

LEE STERN

Biography Excerpt from:

A Ghandian Quaker, Convict & Peace Teacher

by *Caroline B. Webster*

Creative Response to Conflict - Nyack, NY

QPCC Nonviolence Training of Youthful Offenders

As Head of QPCC under PSAP, Lee Stern sought to expand training for conflict resolution in community to include nonviolent response to conflict in prisons. Training in transforming power began in QPCC nonviolence workshops in upstate New York prisons. Lee Stern and Lawrence Apsy touched bases with The Think Tank, a primarily black project working with New York City youth gangs and delinquent youth in custody. “The goal was to help these youth to break out of their psychology of total violence.”²⁰ The aim was to benefit both themselves and the communities to which they would return.

The Think Tank Concept

Lawrence White served 32 years in federal prisons for felony offenses. He was released in 2002 and now works as a community advocate for the Fortune Society. Larry White is a member of Morningside Monthly Meeting in New York City.

Right after Attica²¹ I guess the administration central office identified ringleaders and sent them to Green Haven.²² Green Haven had a number of them. They had a chaplain by the name of Edmund Muller. I don't know how to identify, to classify him – a very unique individual, very creative mind. Well, anyway he set up what he called Cadre made up of all of these. Everybody came down to the cadre. He began to teach us all how to use our

¹⁹Tom Wicker, *A Time to Die* (New York: *Quadrangle*, 1975)

²⁰Lee Stern, *QPCC's Nonviolence Training in Prisons* report 1974

²¹Attica Correctional Facility inmate uprising, September, 1971.

²²Green Haven Correctional Facility, Stormville, NY

minds - how to develop programs to bring about the kind of changes that we all wanted, better prison conditions, rather than to do rebellion. He taught us to set up our own organizations as well, so we set up what was known as The Think Tank.²³

Carl Berry, a progressive administrator, was appointed Deputy Superintendent for Programs at Green Haven. Deputy Berry sent a questionnaire to the prison population requesting inmates own suggestions for programs that would meet their needs. Enlightened by discussions guided by Rev. Muller, the Think Tank men reached out to the Quaker Worship Group for assistance. The Quakers, principally Lawrence Apsey, began discussions with Deputy Berry and successfully negotiated a proposal which was approved by the New York State Division for Youth and the Department of Correctional Services. The Think Tank was allowed to proceed with orientation and training of adult offenders who would become youth aid workers in the State's Division for Youth Facilities. QPCC assisted by assembling an experienced team of inter-racial trainers led by civil rights organizer Bernard Lafayette who conducted a successful three-day nine-session seminar in March, 1975. Nine inmates completed the course, six of whom were certificated by QPCC for training juveniles in nonviolence skills and philosophy. The inmates were allowed to go to a facility for youthful offenders where they applied the skills they had learned. Roger Namu Whitfield, director of the inmate group at Green Haven Prison in Stormville, New York, known as the Think Tank Concept, participated in QPCC's workshops there. He wrote in a letter to QPCC: "How we can even begin to explain the feeling of brotherhood and dedication, I do not know. Not only did that bunch of you train us in transforming power, but also impressed upon our minds so much more. I hope that we can all keep in touch, share information, experience, and our lives. The wall that divides us is not a real barrier unless we let it be."²⁴

²³Larry White continues as an advocate for prison reform. He is currently involved in the development of the community-sponsored Reconnections Reintegration Project, a collaboration between the Riverside Church Prison Ministry and Harlem Men Stand Up organizations.

²⁴Records of Lee Stern

Unfortunately, prison officials were resentful. Lee Stern reported that the team was confronted: “What are you doing using these criminals and murderers to teach prisoners how to behave? That’s our job.”²⁵ Complaints of prison officials and union guards made it impossible to continue the Think Tank program in Green Haven Prison. However, requests from other prisons increased. Further seminars were conducted at Auburn and Wallkill Correctional Facilities at prisoners’ requests. Out of these seminars grew the Alternatives to Violence Project.

The Alternatives to Violence Program - Beginnings

AVP, first known as The Alternatives to Violence in Prisons, began in 1975 as a program for teaching prisoners to deal with anger and conflict without violence. The seeds were planted in Green Haven Prison Think Tank Concept, which activity had been terminated there. Under the sponsorship of the New York Quaker Project on Community Conflict, AVP was initiated as “a QPCC service responding to the needs of men and women in prison who want to relate more creatively to the prison situation and to people and problems outside the prison after their release.”²⁶ This two-pronged vision, a vision of Lee Stern’s for thirty-five years, was finally to come to fruition.

AVP was originally a project of NYYM, Peace and Social Action Program. Lee Stern was among the founders, along with Lawrence Apsey, Ellen Flanders, clerk of NYYM Prisons Committee, and Janet Lugo. With help from the Philadelphia Movement for a New Society, they developed a workshop which they successfully conducted in Green Haven Prison. It was the very first AVP workshop. “We modified it some and by that time we had developed an education committee. We were a team and worked on the development in Larry Apsey’s living room.”²⁷ Workshops employed the techniques of role-playing, setting up situations which simulated conflicts and by acting the parts of combatants were resolved.

Ellen Flanders did some workshops with Lee Stern in Auburn and

²⁵Lee Stern 1992 taped interview of the Second International Conference of AVP at Skycroft, MD

²⁶Alternatives to Violence Program statement, 1976.

²⁷Ellen Flanders interview with author at Silver Bay, New York, NYYM sessions July 22, 2009

Woodbrooke Prisons. Lee Stern expected prisoner's behavioral transformation with each other to extend to respect for prison guards. "I remember that at one point he was speaking to the prisoners and protesting against their basically dehumanizing the guards. I thought this was being humble and I told him so. I said that we are not all the best actors in the world. Lee seemed a bit amused and perhaps irritated at me, but he took it all right. He was a good facilitator and I got along with him and both liked and respected him very much. But he was too busy to do workshops himself very often."²⁸ Interestingly enough, Ellen recalls a workshop where an inmate played the role of a warden and "did it not as a caricature but as a real human being with serious problems and serious things to think about. It was a very good experience."

AVP incorporated the cardinal basic skill of affirmation. The first technique taught to affirm a participant, was to address one by first name, preceded by an adjective connoting positive attribute and with an alliterative first letter. The participant chose his own personal adjective. Lee Stern was known as "Likeable Lee." AVP also developed a training manual. It was taken to three levels: basic, advanced and training for facilitators.

Demand for AVP Escalates

Under the administration of Lee Stern, PSAP and AVP moved into the office complex of New York Yearly Meeting at 15 Rutherford Place in New York City in 1977. Lee continued to assist the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) as Vice President, Treasurer and office overseer for seven years. He not only did administrative work, but frequently served as a skilled trainer in AVP and Children's Creative Response to Conflict workshops and as Clerk of the Metropolitan Area Council of AVP. He served on the YM Committee of AVP from 1982-1985. Demand for AVP New York State prison workshops escalated. Between 1975 and 1983, AVP trained a total of 2,480 prisoners and 718 community participants in nonviolence.²⁹

²⁸Ibid

²⁹NYYM Yearbook 1983, p. 69.



Cecil Seabury, aid to Corrections Commissioner Benjamin Ward, and Bernard Lafayette, Jr. presenting certificates to graduates of nonviolence training program. In background is Lawrence Apsey and to right, Lee Stern.

James Charles

Figure 19.1: The first nonviolence training program in prison predating the Alternatives to Violence Program.