The Hollyhocks Are Still Blooming: 25 Years of College Staff

By C. Jan Swearingen

A row of pink hollyhocks is blooming along the northwest corner of the College Staff house. There’s a light pink one, it blooms opening splendidly from bottom to top. The others are a deep fuschia. Twice this summer our five year-old, Benjamin, and I have had to splint the biggest hollyhock. Knocked over by a strong wind, big rain, a bicycle or a dog on his evening rounds, that hollyhock has become a living symbol for me of what I’m doing this summer as staff director, and, beyond that, of what the ranch has done for twenty five years through the college work-study seminar. It would be so easy this year for me to let that hollyhock die, or to wait for someone else to splint it, or to think it’s not worth the trouble. I’ll probably not be in the staff house again; nobody will notice. Reversing attitudes has been a core purpose of the college staff program.

Since 1972, the year I was on the college staff myself, I’ve become increasingly aware of how much that experience taught me about freedom and responsibility, about the spiritual strengths and rewards gained when you make the decision to be responsible even when no one notices. Like a teacher appreciate long after the class has ended, the college staff experience provides a storehouse of memories, memories of all the tests, failures, triumphs, and insights gleaned during three months in close quarters. A substantial number of college staffers return to a more active involvement in the church and within church-related programs after their summers here. This summer we have three who are seriously considering Volunteers-in-Mission work. Two are already off to Egypt and Italy respectively — to teach in VIM schools. Several have said that after this summer they feel more affirming of the institutional church than they did when they arrived. For many, however, it is still the dry sceptical summer of post adolescence when more questions must be asked, more rebellion acted out, before they seek or find a way back. For these, the questions are clearer, the debates more informed, the charges of hypocrisy harder to substantiate after hearing John Fife talk about his work with Sanctuary, or representatives of South African Blacks talk about how central the church has been to their spiritual and political survival.

For twenty five years, through a concept nurtured to maturity by Jim Hall, the college staff experience has provided these and countless other points of experience and exposure to 30 some college students each summer. How did the college staff seminar begin, and how has it changed over its quarter century in existence? As early as 1959 there was a group of high school age youth here called “Rangers,” a program developed by Maurice T. Bone, of the Board of Christian Education. They were conceived of as a special elite whose primary duty was as counselors, guides, and companions to those who wished to hike. In 1960 the first college staff came here, only half of today’s 34 or so in number. The idea of Vernon Smith, also of the Board of Christian Education, this group was to work primarily in children’s activities as the Ranch shifted to an adult study center. But even in 1960 the idea of some summer-long study for the college staff had begun, the germ of what later became the college staff seminar. In 1961 Jim Hall assumed the directorship of the Ranch, and inherited a college staff director already chosen. That year, the staff director led not just a seminar but a group of dissertations. The length and requirements of the “term papers” proved too demanding and too academic. From that summer forward the college staff seminar has been defined as an informal discussion group whose topics, readings, and structure are decided by the group.

In the early and mid-sixties the college staff grew in number and began to assume duties in the kitchen, housekeeping, pool, maintenance, and ranchlands. Ties for men and skirts for women were required dining hall attire for college staff workers. In a family style dining hall they brought serving platters and pitchers
to each table, and joined the diners in prayer before the meal began. By the late sixties cafeteria-style serving had been adopted and the revolt against dress codes had begun. Who can forget the tie-dyed T-shirts, ragged bell bottoms, and unisex long hair of that era? As the seventies began, revolt against the Vietnam war was in full swing. Jim Hall remembers one college-staff-initiated seminar of that era in which college staffers flung obscenities and worse at those who challenged their opposition to the draft. After listening to the complaints of the livid seminar participants involved, he pulled in the college staff to point out that if their aim was truly communication they hadn’t exactly gotten off on the right foot by yelling four-letter words.

The college staff follows the times. Its members are a pretty good gauge each year of national patterns in religious attitude and practice, intellectual interests, habits of thought and behavior, preprofessional choices of college majors. With the anti-Vietnam revolt of the late sixties came college staffers disaffected from government and the draft. With Kent State and then Watergate came an even more profound doubt in the integrity of our society and its leaders. Each of these eras brought with it cognate disaffections from the church, and these, too, were reflected in the college staff. Yet college students continued to come, to discover at the ranch a place to challenge those within the establishment, to test and try their own beliefs “in the refiner’s fire.” The job-consciousness of the late seventies and early eighties, and the revival of evangelical Christianity which took place during the same years have been, like other patterns, reflected in the college staff. The differences between secularism, social-activism, and evangelical Christianity challenge the tolerance of college staffers for one another. Unlike the staffers of even two years ago, this year’s staff is once again involved in activist causes: Central America, South Africa, Sanctuary. Unlike the social activists of the early seventies, many are now involved because of their religious convictions rather than because of anti-institutional fervor. I found this year’s staff looking, hard, for renewal of spiritual values, for meaningful forms of expressing and publicly marking those values, for reconciliation with an institutional church which many find unsatisfying. I predict that among this group will be some of the reformers from within who can enliven and regenerate the life of congregations and campus religious groups. These will be some of the youth leaders strengthened by working with Junior and Senior highs at Ghost Ranch. In numerous ways the experiment in freedom the Ranch provides its college staff returns tenfold to the church at large, to the communities staffers return to, even to the Ranch itself where, in a given summer, you can find former college staffers at work — as seminar leaders and volunteers.

