

Alternatives to Violence in Atlantic Canada

'Vital' Vince Zelazny

September 17, 2008 was a day not unlike other days, and even at Dorchester Institution the fifteenth anniversary of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) passed without fanfare. The first AVP workshop in the region had taken place at the Elizabeth Fry Centre in Halifax on September 17, 1993.

This does not imply that AVP has had little impact on our region. It has touched the lives of many hundreds of prison inmates and 'outmates' alike. It has given us at least a glimpse of what it's like to live a life in a supportive community based on goodness, respect, caring, and non-violence. Devotees of AVP not only believe that each person's transformation into a state of grace is possible, but we try to live it ourselves.

In 1993 the small, idyllic university town of Sackville, New Brunswick, was the home of Edith and Michael Miller and their three sons. The youngest son had reached his twenties in the town on the edge of the marshes separating New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. So with the heaviest demands of parenting behind them, Michael and Edith were open to new involvements. They had become interested in AVP after being exposed to it at Canadian Yearly Meeting. When Rosemarie and Bill McMechan organized the eastern movement of AVP from its established base in Ontario to the Maritimes, Michael and Edith gladly pitched in. Ruth Hillman, Gordon Gilhuly, Liz Schroeder, and Gordon Husk from Ontario soon followed Rosemarie and Bill to New Brunswick to help get the ball rolling. This is how AVP is established in a new area. Representatives from a mature program will "plant" it. The first New Brunswick AVP workshop began on September 24, 1993, at Westmorland Institution.

"AVP is a new, very promising approach to the problem of violence in ourselves and in society", wrote Miller to Dorchester chaplain Phil Ferris. In his letter dated June 28, 1993 he proposed having the inaugural AVP at Dorchester Institution.

The non-violent and spiritually based philosophy and techniques of AVP could be described as a 3-day course in practical Quakerism. As the course is based in practical life experience, it contains all the emotions and drama of real life. Stirring emotions and experiences are held up safely before the group and explored through exercises and role-plays.

My own experience of AVP began in 1995. I'll never forget the feeling on first entering a prison and negotiating the layers of security, the bars and mechanized gates shutting loudly behind me, and of suddenly being on the inside, surrounded by incarcerated people and prison guards. In spite of the extraordinariness of the event and the setting, I soon learned through the workshop how surprisingly ordinary the people inside were. They shared the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and hopes of people on the street. They seemed not at all like the demons we hear about in the media and in the provocative law-and-order statements of politicians. I have never felt I was in danger at an AVP workshop - although once a "light and lively" ended with a broken foot. Red Beard Ralph and Caring Colin simultaneously and vigorously tried to sit in the same chair during a musical chairs-like game - Big Wind Blows. At the next workshop both Ralph and Colin recounted the incident with loud guffaws.

Equally memorable but much more common are the workshop moments of quiet sharing and reflection. During a gathering participants take turns speaking around the circle, completing a sentence, such as, "Something I am grateful for is..." or, "A time I was proud of an accomplishment was..." More often than not during a gathering, an inmate will express deep gratitude that outside people would come to the prison to spend a weekend away from their homes and loved ones, to be with prisoners in the circle.

Michael Miller's experience of AVP at Dorchester has been similar to mine. "The written evaluations at the end of each workshop are overwhelmingly positive. However, I try to remind the inmates that I derive a great deal of satisfaction out of participating in AVP. I get out of it as much or more than I put in", said Michael. The workshop is for the benefit of each person in the circle. We all enter the circle bearing our particular life challenges, as well as our willingness to help each other.

At least half of the regular outside facilitators are women. Linda Foy is a Friend living in Port Elgin on