

EAOP Inspirations

In September 2002, Antioch University New England launched our award-winning environmental studies master's program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing. Since then, several people have asked what inspired us to launch the Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program. We have two basic answers.

First, there was the crying need. As noted by Janet Ross, the Director of the Four Corners School of Outdoor Education, in their 1998 catalog:

The typical environmental curriculum is incomplete! In biology class, you can study the ecological consequences of clear-cutting our last remaining ancient forests. In environmental health class, you can study how exposure to toxic chemicals interferes with the human reproductive system. But where do you learn how to organize the public to oppose clear-cutting? Where do you study how to organize the victims of toxic waste dumping?

Second, we were also very inspired by several 20th century training programs for activists that had dramatically increased the capacity and effectiveness of their respective movements. For those of you who are interested, Steve Chase, the founding director of our program, describes below five of the activist training programs from the 20th century that most profoundly influenced the values, vision, and curriculum of the EAOP. You can click on the links below to read these case histories individually, or you can download the full text of this five-part essay on "EAOP Inspirations."

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Rosa Parks and the Highlander Folk School

Rosa Parks became famous back in 1955 when she refused to move to the back of a segregated bus for a white man. She was immediately arrested, and her act of defiance sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which won the first major victory against legal segregation in the South and launched a national movement for civil rights.

People can usually see how Rosa Parks sparked my interest in nonviolent activism for the common good. What they don't get is how she inspired my interest in activist training and education.

Like most people, I used to think that Rosa Parks was just a tired, middle-aged seamstress who got fed up with the indignities of racism on the evening of December 1, 1955. However, when I was a teenager, an old Quaker activist I knew told me the real story of Rosa Parks.

For starters, Parks was a seasoned activist, not a novice. She had been an active member of her local NAACP chapter for over twelve years before refusing to move to the back of the bus, and she had participated in many discussions about how to launch a successful campaign against segregation. Contrary to the conventional story, her act of civil disobedience was pre-planned and aimed at sparking a powerful movement for freedom.

Secondly, Parks was also a trained activist. The summer before her famous act of civil disobedience, Parks attended a ten-day activist training workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. During a radio interview years later, Studs Terkel asked Parks what role Highlander played in her decision to act. Parks answered, "Everything."

Highlander Folk School was founded in the 1930s by Myles Horton. His vision for the school was to bring poor and oppressed people together, encourage them to grapple with their everyday social problems, provide an arena for deep political reflection, and, ultimately, provide training workshops in the skills and strategies of social movement organizing.

During the 1930s and the early 1940s, Highlander focused its educational programs on the southern labor movement. By the early 1950s, Highlander moved into civil rights activism and Horton brought together blacks and whites interested in confronting the problem of segregation.

To deepen the effectiveness of this work, Horton hired Septima Clark, the School's first black staff member, as his Education Director. A public school teacher who had been fired and blacklisted because of her volunteer work with the NAACP, Clark cemented Highlander's ties over the years with many of the people who eventually became leaders of such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

At Highlander, these people were encouraged by both Horton and Clark to take what they learned and apply it in their own communities. As Horton said to generations of participants at Highlander's training workshops: "The way to use this information is not to say that we have learned a lot, and isn't it wonderful and great to have been at Highlander.... You're here to act on it. This is education for action. Now, how are you going to act on this? Let's just plan what you're going to do when you go back."

In her recollection of Park's first visit to Highlander, Septima Clark reports how Parks struggled with her fears over taking the kind of daring action against segregation being discussed by workshop participants and Highlander's trainers. As Clark remembers it: "Rosa Parks was afraid for white people to know that she was as militant as she was. She didn't even want to speak before the whites that she met at Highlander, because she was afraid they would take it back to the whites in Montgomery. After she talked it out in that workshop that morning and she went back home, then she decided that 'I'm not going to move out of that seat.'"

With her dramatic action a few months later, Parks earned her "diploma" from Highlander and rightly became revered as the grandmother of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Unknown to her, she also inspired the creation of a two-year, environmental activist training program in Keene, New Hampshire close to 50 years after her big day.

James Lawson and the Fellowship of Reconciliation

The Highlander Folk School is just one example of what sociologist Aldon Morris calls "movement halfway houses." --a term used in his book *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* to describe a wide variety of activist training programs. While diverse in structure, the common goal of all movement halfway houses is to increase the effectiveness of democratic social movements by training "the leadership and the rank-and-file to bring about social change."

