

Reflections on the Gift that Is the Annual International AEE Conference... **By Laurie Frank**

This year I took a bus to and from the AEE conference in Little Rock. Thirty-eight hours of travel time gave me ample time to reflect on the wonders of AEE and our marvelous Annual International Conference. I have had the privilege of attending every conference for the past 15 years or so, and each one has helped me grow as an educator and as a person. Little Rock will join the others tucked away in my heart from which I draw strength, hope and inspiration.

It was obvious from the outset that the realization of the 35th Annual International Conference was a labor of love for Sanford Tollette, Binky Martin-Tollette, and the host committee. Their welcoming spirit permeated the place, binding us together as a community. From the 14 flags flying behind the stage to signify the different countries represented by the participants, to the sponsorship by Heifer International, it was clear that we are a community with focus that continues to grow. With help from the Arkansas Department of Education and Pygmalion Commission, the group of organizers reached out to educators around the state with invitations and support to attend the conference. In this way, it was possible to focus on what unites us as educators in creating a positive and powerful learning environment for students.

The theme, "Education Inside and Out," took on a variety of meanings for me as I participated in workshops and did my general wandering/socializing throughout the conference. The keynotes this year took on special meaning for me. Jasper Hunt, in the opening presentation, reminded me that we have some core beliefs, philosophies and values that unify us as educators. In fact, what unifies us is greater than what can potentially divide us. It is not that primary (or direct) experience is better than secondary (or theoretical) experience. Learning requires both. It is simply that, as experiential educators, we tend to believe that primary experience occurs first. He also stressed that experiential educators are inclined to believe that teaching and learning includes character or moral education in the equation. (A CD recording of Jasper's address will be available for a small fee through AEE's eStore within weeks.)

Our second keynote address filled the room with a sense of history and powerful wisdom gained from some formidable primary experience. Minnijean Brown Trickey, one of the Little Rock Nine who desegregated Central High School 50 years ago, captivated us with stories, anecdotes and keen opinions about her experiences and the learning gleaned from her work. It was clear that we could have easily continued to listen to her all day had the schedule allowed.

Nina Roberts, a long time AEE member and dynamo in the world of experiential education gave the Kurt Hahn Address. Nina shared her personal experiences as a woman of color who has a passion for working with youth. She reminded me that true and powerful education is steeped in social justice. As Jasper Hunt stated, and Minnijean Brown Trickey

personified, it is our human-ness and intentional focus on character and social justice that stands at the core of the educational experience.

Another highlight for me were the auctions. The generosity of our members—both those who donated items to the auction (refer to the list at the end of this article), and those who bid on the items—was breathtaking. It is no secret that AEE members generally are not in their chosen profession for the money. I will never forget the scarecrow that became a symbol of our philanthropy. The funds raised from the auctions go to the Touch the Future Campaign, from which the Board of Directors can help fund initiatives such as the Council on Research and Evaluation (CORE), which was established this past year.

The awards ceremony also held significance for me in that all of the individual awards went to women in AEE. As we celebrated these women, their accomplishments and contributions, my mind wandered back 25 years to when I was starting out in the adventure field. To my knowledge, at the time there were no other women doing the same type of work. AEE introduced me to other women working in experiential education. I learned I was not alone, just isolated. I reflected on how change really can happen. Over the past decades the representation of women has continued to grow in the many fields of experiential education. We were witnessing it at this awards presentation, and it inspired me to continue in the struggle for change both “inside and out” of AEE and in education as a whole.

An association is, of course, made up of people. It was striking this year to see how we are becoming intergenerational. Within the next five years we may have as many babies attending the conference as elders. What a splendid future to look forward to as an aging AEE-er.

In my view, this conference served as a bridge between what we like to call “traditional” education and “experiential” education. AEE is a home for many of us who tread in both worlds. The conference provides a glue that holds my psyche together for another year as I try to act as an interpreter between the worlds. This year, I was reminded that there is an historical context to everything, and that we are more unified than divided in our pursuit of down-home and just-plain-good education. As I reflect on this past week full of primary experiences, I can only see it as amazing gift. I look forward to our time together next year in Vancouver, Washington (right next door to Portland, Oregon!), where we can collectively unwrap the gift that our new host committee is preparing for us.

>>> A HUGE THANKS to the following individuals and organizations, for their donations to the silent and live auctions. And an equally big thanks to those who bid on the exceptional array of donated items.

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| ACCT Alaska Crossings Biltmore Estate Andrew Bobilya Sue Brenchly Camp Henry Challenge Course Advisory Challenge Masters Incorporated Challenge Quest Diamond Brand Dunn School Fox Mountain Guides Laurie Frank Heifer International High 5 Adventure Hilton, Vancouver, Washington Human Kinetics Jefferson National Parks Association Landmark Learning Learned Enterprise Marilyn Levin Life Adventures Lowe Alpine Montreat College Mountain Grove B & B Mystery Ranch NATWC | Off-Key Products Pathfinder Pazzaz Interiors Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp of Little Rock Prescott College NOLS Process Solutions Project Adventure Rainforest Adventure Centre Expeditions Red Ant Pants Red Lion Hotel, Vancouver, WA Rob Rubendall Rutabaga Smith Optics Solo Wilderness Medicine on behalf of NE Region Sports Academy Take a Hike Team Source Inc. Teach Me Teamwork Three Springs Training Wheels Vanness Pen Shop Visions WPG/ Eagle Rock Weave West Region YMCA of the Rockies |
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