

AERO-GRAMME #5

The Alternative Education Resource Organization Newsletter

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FINDING THE RIGHT TRACK

I was on my way in to New York City for a meeting with Freer Spreckley, Secretary of the Friends of Summerhill Trust. I needed to take the subway from Penn Station to Times Square, and then the shuttle to Grand Central Station. The shuttle is a short subway which brings people from the West side of Manhattan to the East side, and vice versa. It operates on several tracks at once, going back and forth.

As I arrived at the west end of the shuttle, one train was just pulling out toward Grand Central Station on track three. Approaching, I saw a sign in flashing red letters that announced that the next train would be on track four. The two tracks next to me were two and three.

The New York City subway system is not very logical, as the Metro in Paris is, so it is usually necessary to ask people questions, or follow the crowd.

In a few minutes, more than 75 people had gathered at track three, waiting for the next train. But I wondered about the significance of the sign saying that the next train would be on track four.

I began to look for track four. After looking again at the nearest tracks, I looked across and saw another track. It looked inaccessible at first. Then I noticed a small walkway up the tracks about 200 feet. I suspected that this was the way to track four, but NOBODY was waiting over there. I thought about going over by myself, but hesitated, because the crowd was all at track three, and I thought that they must know something that I didn't. Furthermore, with the recent subway muggings, I felt more comfortable with the crowd.

Suddenly, a subway worker came over to the crowd. "The next train will be on track number four," he announced, quite simply.

Immediately, the whole crowd began to walk up the track toward that walkway and around to track four. I thought it was a remarkable phenomenon, that a crowd of a hundred seasoned New Yorkers was waiting at the wrong track. I talked to a few people about it, but they just smiled unembarrassed smiles as they walked on their new path.

Soon the train came on track four, and we were on our way to Grand Central Station. As I alit from the subway car, I looked for the signs to the train station. The crowd was moving rapidly toward one exit, but I stole a glance at the staircase they were ignoring. There was a closed gate at the top. This time the crowd was right, and I was soon in the station for my meeting with Freer.

The point of the story is that I believe that we COULD change the educational system overnight to a better and more humane one. It just takes the right worker to inform the crowd that they've been on the wrong track.

WHY DO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION GROUPS FIGHT AGAINST THEMSELVES?

In the Fall, 1990 issue of *Changing Schools*, Mary Ann Raywid, a Professor at Hofstra University and expert on public alternative schools, wrote in detail about the conflict within the International Affiliation of Alternative Schools and Personnel. It is essentially between practitioners of "choice" schools, public alternatives open to all students, and "at risk" schools and programs, those primarily for children with social or educational problems. At a meeting of the participants in the National Alternative Education Conference at Stanford University on July 1, 1990, there was strong disagreement, even about supporting a national alternative education day. This conflict was based on differing definitions of alternative education. For example, the "choice" advocates feel that a program cannot be called alternative if the students do not have significant decision-making power. The "at risk" advocates feel that a program is alternative if it exists as another approach available for a student having difficulties, even if there is not decision-making power within the program. The following letter was written to *Changing Schools* in response to the Raywid article, and is reprinted with their permission.

Applause to Mary Anne Raywid for writing and Mary Ellen Sweeney for printing the story of the philosophical conflict within the International Affiliation of Alternative Schools and Personnel (IAASAP). Ever since Dave Lehman proposed that a national organization be created in 1985, this has been an area of controversy. In other organizations internal conflicts are covered up or swept under the rug while decisions are made by a central few. Raywid's article gives the readers of *Changing Schools* and the participants in the IAASAP a chance to analyze the situation, and perhaps to come up with some creative solutions.

It is certainly clear that the IAASAP is one of the most unorganized organizations one could ever encounter. By design it has no funds, no spokesman, no office, staff, or journal. It is even difficult to remember the name.

However, if one compares this group to others involved with countercultural ideas, it may be faring pretty well. For the fact is, many of these groups seem to be in disarray, fighting among themselves, shooting down anyone who dares to lead them, and losing track of their mission.