In his book, Morris also focused on the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a small national pacifist organization that was also active in the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. As Morris notes, "Nonviolence was practically unheard-of in Southern black communities before the civil rights movement." Yet, in the Black freedom movement that emerged in the U.S. South in the 1950s, "large masses of black people ultimately became directly involved in economic boycotts, street marches, mass meetings, going to jail by the thousands, and a whole range of disruptive tactics commonly referred to as nonviolent direct action." This dramatic turn of events was significantly influenced by the educational efforts of the FOR.

For example, while civil rights leader James Lawson first learned the art of public speaking and organizing group activities within the African-American church, his activist skills and political vision were significantly deepened by his participation in FOR. As Lawson reports, "I joined the FOR as a college freshman. Then I became aware of a whole library of literature. Then, I heard lectures by A.J. Muste and Bayard Rustin." Soon, as Lawson explains, "I began to get the monthly magazine, to see their bibliographies, and then I began to read into those bibliographies and began to get some of those books and

studied them.” Through such rich educational encounters within FOR, Lawson developed a reputation for having “studied the entire world history of nonviolent social action.”

Lawson, however, did not just develop his intellectual understanding of nonviolent social change strategy as a result of his participation in FOR. He was also encouraged to develop practical organizing skills. As Lawson told Morris in an interview:

Even as a freshman I was participating in workshops, doing some of the lecturing, speaking, helping to organize students for FOR. And at different times in college the FOR asked me to organize student meetings. They sent me to speak to college campuses, to speak and defend the pacifist point of view. And then church groups learned of my concerns and interests and ability [and] invited me into campuses to debate military officers, to debate professors.... When I moved into the Southeast, even Southern Methodists knew who I was. I knew many people already by that time in the Southeast, from national meetings and regional meetings of all kinds. I guess part of the answer has to be that yes, FOR was part of my nurturing process, and it remained so.

After his college years, Lawson also engaged in small-scale experiments in nonviolent direct action sponsored by FOR and its spin-off organization, the Congress of Racial Equality. In this way, Lawson’s extensive book knowledge became grounded in direct personal experience with activism and organizing.

All of this training and learning prepared Lawson to become a highly effective leader of the mass nonviolent direct action campaign against the segregation of commercial and public facilities in Nashville, Tennessee. According to Morris, “Careful organization and planning was the hallmark of the Nashville sit-it movement.”

Lawson’s abilities as a “trained pacifist” were central to this outcome. He proved instrumental in training hundreds of rank-and-file activists in the local desegregation campaign. He was also instrumental in developing a strategy that involved dozens of nonviolent student rebels sitting in at lunch counters; thousands of local Black citizens supporting the students through a mass boycott of downtown stores; a handful of mainstream reformers pursuing legal strategies for defending the students as well as lobbying members of the White power structure; and, finally, organizers like himself and the other leaders of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council who actively alerted, engaged, educated, and organized the various segments of the Black community into a successful social movement campaign against segregation.

When the Nashville movement finally overcame the resistance of the local White power elite and desegregated the city's stores, restaurants, and public facilities, Lawson was soon invited to travel "across the South to confer with black movement leaders and to conduct workshops in their communities." Lawson was not alone in this work. Similar ripples of empowering leadership and organizing were felt throughout the South by other well-trained FOR members and staffers who also became active advisors and organizers in the civil rights movement. Besides Lawson, this small group of influential "FOR graduates" included such significant leaders as Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, and Glenn Smiley. Both Rustin and Smiley served as advisors to Martin Luther King Jr., and Rustin went on to serve as the key organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

A. J. Muste and the Brookwood Labor College

Numerous examples of other movement halfway houses also exist. In his book *Inciting Democracy*, Randy Schutt lists close to two-dozen examples of "the many schools and training programs across the United States that have contributed so much to progressive social change."

One of the ones he mentions—the Brookwood Labor College—is arguably the most ambitious long-term activist training program in history and was a particular inspiration in the creation of Antioch's Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program. As Schutt notes,

From 1921-1936, the Brookwood Labor College in Westchester County, New York, with A.J. Muste as director, taught a two-year program in labor organizing for about twenty or thirty students. Students lived on campus, but also attended meetings of their labor unions and participated in labor activities.

A more detailed story of the Brookwood Labor College is told in Richard Altenbaugh's (1990) *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s*. According to Altenbaugh, Brookwood was created as an alternative to traditional higher education institutions in order to meet the specific educational needs of labor activists--needs that were typically ignored or undermined by most existing colleges and universities--and offered a 2-year advanced training program in labor advocacy and organizing.

