

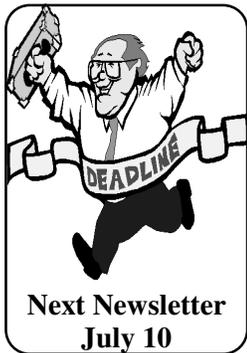
RPEC NEWS

The newsletter of the Richmond Peace Education Center

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Profiles in Peacemaking

A History of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP)

Linda Heacock

We believe that there is in the universe a power that is able to transform hostility and destructiveness into a cooperation and community, and to do justice among us. We believe that the power is everywhere—in us, in our opponents, and in the world around us. We believe that there are certain individual and group dynamics that make it possible to tune in to this power enabling us and our opponents to realize our birthright of peace and dignity.

~ Basic Manual, Alternatives to Violence Project

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a grassroots, international, volunteer movement that is committed to reducing interpersonal violence in our society and the world. AVP works towards this goal by presenting highly experiential workshops in prisons, schools, and communities. In origin and philosophy it has ties to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), but it is a non-sectarian, non-profit organization, funded entirely by private sources.

AVP began in 1975 in the New York State prison system when an inmate group at Greenhaven Prison, "The Think Tank," felt the need of nonviolence training to prepare them for their upcoming roles as counselors in an experimental program at an institution for under-age offenders. A local Quaker group held weekly worship services at the prison. Knowing that Friends were opposed to war and violence, The Think Tank asked them to provide the training they needed.

A committee of four Quakers from the weekly worship group became the first AVP facilitators and developed the rudiments of what is now the AVP Basic workshop. These founders of what became known as the Alternatives to Violence Project were Larry Apsey, Ellen Flanders, Janet Lugo and Lee Stern. The Basic Manual, first issued in 1975, consisted of material adapted from the marshal training of the peace marches of the 1960s and 70s, plus material from Children's Creative Response to Conflict Program, the Movement for a New Society, and the Quaker Project on Community Conflict. Many of the original workshop discussions and exercises remain an integral part of the AVP training.

The insights that the Greenhaven inmates gained from this new program enabled many of them to find alternatives to their violent ways. They experienced a profound change in attitude, values and aspirations, by drawing on a power within them capable of restoring harmony and transforming their lives. With the realization of this inner power they developed an understanding of what became known as *Transforming Power*, the heart and core of AVP philosophy.

The AVP program spread to other state prisons through Quaker worship groups and

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word of mouth. For some years the focus was on prisons, as a means to help people reduce the level of violence in the prison environment while at the same time deal with the violence in their own lives. However it soon became clear that prison violence is merely a distilled version of the violence that pervades all of society. People unconnected with the prisons, many of them Quaker meetings, first in New York and later other states, began requesting community-based training to develop teams of AVP facilitators. As AVP spread among prison populations around the country, program emphasis also took root in various community settings, including shelters for battered women, homeless people, criminal justice programs, and other community agencies. As AVP broadened its outreach to include many communities nationwide, program manuals were developed and expanded for use in each of the three, 22-hour workshop levels, Basic, Advanced and Training for Training.

Eventually, AVP made the international leap to Australia and New Zealand, then to Europe, Central and South America, the Far East, and Africa. It now has a presence in 44 states, and 37 countries on nearly every continent.

The AVP program has been particularly successful and is rapidly expanding in the Great Lakes Region of Africa (Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda) where throughout the region there continues to be ongoing threats of ethnic and tribal violence. More specifi-

cally, response to recent AVP workshops held in Western Kenya has been overwhelmingly positive. At the October 2005 AVP training I conducted with Kenyan co-facilitators, eight of our group of 20 participants, who certified as AVP facilitators, have committed to apprenticeship at a Basic Level workshop in each of the ten locations in their District—one each month. What is most significant is that these workshops are all self-financed—they are not dependent on outside funding.

AVP's organizational model is one of building from the grass roots up, based on the approach taken by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is felt this approach is essential to nonviolence training. AVP makes use of consensus as its decision making process, incorporating the Quaker idea that shows respect for the opinions of all and resists development of a hierarchy within an organizational structure. AVP is about community, acknowledging and encouraging the potential within us all to grow, develop, and work together by reaching mutual agreement and without coercion.

Note: portions of the above were taken from: the AVP Organizing Kit and the AVP Basic Manual, AVP Distribution Services, Plainfield, NY; and an article by Gini Floyd, AVP facilitator to Kenya in 2004.

AVP in Kenya

Linda Heacock

*[In September-October of 2005 I traveled to Kenya as part of my Quaker ministry through Richmond Friends Meeting and Baltimore Yearly Meeting. I am in the process of raising funds for a return trip again this September to continue my work with the **Alternatives to Violence Project**]*

My ministry with Friends Peace Teams (FPT) evolved out of a strong personal leading to offer training and skills gained over the years in the field of alternatives to violence education, as a resource to the work being done in Kenya and parts of Africa through FPT's *African Great Lakes Initiative* (AGLI). Thanks to the overwhelming support of my Meeting, and my family and friends, my leading became reality in September of 2005, when I embarked on a 6-week journey to Kenya. I joined a peace team of Kenyan facilitators to deliver Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops in Western Kenya and Nairobi. The program is a joint collaborative effort of FPT-AGLI and the Kenyan organization, *Friends for Peace and Community Development* (FPCD). AVP, originally founded in the United States in the 1970's by Quakers in their work with prison populations, is now international in scope with programs in many countries on nearly every continent. The program is still in its infancy in Kenya, and so they are very dependent on the resources

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and leadership offered by the African Great Lakes Initiative. AGLI supports and promotes peace activities at the grassroots level in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. In collaboration with (Quaker) yearly meetings and other peacemaking organizations in the area, AGLI works together with native people in local communities to deliver programs and training such as AVP, and promote deeper understanding and community between Friends in Africa and those in the United States.