This was well documented in a recent story about the U.S. Green movement by Mark Satin in his publication, *New Options* (#70). He was so shaken by the anger and internal destructiveness that he witnessed at the Green Gathering in Colorado that he ended up questioning the whole direction of his life. "Their life choices are my life choices...To accept that the Greens are never going to make it is tantamount to accepting that my life choices were not so smart." This kind of internal destructiveness has also been the experience of the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools, the Association for Humanistic Psychology, the homeschooling movement, and others.

It seems crucial, then, to ask the obvious question: What is the cause of this phenomenon? Here is a theory:

All of these organizations generally consist of people who did not grow up in freedom, or as products of the alternative and liberating philosophies the members often espouse. In fact, the people involved with them often created their alternative and liberating schools and programs in REACTION to having been repressed and oppressed themselves. In further fact, the success of many of these programs has been a direct result of their own stubborn, sometimes charismatic, democratic leadership. In a society that has been pushing punctuality, conformity, dependence, and discouragement of creativity, it seems to take an individual who has the almost angry ability to reempower people to make such a program work. This has worked well for the individual programs, truly empowering the students in them.

However, when these same people form an adult organization, that mutual empowerment seems to open up a lot of the unresolved, residual anger, with conflicting strong personalities, and subsequent destructiveness. Authoritarian organizations seem to reach their goals far more efficiently. Ironically, these open and democratic ones seem to go nowhere, not even modeling the sensitivity and humanity that they promote.

At the NCACS conferences of the last few years, there were more student than adult participants. In essence, the students created their own sub-conference, establishing connections, arranging exchanges and sharing information, without conflict. Meanwhile, many of the adults, particularly those with decision making power, were in continuous turmoil.

Even historically, in his book about anarchist educators, *The Modern School Movement*, Paul Avrich describes how the Modern School Association came

apart through political and philosophical in-fighting in the 1940's. The movement was started in 1910, and was dissolved in the 1950's. Yet the GRADUATES of the Modern School continue to meet every year, and most of them are now in their 70's and 80's!

Perhaps if our organizations consisted of members who grew up with real freedom and empowerment, things would work differently. One rare example of this is Zoe Neill Redhead, daughter of A.S. Neill, who grew up at Summerhill and is now its Head. Under her quiet direction, Summerhill is running smoothly, and is reaching out internationally to other educational alternatives (her father would never have done that).

So what is the solution? Run these organizations in a more authoritarian way? Have no leadership or structure at all? Find a charismatic democratic leader? Forget about organizations and coalitions and just work independently? Or turn everything over to the students? There are no easy answers. But perhaps if this has shed some light on the problems of the past we may be better at avoiding them in the future.

NOTES ON TRIP TO ONEIDA RESERVATION, 12/13/90

"We have come to think of some of these children as elders." Howard Elijah.

We arrived on December 13th at the Oneida Reservation, near London, Ontario. We really didn't have any trouble finding it. I was joined by Nathan, a 15 year old student from Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts. He is particularly interested in Native Americans.

We first visited the alternative school that they started three years ago. There are about 18 kids in the school. There is one girl who is fifteen, but she is more like a teacher aide. The next oldest student was ten or eleven. The youngest was three years old.

We videotaped their "opening", which is a recitation that they use to open various ceremonies and social (traditional Indian) dances. The students spoke in the Oneida language, a language which they are trying to preserve. Many in the the reserve don't even speak Oneida any more.

There are about 1800 people living there. They have lived in that area for 150 years. It's not exactly an official reserve, from what I understand. I'm not clear on the legal aspects of it. They say it's "Crown land", which means that it given to the Indians for their use, but it's not quite in the same status as land which is theirs by treaty.

The visit to Oneida was arranged by Bruce Elijah, whom I had met with a week earlier when he was in New York City. We met Howard Elijah, Bruce's brother, who is one of the main teachers at the school.

