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AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVE ANGELL

By Robert Dockhorn

Stephen L. Angell was an early participant and continues to be active in the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), a program that offers workshops on nonviolence in prisons and elsewhere. This interview took place in Kennett Square, Pa., on June 18, 2002.



Right: Stephen L. Angell in China.

How did you first become involved with AVP?

AVP started in New York Yearly Meeting. My first encounter with it came when AVP held its first workshop in 1975 at Greenhaven Prison. Lawrence Apsey, who was the founder of AVP, asked my wife and me to serve as hosts to one of the leaders, Bernard Lafayette, a right-hand man to Martin Luther King Jr. We happily agreed to have him in our home. Although I had no direct contact with that first workshop, we plied him with questions afterwards in the evenings. That workshop was quite different from the workshops that we conduct today. We had no manuals then. We just had the model of the Children's Creative Response to Conflict (CCRC) program, which started in New York Yearly Meeting about three years prior to AVP. The first workshop was very much centered on individuals telling stories of how they approached potentially violent situations with nonviolence.

So that was my first contact with the program. A number of years later, New York

Yearly Meeting became a little concerned because the program was growing in size as an activity of the Peace and Social Action Committee. It was part of the Quaker Project on Community Conflict (QPCC)--not a very catchy name. The yearly meeting felt concerned lest the tail start wagging the dog because they had very little staff. AVP didn't exactly have staff, but it had a growing number of facilitators for the workshops and growing expenses. We were also trying to raise funds to support the program. It was decided to incorporate AVP as a separate organization, although it would still be under the sponsorship of the yearly meeting and would have a separate budget. The facilitators were at first going principally into Greenhaven and Auburn prisons, although prisoners throughout New York state were beginning to ask for workshops.

How long was it before you were actually leading workshops?



An advanced AVP workshop in Osijek, Croatia: a small group involved in an empathy exercise.

When they decided to incorporate and needed incorporators, Larry Apsey, a close friend of ours, asked me to be one, and I agreed; and then they needed a board of directors, so I agreed to serve on that. Larry Floyd was the first clerk of the board, and I succeeded him two or three years later when he died. So I was quickly drawn into the organization, and then my friends who were leading the workshops said, "Steve, you ought to know what we're doing; you should take a workshop." I didn't think I needed that;

I'm not a person who walks around getting in fights, carrying a gun or a knife or a tool for protection. But I couldn't disagree with them. I said if I'm going to be supporting this program from the organizational side, maybe I should know what it's like. So I agreed to take a workshop with Larry Apsey in Fishkill Prison in New York. That was late 1980 or early 1981. And I learned something about myself in the workshop that led me to believe I was in the right place doing the right thing: I realized that there was violence in me, too. The way I responded verbally and the disagreements with my teenage children could be more or less violent depending on how I did it. From that point on, I feel that each workshop I participate in has had something to offer to me and that I have grown as a result.

I wonder if that's generally true of the leaders of AVP workshops--that they themselves benefit each time they lead?

I have come to realize that what has held volunteer AVP facilitators in the work is that they feel they are getting something out of it themselves. It is more than giving

something to others, it is also getting something back. The demands for being a facilitator for an AVP workshop are considerable. Most of our workshops are weekend workshops, starting in the prisons on Friday, maybe Friday morning, and running through Sunday evening. That means giving up a lot of valuable personal time. And yet, individuals stay with it week after week and month after month.

At this time, you were a member of which meeting?

Bulls Head Meeting, in Purchase Quarterly Meeting of New York Yearly Meeting.

And Lawrence Apsey--what was his meeting?

Also Bulls Head. He and his wife, Virginia, had lived in New York City and were members of 15th Street Meeting. He had been the administrator of QPCC, a subcommittee of the Peace and Social Action Committee, which had various projects.

How did AVP get its name?

The name QPCC was a little awkward. Once, when the facilitating team was coming out of Greenhaven Prison in New York--a maximum security prison with the electric chair--the officer on the way out said, "How was your workshop in alternatives to violence?" We picked up on that. It is short and accurately describes what we are doing. It also gives an accurate impression about what the project's about because it was really by happenstance that we started in prisons. I've always seen the project as something that is much broader than just working with prisoners.

Who were some of the other individuals who were important in the early stages?

Lee Stern, Ellen Flanders, Janet Lugo, Mary Gray Legg, Ginny Floyd, Steve Stalonas, and Steve Levinsky come immediately to mind--got a lot of Steves involved here! There were many others.

Were key decisions made early that helped AVP grow so rapidly?

First of all, from the beginning we decided that this should be a volunteer project. In other words, we would not pay facilitators. Individuals would do it because they wanted to, and that was their compensation--what they got out of it. There is no way that AVP could have spread around the planet the way it did if each new country that picked it up had to raise thousands of dollars to finance it.

Is there no paid employee?

Initially we had some staff in the yearly meeting office--Lee Stern was extremely helpful. For a while, in 1984–86, I was paid to go into the yearly meeting office in New York City and handle administrative details for AVP. And in the '90s, we hired an executive director. But we've gone back to volunteer leadership. We found ourselves putting too much energy into raising the funds to pay for that position, which deflected us from just spreading the program.