The major focus of my trip was devoted to facilitating a series of five, 3-day AVP workshops to a diverse group of participants: community officials, police, paralegals, teachers, and youth. Much of my time was also spent meeting with Quaker activists and leaders in Kenya, attending Quaker worship services, and visiting several of the many Friends-sponsored programs, including orphan support groups (caregivers of children orphaned due to the AIDS pandemic), and an extensive youth program that includes peer education, community outreach, economic empowerment, and the use of participatory drama focusing on pertinent issues such as gender-based violence, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS.

Among the most meaningful experiences I had while in Kenya was witnessing the profound impact of AVP on its participants. I believe the AVP training has been so universally effective because of its concept of “*Transforming Power*,” which is the core philosophy of AVP. To me Transforming

Power is synonymous with the Quaker “Inner Light,” the belief that there is “that of God” in every human being. In our workshops, following an initial phase of building trust and community, each group would inevitably begin to reveal their personal stories – through conflict scenarios shared in small groups, in role plays, and large group discussions. It soon became apparent that no one had escaped incidences of overt violence in their lives. Violent outcomes – or the potential for violence – were shared in countless examples: disputes over land or animals, quarreling between neighbors, domestic violence, alcoholism, and extra-marital affairs. The training presented our participants with many questions; some seemed almost desperate for answers – *how do I deal with drunkenness and violence in my family, how can I personally confront the HIV/AIDS pandemic, what can I do about my anger??* Perhaps because collectively, these participants have experienced their share of violence in their lives, we found in general they seemed to have understood the roots of violence in all its forms almost without question. They were ready and willing to look at its alternatives and how to apply them. This may explain why our experiential exercises and role plays were so effective at each level of the workshops. Over and over again, evidence of “*Transforming Power*” was both demonstrated and noted by our participants.

The response to our AVP workshops in Kenya has been overwhelmingly positive. In Western Kenya, eight participants who be-

came certified AVP facilitators at our October 2005 training have enthusiastically committed to become part of an AVP team to deliver a basic-level workshop in each of the ten locations in the District—one each month. What is most significant is that these workshops are all self-financed (without dependence on outside funding), thanks to generous donations of time, food, and workshop location.

In my 6 weeks of living and working with the people of Kenya, I was privileged to learn much about and appreciate their everyday life and culture. I found I began taking certain inconveniences – lack of plumbing, electricity, modern transportation – in stride. They were overshadowed by the intense richness in the quality of my daily interactions with the environment and the people. I wrote of my experience of the people in my daily Kenyan journal:

There is a spirit of perseverance and determination in the face of many odds. The average citizen has experienced their share of hardship. Because of a severe shortage of medical care, and the prevalence of AIDS, malaria, TB and other disease, most people have lived through the death of multiple family members by the time they have reached adulthood. I find that those I am living and working among demonstrate a genuine acceptance of and appreciation for the good things life has to offer, instead of dwelling on hardship and diversity. They grieve, let go, and move on. Those I meet often appear to be living life to the fullest, reap-

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ing gratitude and joy from the little they have.

My life will forever be changed from all I have seen and experienced while in Kenya. I am now even more convinced that the intentions of the Spirit are for me to continue to be an instrument for this work. I have learned that there is an enormous amount of visible grass roots work being done in Kenya and other countries of the Great Lakes Region (Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda) by Quakers, African NGOs, women empowerment programs, and other peacemaking groups. I believe we can all search for and find both individual and corporate ways to support a strong peace and justice witness in the region. Kenyans are deeply indebted to the help that comes from the US through programs such as Alternatives to Violence Project.

AVP in Richmond

RPEC has been a local sponsor and coordinator of the Alternatives to Violence Project for over 12 years. (See accompanying article.) AVP trainings—Basic, Advanced, and Training for Facilitators—have been conducted regularly throughout this period at local area prisons. The Center has approximately 50 people listed as having completed certification to become an AVP facilitator. This number includes many incarcerated people who have served on an AVP team (past and present). There has been an active AVP team of inside and outside facilitators at the James River Correctional Center for many years, delivering workshops an average of four times a year.

An enthusiastic effort is currently underway to re-introduce the AVP program at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in Goochland, VA. AVP at the women’s prison has not been operating since Marilyn Robertson, the former coordinator of the program, moved out of state a few years ago. Our goal is to expand the AVP program to other correctional institutions as well as to offer the training in community settings.

An AVP Organizational Gathering recently took place on May 23rd for people (past facilitators as well as *anyone with an interest in AVP*) who would like to be involved in re-establishing a presence at VCCW—and beyond. We hope to be ready to begin scheduling AVP workshops at the women’s prison within the next year, if not sooner.

****Please contact the Center (804-232-1002) if you have any interest in involvement with RPEC’s AVP program.**



Linda facilitating a role play at an AVP workshop in Nairobi



Linda with family of AVP participant who invited facilitators to their home