We went over to their mother's house. Her name is Grace. We waited there for Bruce to arrive, and for Howard to come down with some of the kids. He did come down later, and we showed some of the video that we had shot. Some of the kids were really fascinated by the video camera and wanted to know how to use it. I taught some of them how.

Although the goal is to have the Oneida children grow up in and live their traditional culture, it seems that part of that culture is a true openness to experiential learning, which seems not necessarily to exclude things that are part of the modern world, like video cameras. It's also interesting that even though they don't use books at the school or teach the kids English reading or writing, they seem to be picking it up anyway. The children still watch television, and there seems to be no prohibition on that.

Eventually Bruce came down with a person he had met at Oka, the reserve that has had so many problems lately. People were trying to take over some of their land in order to expand a golf course. The Mohawks there protested against it, setting up a blockade. There are still four people up there in jail who were involved in those protests.

Bruce had to leave town and go to Branford, where he was going to be conducting a sweat lodge and sunrise ceremony at a drug treatment center, and came back the next day.

I talked to Howard until about 2 AM. One of the most interesting things that he talked about was how the tribe decided to get rid of the provincial policemen who had been patrolling the reserve. They felt that the provincial police were causing more problems than they were solving. They weren't at all helpful in domestic disputes, or almost any situation. So, they asked them to leave, actually escorted them off of the land, after which they were surrounded by the provincial police. They never actually come on to the land. Eventually, they left.

The whole idea of this was that they felt that the people should be reempowered to enforce their own rules. They established something called the "peacekeepers society". It has the responsibility to keep the peace. There have been occasional incidents in which they have turned people over to the provincial police. For example, a \$50,000 vintage car was stolen and brought on to the reserve. The peacekeeping committee went to the people's house and told them what their choices were, and the one who stole the car was remanded to the police. But generally speaking, this is not how they operate. For example, if they see someone who is drinking and driving, they will go and speak to that person and counsel them, perhaps get them into some kind of therapy. They do what Howard says is essentially prevention

work. They will go to domestic disputes, have people work with all parties, and work out counselling if necessary.

The result of this has been a 90% drop in car thefts, a 90% drop in drunken driving, and big drops in domestic violence and all other areas. It seemed to me that the results of this were very significant and had application beyond this reserve.

The next morning we went up and visited the school again. They were doing exercises in the Oneida language. They were also doing math, and some were doing art work. I showed them how to use the video camera.

The students took us out to a spot where they had just planted 40 apple trees. They had been given the trees in exchange for helping a nursery man with the grafting a trees, a skill they they had now learned. They also showed us where they had planted a grape vine.

We had some question as to whether the school was a little too anti-intellectual, or too much against the idea of teaching English reading and writing. Some people have been thinking that at some point they may want to teach this to the older kids, after they have a base in their own culture and language. They talked a lot about not wanting to teach language as "just" communication, but more as a living thing. They expressed the feeling that some of the survival schools were only public education translated into native American language. Howard pointed out that 85% of the Oneida language are verbs, so that a lot of it has to do with describing things by their function and origins.

He said that there were some situations in which the students could speak to their grandparents in Oneida language, but the parents couldn't understand it. He said that they sometimes don't get support from the elders, who feel that these things should be taught at home and not in school. Of course, they are generally not taught at home. He said they hadn't been able to find people to teach traditional hide tanning, something that Nathan has been studying at Sudbury Valley. They were pretty impressed with that.

He mentioned a phenomenon that we've seen in many alternative schools: when, for some reason, these kids have had to go back to public school, they have done very well. I noticed that the older girl, who also leads many activities, said that she has been doing a lot of reading on her own at home.

I showed slides of my trip to California last summer, and I was impressed by how much information the kids did have. I happened to show some slides of Stonehenge, which I visited last summer after visiting Summerhill. One

of the kids said that he thought they might have been built by the Druids. He was 8 years old.

They have taken the students on many trips. They feel that to teach the students geography, they should be traveling, and took them to British Columbia, and to Oklahoma last year. They have also been visited by many groups, including a group of Mexican descendents of the Aztecs, who spoke no English.

