

# Evolution of a Self-Sufficient Community Family Education Center

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For those who are acquainted with the organization of a family counseling center with its satellite study group program, the Wilmington, Delaware, operation would appear familiar. What would be unfamiliar, however, is the total absence of professional personnel. The Family Education Center of Delaware, Inc., is staffed and operated by lay volunteer personnel, including the family counselors. No one is paid.

Over one hundred members staff the network of interrelated programs. All contribute through their varied talents and training in an egalitarian social value system. Membership costs \$5.00 per year per family. Attendance and/or counseling at the Center requires an additional \$10.00 per semester, per family. These modest fees, plus the profit from book sales, provide financial independence. We have a central office in a local church, and our counseling is held in a local school. We rent these facilities for very reasonable rates.

Counseling is provided each Saturday on a two semester basis of sixteen weeks each. A limited summer maintenance program is provided at no extra cost. This schedule suits the special needs of volunteers and provides ample opportunity for education within the community of people participating.

Everyone who participates in the FEC program is encouraged to work within the organization in some capacity. This is our means of creating a sense of "belongingness." We are not interested in providing a service **for** the community. We are interested in evolving a "therapeutic community" which exists **of, by,** and **with** every citizen. Our lay counselors know that they are the forerunners of a future culture whose citizens will share increased knowledge and expertise in solving social problems in society. It is toward the evolving of a more effectively trained citizenry rather than creating trained staff who function like or with professional agencies that makes our training programs unique and our volunteer status workable.

The number of people who are official members of FEC, Inc., (150) does not indicate the number of people who are actually involved or have been involved in the past. Our beginning study groups do not require membership in FEC, Inc. We have up to 400 people in study groups at any one time. Many of these people begin working within the organization before they are "dues-paying" members.

Our beginning study groups are Parents of Teens, using selected materials, and "Children: the Challenge" groups for parents of younger children, using the text by that title written by Rudolf Dreikurs and Vicky Soltz. Our advanced groups

are identified by the titles of the texts used, all written by Rudolf Dreikurs. These are "Challenge of Marriage," "Equality: the Challenge of Our Times," and "Fundamentals of Adlerian Psychology." In addition to these groups, we offer reinforcement groups (Re-groups) for people who have previously taken the beginning groups. From these latter groups come many of our study group leaders. At present we are offering seventeen beginning groups and seven advanced groups.

In addition to the study group program, specialized training is offered in study group leading and family counseling technique and theory. Anyone who has been in a beginning study group can become a leader; anyone who has taken and led a beginning study group can enter the counseling training. At present we have nine trained counselors. Fifteen others are in training. Our materials for study come from the rich store of information written by Alfred Adler, Rudolf Dreikurs, and many other Adlerians. Our reference library contains almost all of the material offered through the Alfred Adler Institute in Chicago plus other materials considered useful to our education.

While there are "do-it-yourself" materials available that community groups may use in forming educational study groups for parents and teachers, counseling training is not a "do-it-yourself" project. To our knowledge materials have not been written that train laymen in this technique without the presence of a qualified counselor. Theory as well as other useful information is essentially understood through the study of reference material, but counseling is learned through demonstration, specific explanation, and practicum experience. In our counselor-training program the ultimate qualification of an individual to counsel for the Center is his demonstrated ability over several practicums that he does indeed know what he is doing.

Counseling is done in pairs. The co-counselor is always in the role of trainer even though his direct influence in the case diminishes as the expertise of the counselor in training increases. Where two have matched ability, they simply work out a way to complement one another. Because we are always training, evaluation of the counseling follows each session or practicum. In the beginning this was done by the professional counselor together with the peers in the program. As of May, 1972, when nine of our members became qualified to counsel, the professional counselor retired to the role of consultant and meets with the counselor-training participants four times a year. All evaluation of counseling is now peer evaluation. Personality differences evolve different "styles" of counseling, but the evaluation session deals with the pattern, goals, and specific recommendations. A trainee cannot "snow" his fellow members. At the same time the professional counselor was training **how** to counsel, he was also training **how** to train.