As I said, going into the prisons was happenstance. I don't think we thought we were setting up a program that would spread throughout the prisons in the United States. We had a Quaker worship group in Greenhaven Prison that had, as part of their program, in addition to a half-hour worship, a half-hour discussion time. During the latter, one thing we'd do is tell the men what other things Quakers were doing that might be of interest to them. We told them about what Quakers had done during the Vietnam War, how we'd traveled all around the United States training individuals in ways to enter demonstrations and keep them nonviolent. Philadelphia was one of the areas. We did that work coast to coast. Trained thousands.

There was a group of men in the prisons called the "Think-Tank Concept." They were trying to work with. . . .

These were prisoners?

Yes. They were trying to work with youth from New York City who were on a violent track, to lead them to other ways of addressing their problems without violence. And they didn't feel they were having as much success as they would have liked because what they were predominately working with was fear. They'd bring these young fellas in and try to scare the daylights out of them--tell them how horrible prison was and if they continued what they were doing they were going to end up there. It wasn't working.

Was this before the first AVP workshop?

Oh yes.



Stephen Angell, while at an AVP workshop in Honduras, outside a Friends church in Tegucigalpa.

And was this the group that then approached you?

Yes. When they heard about our involvement in the Vietnam War demonstrations they said, "Well is there something that you could teach us that we could then pass on to these younger guys?" We said we could do a workshop for them. So the first workshop was born.

Did the think-tank then become part of AVP or did it retain a separate existence?

They continued separately, but it was largely members of that group who came into the first workshop: about eight men. And it also happened in Auburn Prison. There was a Quaker worship group and a similar process up there.

How would you describe the relationship between AVP and Quakers?

Well, I've always felt that I wanted AVP to become ecumenical, totally so, and not just be a Quaker program. I think that is true in many of the places where it's gone, and I know in New York state that the people we trained to be facilitators were of all denominations or none at all. And I'm assuming that's happening in other places as well because while Quakers can give the initial push, there's no reason they should claim it as just their territory.

Have inmates become trainers or involved in organizing AVP?

We believed that unless we could bring the participants to the trainer level of participation, this program couldn't have the kind of outreach that we were aiming for. So whenever we went into a prison for the first time, we tried to complete all three levels of the workshop: basic, second-level, and training for facilitators to get individuals who are trained as apprentice facilitators. And from then on, when we went into the prison we would have a mixed team of inside facilitators and outsiders. Early on we set the policy that we would not support workshops that only had inmate facilitators, not because we didn't trust their capacity to lead the workshop--in fact I think that some of our very best facilitators have been from the inside--but we soon realized there was pull from the administrative side in prisons to get involved and take this over as one of their programs. We never wanted AVP to be a program of the prison system. We wanted it to be a program coming in from the outside, from individuals who were there because they were concerned. We wanted it to be a program that belonged to the participants. When I go in and do a first workshop, I say to any group that I'm here as a volunteer because I want to give a gift to them that was given to me. And that really seems to have an impact. I can't consider that I'm giving them a gift if I'm paid. We do, however, try to cover expenses for facilitators: travel, babysitting costs, etc. This is a problem of some controversy because guys come out of prison and need money. So we make some exceptions

based on need.

So AVP, you say, started by happenstance in prisons, but the workshops go far beyond that. How did that happen?

In order to do prison programs you have to do outside programs first. You have to train people on the outside because every workshop in prison needs an outside facilitator. So there's always been a strong citizen component, or outside people component to AVP, because that was necessary in order to do the programs in the prison. We've always done sample workshops, for instance, at FGC gatherings, as a step forward to enabling people to then take the program into the prisons, where it started.

Worldwide application began in the late 1980s. My wife died in 1988, and in 1989, Friends from abroad were writing and saying, "Why don't you come visit us?" And I thought, why not? And as this thought began to mature in my mind, I thought, why don't I share AVP while I'm there? Also, in 1989, Ellen Flanders and Janet Lugo went to England to share the program. Then, late in the 1990s, during the crisis in Yugoslavia, there was a lot of community violence, and I saw no reason why AVP shouldn't have applicability in that culture as well as in the prison culture. I learned that there was a Quaker in Yugoslavia who'd set up what he called the Baranja International Meetinghouse who was trying to work with Croatians in the Baranja region to help bring about more peaceful ways of solving their conflicts in the future.

A Yugoslav national?

No, a British Friend, Nicholas Street. I offered to go over and give a workshop. And I've been doing that ever since. And this fall it looks like we'll be going back to do some workshops in Serbia because we had some Serbian folks here and did a workshop with them, and they said, "Oh, we need this!" and "Won't you come to Serbia?" Now the work in the former Yugoslavia is taking a turn toward doing prison workshops--they have prisons there and feel the need for that work, too. But my purpose in going there was to help the people of the country to recognize that there were other ways of dealing with problems than resorting to violence and war.

Is there a partner organization there?