Both Nathan and I were impressed by the energy of these children, their openness, their curiosity, how affectionate they were, and their self confidence and high self esteem. When you talked to them, they really saw you and listened. One girl commented that I had an eyebrow that went all the way across with no break. When we were outside, they noticed birds and animals that I wouldn't have seen.

Howard pointed out later that the adults have been astounded by the growth and development of these students. Some are even members of the medicine society. He said they have learned much from them. In a most telling thought, he said that they have come to think of some of these children as elders, because of their knowledge.

We talked about the idea of getting back together in March for a full week session, bringing other alternative school student there, for the purpose of acquainting other tribes with the idea of setting up alternative schools that they would run. They also expressed interest in coming to visit alternative schools. It seemed quite helpful to Howard in particular to get a sense that there were other people who were not Indians that were moving in the same kind of direction that they were, and that there were commonalities between what they were doing and what we call alternative and holistic education.

Howard made it clear that they had no idea how the school was going to evolve. They were learning as they went along, learning a lot from the kids.

NOTES ON TRIP TO SOUTHEAST, OCTOBER, 1990

This trip started on pretty short notice with a phone call from Fredo, a trip leader from Autre Chose, a travel school from France . He called me from West Virginia where they had stored their bus since their last trip.

He told me that they couldn't get insurance on the bus in time to bring it to JFK airport to pick the group of students who would be arriving there on Tuesday. He asked me if I could pick them up, which I did the next day. We headed to West Virginia to Highland School.

We got there the next day.

Candy and Steve Landvoigt, the directors, own about 500 acres of land. Their house is also on the property nearly a mile away from the school. There is no electricity running to it but they power the house with natural gas that is found on the property and runs a generator. Ultimately, they would like to have a boarding school there. One advantage would be that they would have virtually no utility costs. The school itself is supported partly by income from several oil wells that have been donated to the school and which the school maintains or has a contract with other people to maintain.

The school runs as a democracy and class attendance is non-compulsory. The students are local kids from rural West Virginia.

Having delivered the Autre Chose students and sent them on their way, traveling across the United States for the next few months, I left to go to the NCACS Southeastern regional conference in North Carolina at Arthur Morgan School.

Arthur Morgan School now has 22 students in their mostly boarding junior high school. They have a few day school students. The school seems to be pretty strong now. Eric Joy and his family have moved down there from the Meeting School in New Hampshire.

I met with Ernest Morgan and his wife, Christine. Ernest is now in his mid '80s and has been a key person in keeping Arthur Morgan School alive. Of course, the school is named for his father. Among other things, he mentioned that Mildred Loomis of the School of Living was a key person in publicizing his work on the simple burial and it caused him to ultimately produce a book that sold over 300,000, most of the profits of which went to support Arthur Morgan School. So there is a School of Living connection that people might not have known about.

The conferece turnout included a group from the Farm, in Tennessee, Laurel High School, from Knoxville, and some homeschoolers.

After visiting the Swarthouts in Charlotte, a homeschooling family I had met on the Prodigy Network, I traveled north to Floyd, Virginia. There, we did some slide shows, and visited with many people. We talked to Joe Klein, a former staff member at Floy's Blue Mountain School. We talked about a program he wanted to start for teen-agers, which he hopes could evelve into a school. (It has now started).

When I visited Blue Mountain School, I was asked to demonstrate a democratic meeting. We made a circle with the 15 or so students and two or

three adult staff.

First we made an agenda.

We started out the meeting with "swimming pool." One of the kids had suggested that it would be nice if the school could get a swimming pool, and all the kids thought that would be a great idea but more than half of them thought that it would be impossible.

But as we discussed it, we realized that one of the adults in the group had actually gotten a used swimming pool for \$100 at the end of the season, and the feeling was that they could probably get one donated to the school because it would be to the advantage of the donor to do that, rather than sell it for \$100. It was passed that the school pursue that, and a swimming pool committee was formed which almost all the students signed up for. One of the students took responsibility for calling the meeting.