Brookwood's students came to the school from all over the country in order to become visionary and effective labor organizers, union officers, writers, editors, and popular educators. Altenbaugh also reports that Muste and the other founders of Brookwood focused on five things:

First, the formal curriculum provided rudimentary learning skills for workers with limited educational backgrounds. Second, every aspect of the formal curriculum sought to imbue the worker-student with class consciousness. The social sciences dominated the curriculum and concentrated on areas pertinent to the students' backgrounds and needs, while activities such as labor drama and fieldwork stressed class conflict. Third, informational courses enabled students to acquire the intellectual skills necessary to analyze their society and determine the roots of working-class problems. Fourth, "tool" courses emphasized the practical means by which to ameliorate working-class conditions.... [Fifth, the school used] pedagogical techniques combining classroom interaction with militant off-campus activities.

Brookwood graduates, who numbered about 700 by the time the College closed, had a significant and very positive influence on the U.S. labor movement. As John Dewey and other progressive intellectuals argued in a funding appeal for Brookwood, "In every section of the country its graduates are giving credible, in some cases noteworthy, service to labor, progressive, and radical movements--in unions, labor colleges, cooperatives, labor political organizations, unemployed leagues."

This cadre of highly-trained activists working within the labor press, union organizations, and local workers' education projects were not only skilled and effective; they were visionary. They brought a renewed spirit to a labor movement that had long been dominated by the staid, conservative, craft-oriented, business unionism epitomized by the American Federation of Labor.

In stark contrast to the "old school" leadership of the AFL, Brookwood graduates tended to embrace a vision of what Muste called "labor progressivism," a vision that called for an "aggressive effort to organize the masses of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the basic industries into industrial unions, with special attention to such groups as women workers, young workers, negro workers, and immigrant groups." These activists saw the labor movement "as not only a business proposition but as a great idealistic force, having for its ultimate goal the good life for all."

Brookwood graduates were particularly influential in the formation and successful organizing campaigns of the United Auto Workers and the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s. The College also played an important role in serving the community-based workers' education movement.

Moses Coady and St. Francis Xavier University's Extension Program

One of my favorite examples of a university program serving as a “movement halfway house” is the story of Moses Coady. He helped spark a major social movement through his work in the 1930s as Director of the Extension Service at St. Francis Xavier University in eastern Nova Scotia.

According to educational historian Anne Alexander, Coady was a visionary academic who found a way to make St. Francis Xavier University’s extension program a potent force in the development of a social movement--in this case, the Antigonish Movement, which was named after a village in eastern Nova Scotia where Coady began his work as an adult educator.

Inspired by the social gospel of progressive Catholicism, an ideology that rejected both Marxist-Leninism and exploitative capitalism, Coady sought to use the resources of St. Francis Xavier University to inspire ordinary people to collective action to create an economic system that offered justice, fulfilling work, and sufficient wealth to “unlock life for all the people.”

His double-barreled strategy during the 1930s was adult education through the formation of study clubs, and the development of cooperative economic ventures emerging out of the discussions of those study clubs. In this impoverished region of Canada, Coady, his associates at the University Extension Service, and a host of community volunteers created over 1,000 study clubs involving over 10,000 members. These, in turn, sparked the creation of several local lending libraries, a populist newspaper, 142 credit unions, 43 cooperative stores and buying clubs, 35 producer cooperatives, 11 cooperatively-owned apartment buildings, a residential summer leadership school to train adult educators and coop managers and a shorter residential labor school to train trade union activists.

This dramatic expansion of adult learning and democratic institutions freed thousands of people from the grip of company housing, company stores, commercial middlemen, large banks, and absentee owners. The movement also created new bonds among men and women; people of different faiths; and farmers, fisherfolk, and industrial workers. This changed the region’s political climate as well. While having no official ties to any political party, the Antigonish Movement created a cultural climate that allowed candidates of the populist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation to be elected to the national legislature from several towns in the region.

Perhaps the deepest changes, though, were inside people’s hearts and minds. Where people once felt helpless and powerless in the face of overwhelming social forces, the “program of adult education and cooperation enabled people to understand and transform their situations, thereby developing their self-help capacities and increasing their sense of self-worth and power.”

Bunyan Bryant's Environmental Advocacy Program at University of Michigan

As I pondered Rosa Parks, Highlander, the FOR, Brookwood Labor College, and the Antigonish Movement, I began to seriously consider designing an academic "movement halfway house" at Antioch University New England to train some of the modern environmental movement's paid and volunteer public interest advocates and grassroots organizers. Yet, the potential of this idea didn't fully hit me until I learned about Bunyan Bryant's Environmental Advocacy master's program, which existed at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources from 1972 until the early 1990s.