Yes, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, in Croatia. And the person there, Michelle Kurtz, is a Presbyterian missionary from the Midwestern United States. She's been our primary contact, but now that I've been back there five times, planning a sixth, we have contacts that are strictly Croatian, Serbian, and so forth. It's viewed very much as a community program as well as one that could be suitable in their prisons. We did a workshop in a refugee camp in Gascini, in Croatia.

I know AVP has been active in Africa. Is it spreading around the world?

Playing "elephants and palm trees," an exercise in AVP training for facilitators.

Oh yes, it's on six continents, all of them except Antarctica. In 1988, I attended the triennial sessions of Friends World Committee and there I offered a sample workshop on AVP. Val Ferguson asked if I'd be interested in representing Friends at the NGO Alliance on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice at the United Nations in New York, an activity that the Quaker UN Office didn't feel it could take under its wing. So I became the Quaker representative to this alliance, which holds a worldwide Crime Congress every five years. This body planned and conducted ancillary meetings of the congresses on subjects

pertaining to criminal justice. I offered to do one on AVP. The first Crime Congress I attended was in Havana, Cuba, and we held an ancillary meeting there on AVP and there seemed to be considerable interest. One man there was from Colombia and wanted to know if I could come there to share AVP and so forth. I developed world contacts through that venue. The next Crime Congress was held in Cairo. By then I'd been attending meetings for seven or eight years. It seemed to me that if we were going to tackle the problems of crime worldwide, we had to look beyond prisons because that's not the best way to tackle the problem.

After the fact, as opposed to being more proactive?

I wanted to see, on the worldwide level, a focus on alternatives. Now I see this happening in the Great Lakes project in Africa (Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda). In 1995 we introduced AVP into Africa, first in Kenya, then Uganda and South Africa. There have also been extensive trips to Central America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. British and Australian AVPers have taken it to India. I think AVP has appropriate application all over the planet.

What could we do that's more constructive than just sending people to prisons? At the Cairo congress, this all became very clear to me--that we were focusing too narrowly. I got back to New York thinking we need to do work on restorative justice: ways of dealing with individuals committing crimes *before* they get into prison and perhaps eliminating the necessity to put them in prison. This is a process whereby all the parties with a stake in a particular offense come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offense and its implications for the

future. When I brought this up at the NGO Alliance meetings in New York, they decided to set up a working party on restorative justice. And since I had opened my mouth, I became the chair. For the next five years, until the next congress in Vienna, we put in a good deal of work developing this whole topic for UN consideration. We generated a report, and the alliance accepted it and submitted it to the crime commission of the UN, which they accepted and put on the agenda of the UN general assembly. It was approved as a project for the section that works on these matters. So, the UN adopted restorative justice as something it would support and promote worldwide. At that point I decided I'd done my piece, so I resigned from the NGO Alliance, and Paul McCold from Lehigh Valley (Pa.) Meeting has taken on this work.

How does AVP keep track of all the activities? I noticed in the website description [www.avpusa.org] that AVP continues to increase at a rate of 30 percent a year, which is phenomenal, and I wonder how an organization doing that well keeps track of all its different parts--doesn't it need to?

We have a national gathering once a year and an international gathering every second year. AVP groups from other countries volunteer to take responsibility for the international gathering. In the United States, we need a board in order to qualify for nonprofit, tax-deductible status. So we have a designated president/clerk and a vice president/assistant clerk. They have virtually no duties until we hold the annual meeting, and then they clerk it. But we do have a committee that is representative of all the individual regional units throughout the country, and they, like other committees, mostly conduct their business by telephone conference and e-mail.

They are getting permission to be in prisons and communicating with them?

Yes, and with people around the state who were doing AVP and getting their reports. We had a report system that wasn't working too well. That's one place where the volunteer aspect failed.

The internet has helped tremendously with the communication between the various units. It grows rapidly because as people experience it and want to see it carry on, there's no door or portal they have to go through; they can just say, "Send us stuff." We have a volunteer in Vermont who handles distribution of all of the printed materials that we have. So the newsletter, the *National Transformer*, is a major communication vehicle for people in the United States. All of the countries where it's taken root have developed their own distribution system for literature, but a lot of them turn to the United States for materials. Many countries have newsletters of their own.

As you look to the future of AVP, what are your greatest hopes and fears?

My greatest hope is that it can be accepted as broader than just prison work and be a significant factor in helping to bring about a more peaceful planet. I think it's applicable to human nature at all age levels. The Help Increase the Peace Program (HIPP), under American Friends Service Committee, is a version of AVP for teenagers. If you get their manual and look at it, you'll see it follows the AVP program very closely. I'd also hate to see it become commercialized. I can believe that there are situations where perhaps we should consider compensation of facilitators, but I think one of its great strengths has been that people do it because they believe in it and get something out of it themselves and they want to help others, not for any monetary compensation that they might get. In the prison setting, the prisoners have said that the fact that facilitators coming in are volunteers makes the program more believable and acceptable. Once you start paying people, it can still do good, but it would become like all the other programs out there where people are getting paid to facilitate. I would hope that AVP could maintain its strong level of volunteerism.

Bob Dockhorn is senior editor of FRIENDS JOURNAL.

Photograph at top: courtesy of Bob Barns. All others courtesy of Stephen Angell.



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