The next item, yoga, was talked about immediately. Many of the kids did not like the compulsory yoga in the morning, and almost everyone spoke against it. They apparently had little idea why yoga had been instituted as an activity in the morning. Chrissy, the teacher, spoke up and explained that she thought it was good to center people and to get them stretching and so on. One of the other kids suggested that they just do pushups. After some discussion, it was voted that yoga would only continue until Christmas after which that activity would be ended as a morning activity.

The third item on the agenda was decision making. Some of the kids thought it would be good to trust the students to make the decisions. Only one student was against student decision making. That student said that he thought that meetings would be boring. A proposal was made that there be a weekly meeting with the students and the staff and a once monthly meeting with the students, staff, and teachers. This was passed overwhelmingly, and the teacher made the proposal that the meetings would be on Mondays from 2:00 to 3:00 and that was passed.

The fourth item was about snacks. One of the kids proposed that snack time be lengthened to an hour from 20 minutes. A compromise proposal was made that snack time be lengthened by a few minutes. After some discussion, that proposal was voted down, and it was decided to keep things the way they were. I think that everybody including the teacher was rather surprised at the good sense and conservatism of the meeting.

Afterwards I reminded the teacher that no commitment had been made that the

arranged some connections. One of the more recent was Josh Amundson, Farm School graduate and Antioch student, who wrote that he was interested in interning at an alternative school. I had just visited Highland School, in West Virginia. It is one of the group of schools mentioned elsewhere in this issue that is democratic and has non-compulsory class attendance, and they had mentioned interest in having an intern. Josh will begin interning there this month.

Antioch University was the college which expressed most interest in setting up the alternative education training program. First, I spoke again to Dr, Guskin, Antioch's President. I had first spoken to him about it at the Antioch New England 25th year celebration. I was an early graduate of ANE's MAT program. Guskin referred me to Lois Lashell, who had been involved with a similar program at Antioch's Seattle branch. She was very excited about the idea, and asked me to write a proposal, which has been submitted. We'll let you know how it goes from here. Anyone interested in being involved with this program, either as a resource or a student, should contact AERO.

Along similar lines, Susan Donnelly, Interim Director of Prospect School in Bennington Vermont, told us about the teacher training program which they had until recently in connection with their school. They are very interested in the current project. Prospect is a 60 student alternative elementary/ middle school. She also asked us to mention that they are looking for a new Executive Director for their school. They want someone with an MA, five years experience, who can start July 1, 1991. Salary is \$30,000. Send to Search Committee, PO Box 326, N. Bennington, VT 05257.

While researching for the creation of the new alternative training program, I began to think about the idea of getting a PhD for myself. I always used to think of a Doctorate at a negative credential, certifying that the holder did not have their feet firmly on the ground. But I discovered a program that interested me, an alternative non-residential program which gave credit for life experiences. It is Columbia Pacific University, based in northern California, and fully approved by the state. I have applied to the school and have been accepted in their program. Contact AERO for more info. attendanceInterimexperienceconferenceram. First, I spoke again to Dr. Graduate School's and is being reviewed

MATCHING GRANT

As you read in the last issue, Joshua Mailman of the Threshold Foundation created a \$20,000 matching grant to support AERO through the School of Living. As of this date we have raised \$15,000 toward the match. Contributions have included \$5000 from the Bay Foundation and \$3000 from the School of Living. These funds have enabled us to continue to network all forms of educational alternatives, to promote its development, and to

help many people looking for educational alternatives, by phone, correspondence, through the media, and direct travel and services. We still need help in raising the last \$5000 toward the match. Please contact AERO if you have any ideas that could help with this. -t notice with a phone call from insurance on the bus in time to students who t Virginia to Highland School and I had a nice time teaching the students table tennis and video. (see International news) School I have detailed notes on how we organized that meeting, but not enough space in this issue. Contact AERO if you are interested in those notes, or information about how to organize for self government. The last information that I have is that the meeting system is continuing to be used at Blue Mountain School.