On end-of-summer evaluation forms college staff often note that it was their “best summer to date.” They also comment on the diversity of people represented among the college staff,
the absence of any standardized definition of what a "good Christian" must be, and the experience of becoming a community. They experience “forced growth.” Traditional evangelicals are at first shocked to have to put up with agnostics next door. Campus Crusaders try in vain to convert latitudinarians. Existentialists try with equal frustration so shake the inner calm of those born again. By the end of the summer some boundaries have been stretched, and the staff director, too, has experienced some forced growth.

Each summer is a new creation, unique, because it brings a different staff director and a different group of students together to forge a community. Some summers the community has emerged from within the college staff itself; rejecting strong leadership they form their own motley crew and insist on self-government. Other summers have been highly directed and orchestrated by the staff directors. Most summers, a little bit of both occurs and a lot is learned from the alternation between hierarchy and grass roots populism. Most staff are surprised to discover the autonomy, and the subsequent responsibility, that the Ranch provides through this program. Should we allow anyone to use our staff house volleyball court? What if noisy high-schoolers come over and disturb our hard-earned afternoon naps? It’s your decision, but also your rule to enforce. Should a particularly disruptive, irresponsible, and rude member of the college staff be asked to leave? The patience of many a staff director has been stretched to an absolute limit by the goal of teaching self-government and its attendant responsibil-ity. The converse lesson is also learned: those who fail to govern themselves will be governed by others. Many a time the college staff see themselves facing an unruly peer with no effect, asking the hierarchy for intervention, being asked in return to confront the offender.

Having been staff director twice—Once twelve years ago and again this year—I can attest to the equally valuable lessons learned by staff directors. Just as the college staff are given their freedom, a freedom they are sceptical of at first, the staff director has the wonderful and awesome responsibility of almost total autonomy. Designing and creating seminar discussions, monitoring and providing contexts for discussing the summer’s experiences, getting the summer play production launched, putting out brush fires in working and interpersonal relationships — these tasks are challenging and rewarding parts of the summer for the staff director. How many of these things get done, and how many of them are sustained throughout the summer, are completely up to the staff director.

Who’s the ideal college staff director? I like the diversity that has been provided by alternating between singles (myself 12 years ago) and married couples (my husband and I now), and between clergy and non-clergy. It’s probably a good idea to continue drawing from the academic community, just to minimize some of the shock effect of living with thirty-odd 18-to-25 year olds. Most staff directors have been campus ministers or faculty. Depending on the abilities and temperament of the staff director, the seminar programs have ranged from group process to more structured reading and study. The leadership styles have also varied, giving college staff different standards and models to follow or rebel against. In either case the Zen saying holds “You only find your way out through the wall against which you are living.”

It is here that I can observe in myself the most maturing as a teacher and leader. Twelve years ago, like other staff directors in the early seventies, I worked with an anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment group who resisted every form of evening seminar except those which were urgently needed to discuss internal community issues and problems. So, the staff seminar didn’t happen after the first two weeks.
We did have weekly internal worship meetings. We produced *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and took it to Chimayo for a dinner theatre production. We listened to Richard Nixon resign over Watergate. One of our group floated away in a Zen fog, walking through the burro field sipping herbal tea during the time he was supposed to be leading an activities group. The group finally decided to deport him after he had wandered into Box Canyon one night during a thunderstorm and had to be rescued by our posse. Another broke a leg during an illegal horseback ride. Three couples got married. Two became ministers. But we had no seminar that summer.

I know now that we did have a seminar that summer. We had exactly the seminar which is described with sensible latitude in the yearly program brochure. Our seminar was our choice not to have a seminar, coupled with an understanding of why we had chosen not to do that. Refusal, too, is a choice. The number of "town meetings" we had deciding on this or that work dispute, this or that misbehavior, whether to take the play to Chimayo, —these became our seminar. I grew when I realized, in looking back, that formal teaching is not the only vehicle for learning. My initial despair at not being able to "teach" a seminar was replaced much later by a realization that I done the right thing in letting go of that form of seminar that year. And, I was able to let go with only a little hurt pride.

This summer has been a summer of persistence, learning from the lessons of the past, tolerating intolerance for the college staff seminar more than I did twelve years ago. Because of this, I've also been more willing to keep the three mini-seminars that evolved, going for the small groups who wished to continue: 10 in the reading and study seminar, 8 in the study of women in religion, 12 in exploring worship and spirituality. I've disappointed those who wanted a supermom; I observe the slight backlash against feminism and professional women that's observable in many quarters these days. There's a deep yearning for models. It alternates poignantly with an approach-then-rereat pattern in actually discussing the issues. It was one of those days when no one showed up for a seminar that Benjamin and I went out to split the hollyhock.

Jim Shibley says this is the wettest summer he's seen since he's been here. Jim Shibley has been her 30 years. I've only seen the staff house hollyhocks blooming two or three times since I've been coming to the Ranch. I've been coming to the Ranch for 27 years. For whatever reason, they bloomed real big this summer, and they became my symbol of ongoing rebirth, and the willingness to be an instrument of rebirth. In splitting the hollyhock, in not saying "it doesn't matter" or "why should I?" I celebrated the patience and determination and sense of vision that has kept the college staff program here this long. I hope those hollyhocks are blooming bigger and better than ever in another 25 years.

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**RANCH RUN 1986**

For the second year, the college staff sponsored two opportunities on Thursdays for ranch residents and visitors to run, walk, hop or crawl (participants' choice) on behalf of the Sanctuary Movement. Begun by last year's college staff as "I Ran the Ranch" it has become a well-received method for educating people about Central American issues and for raising funds in support of refugees and the Sanctuary Movement. This year participants donated $8 and received a t-shirt with "Ranch Run 1986" silk-screened on the front and the ranch skull symbol on the back. Over $2000 was raised by the $5 portion of the donation that went to the Sanctuary Movement.