According to Bryant, the idea for creating a master's program in Environmental Advocacy was originally championed by several students and a couple of faculty members in the School's Environmental Education and Outdoor Recreation Program. These people had either worked on, or been inspired by, the Earth Day Teach-In on the University of Michigan's campus in 1970. They also came to believe that the School of Natural Resources would have to shake itself up and create innovative new programs to better serve the rapidly expanding environmental movement.

The new Environmental Advocacy Program was originally structured as a concentration within the Environmental Education program. The Environmental Advocacy Program was a 2-year, 36-credit master's of science curriculum that offered both required and elective courses in environmental science, political theory, and applied organizing skills.

At the beginning, Bryant was incredulous that the School of Natural Resources had even authorized this program, let alone chosen him as its co-director. As a young African-American political activist with a master's degree in Social Work and a doctorate in Education, Bryant stood out at faculty meetings. Most of the older faculty also had deep concerns about the School of Natural Resources even offering an advocacy program. As Bryant told me in 2003, "Advocacy is not a widely used term within academic circles because it runs counter to the common notion that universities should be value-free and objective places created solely to generate scientific knowledge."

Bryant's work on the new Environmental Advocacy Program certainly flew in the face of this notion. "Environmental Advocacy students and faculty," reports Bryant, "were greatly influenced by the Black Power, the civil rights, the environmental, the peace, and the countercultural movements that gained legitimacy in the 1960s." Also, as if his focus on environmental advocacy and organizing was not enough, Bryant was an early pioneer in what would later become known as the environmental justice movement. From the very

beginning, he pushed his students to expand their definition of environmentalism.

Reports Bryant, "The program always attempted to make the connections between the exploitation and dominance of human and nonhuman life, and sought to identify the forces exploiting the environment, natural resources, and human beings, particularly people of color, women, working people, and the poor."

Yet, for all of this early dissonance, the Environmental Advocacy Program soon became established at the School of Natural Resources and ran successfully for over two decades before it morphed—at Bryant's initiative--into a research-oriented graduate program in Environmental Justice. During its existence, however, this Environmental Advocacy Program succeeded in training a number of skilled organizers who went on to do important and effective work in the field. Bryant still loves telling stories about what his advocacy students accomplished over the years, often even before they graduated from the program.

One of Bryant's favorite stories is about the two Environmental Advocacy students who worked as interns with the United Automobile Workers' Conservation Department in 1976. As he proudly recalls,

These students played a major role in organizing a conference held at the UAW Walter and May Reuther Camp at Black Lake near Onoway, Michigan. The title of the Conference was "Working for Environmental and Economic Justice and Jobs." Over 350 workers, farmers, environmentalists, and Urban League members spent four days discussing the interface between environmental, social, and economic issues. This was probably the first time that the concept "environmental justice" was used publicly at a conference or event.

Bryant also likes to talk about the activist organizations that several of his former students founded and staffed after their graduations. One student-created organization is the Illinois South Stewardship Alliance. According to Bryant, "This organization was dedicated to ensuring that coal companies in southern Illinois practiced good stewardship of the land in accordance with the 1977 federal strip mining laws." Other graduates went on to form PrairieFire, "a farm organization in central Iowa working to change land tenure laws in order to protect family farms and encourage farming practices that adhered to ecological principles." Graduates of the program also founded the Northern Rocky Action Group, which for over 20 years "helped low income, peace, and environmental groups develop their leadership and consulted on social change strategies and organizational issues, fundraising, and other financial matters."

Many Environmental Advocacy graduates also joined the staffs of existing organizations. As Bryant reports, "The program helped seed dozens of organizations." These organizations included ACORN, Oregon Fair Share, the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, UAW-Ithaca, Friends of the Earth, the Institute for Local Self Reliance, Minnesota COACT, American Friends Service Committee, Connecticut Citizen Action Group, and Clergy and Laity Concerned.

"Besides having good organizing skills," says Bryant, "these students' conceptual analysis of political economy, racism, and environmentalism was so great, so articulate, that lots of the senior staff in these organizations were just blown away by them." Some senior staff even began joking among themselves about these graduates being part of "the Michigan Mafia." It was meant as a compliment. These graduates were a force to be reckoned with.

Antioch University's Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program is carrying on this important tradition of activist training for the environmental movement today!

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