Our counseling is limited to education of the family and group in understanding family interpersonal relationships with emphasis on re-directing

mistaken goals of the children through specific actions recommended to the parents. We do not deal with the personal attitudes of the parents themselves although we may understand them. Understanding only facilitates selection of a non-threatening way in which to win the parent's cooperation in the counseling process. We follow the Dreikursian philosophy that the first step in counseling is to help the parents discover ways in which they can re-direct the misbehavior of the child. Only then can they develop a better attitude.

We recognize there are many effective ways of changing attitudes. Attending and/or leading study groups, participating in some organizational capacity with other members in our common goals, exposure to the value systems of members with well-developed social interest, and close friendships with other members—all result in more encouraged attitudes of individuals. It takes longer for some to change than others. It is for this purpose that we have chosen an on-going community involvement approach rather than offering a service to families in the conventional manner of a social agency. Participation in our Adlerian education program offers the kind of atmosphere in which attitudinal changes may occur. It is this fact that explains the term “therapeutic community” rather than any specific treatment or therapeutic technique employed by an individual within the community—professional or lay.

The training of lay counselors provided the major implementation of a trend toward self-sufficiency started in 1963.<sup>1</sup> The use of lay volunteer counselors, however, was not visualized by the early Adlerian movement in Delaware. In the aristocratic class system of specialized university training stratified by academic degrees, the layman knew his place. This preservation of the difference between professional and lay responsibility was a group value.

Therefore, the decision to sponsor a family education center also carried with it the firm conviction that the Center would eventually need a permanent, in-state professional counselor. Because there were no Adlerian counselors in Delaware, an out-of-state counselor was hired.<sup>2</sup> He was to provide counseling for the Center twelve sessions a year until we could make more permanent arrangements for a professional staff. It was his suggestion that he train “para-professional” counselors. It was our understanding these people would be professionals who came for Adlerian counseling training—psychologists, teachers, or social workers whose backgrounds would qualify them to do educational family counseling at our Center. The problem the training program faced immediately was the fact that we had few members with these educational qualifications. Our counselor suggested that the training would be valuable to

<sup>1</sup>William O. Statton, “Lay Mental Health Action in a Community,” *Journal of Individual Psychology*, Vol. 24, May, 1968, pp. 94-96.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Manford Sonstegard, Professor of Counseling and Guidance, West Virginia University, and Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, West Virginia University Medical Center.

anyone who led study groups or was connected with the volunteer end of running a Center, and so a few laymen were admitted to counselor training. A year or so later a few more laymen were admitted to the training. The nine trained counselors who are now counseling for the Center are three pre-school teachers, one chemist, one church youth education director, and four housewives.

Over the course of four years (1968-1972) the concept of the Adlerian movement in Delaware shifted direction. We considered this a response to the changing needs of the situation, but perhaps it was due to more than that.

In 1968 we had two boards of directors. One was for the parent lay Adlerian organization, The Associates for Study and Action (ASA). The other was a working FEC board which would manage, finance, and staff the Center but which would be under the ultimate control of the ASA. The Adlerian community joined in the challenge of forming and staffing an FEC and all but abandoned the ASA, few even renewing membership. Since the study group program was operated by ASA, it almost ceased to be. The counseling Center was not a substitute for study groups. We needed both. The study groups provided the bulk of education in non-specific Adlerian principles and method; the counseling Center provided a universalizing and unifying influence for the scattered study group members and specific help when needed. The successful operation of all related areas needed great numbers of volunteer personnel. We needed some way to distribute the work load as key leadership was being passed back and forth between a very few overworked leaders. (At the time the FEC was sponsored in 1968, ASA membership was approximately thirty-five people of whom perhaps fourteen were active.)

By 1971 we had reorganized, forming one unified, interdependent organization with one working board which coordinated the various functioning parts of the total Adlerian community. We formally changed our name from The Associates for Study and Action to The Family Education Center of Delaware, Inc.

Our board of directors consists of the Chairman (also Ways and Means chairman), the Vice-Chairman (also Special Projects chairman), the Secretary (also Membership and Recruiting chairman), the Treasurer, the Study Group Administrator, the Counselor in Training Administrator, the Counseling Center Administrator, the Services Administrator (all clerical efforts, the office and audio-visual equipment), and the Public Relations Administrator. Each administrator has a staff of coordinators who meet monthly. All officers and administrators are elected by the membership at large. The board has the responsibility of deciding policy but recommendations for change come from the functioning areas. We recognize the need to be able to change quickly and, therefore, have very few rules and regulations. Instead, we use suggested procedures and guidelines. We encourage innovation and experimentation.

The structure of our organization provides several benefits: (1) It effectively spreads the work load; (2) It successfully coordinates our efforts; (3) It provides many opportunities for everyone to make an important contribution to the total Adlerian concept; (4) It provides varying degrees of responsibility so a timid person can be asked to do a job he is comfortable doing; (5) It avoids the pitfalls of depending on specific leadership. (Even if we lose an Administrator, the area will continue to function.); (6) It spreads key responsibility to the degree that all feel equal in influence; none are "more equal than others"; (7) It trains for future leadership; (8) It provides feedback on the relevance of our procedures to the changing times by the constant inflow of new people; (9) It develops "social interest"; and (10) It is a training medium for democratic living.

A second major decision was made in 1971. This was to use lay counselors in the counseling Center. The laymen in the counseling Center were the most stunned when the professional counselor made this suggestion. They did not really expect that they would ever be permitted to use their developing counseling skills in public; however, their skills had progressed to the point where they were willing to try.

There were grave reservations about the wisdom of doing this by many of the members. They feared the community would not accept counseling from peers. They feared the surrounding professional community would close the Center. There was no precedent to evaluate, and gambling carried the risk of destroying years of hard work. The organization was faced with two more blows at this time: (1) The professional counselor had given notice that his work schedule would not permit him to come to Wilmington on a regular basis after the next year, and (2) The Sears Roebuck Foundation which supplied the "seed money" for the initial operating expenses for FEC had given notice that our funding would be ended.

It was at this time the professional counselor introduced the concept of "therapeutic community" for our consideration. He described this as not just an ideal, but something that could be made to work. The concept included community involvement and really effective education of all members so that ordinary people could help ordinary people to better mental health on the community level, before remedial help was necessary.

We were faced with finding new outside funds and outside professional counseling help or committing ourselves to a new direction using our own resources. We elected to go with our own resources. None of our fears were realized. Instead, interest in our FEC increased in all areas. Our area of influence has widened considerably.

The next year we used teams of our own counselors in the Center, but our professional counselor was still present in a supervisory capacity. Our first solo operation was on April 4, 1972. The day before we had received a phone call that our professional could not come to Wilmington because the Morgantown,

West Virginia, airport was iced in. We were advised to go on alone. If we had had more notice, we might have cancelled the session. As it was, we had little choice but to hold the session because by this time we had close to 100 people attending.

When the announcement was made that the lay counselors would counsel without supervision, everyone in the room sensed that something important was happening. Counselors, group and family, worked together as one team. Our pride in one another was boundless. Our pride in one another is still boundless!

At the recent ASAP congress in Chicago, president Robert Powers expressed the spirit that we share here in Wilmington, Delaware, when he addressed the plenary session assembled to discuss new direction for ASAP. "We have something to offer. Let us offer it to each other."

Many major and minor decisions that contributed to our current self-sufficient operation were made during the four-year period when we were under the decisive influence of a professional counselor. The actual time he spent in Wilmington was forty-eight weekends. He considered his work with us here as one of **facilitating** community self-sufficiency. As laymen who were facilitated, we have certain impressions of what contributed to our evolution which may be helpful to others interested in community self-help.

### **The Advantage of Being the Only Professional**

Because of the profound respect the Wilmington laymen had for professionals, there was no doubt who would be leader and who would be followers. There could have been difficulty, however, if the laymen had more than one professional to follow.

As it was, the influence of Rudolf Dreikurs was an unseen authority in the group. We sometimes tactlessly questioned anything that might sound different from what we thought the "Book" implied. It is to the Facilitator's credit that he never appeared defensive or irritated. It is to our credit that we gradually learned to appreciate differences in counselor's styles and opinions and evaluate information on its own merits.

Because we had one professional, there were no split loyalties to divide the group. The cooperation and harmony between Facilitator and group provided the time needed to train laymen to the point where they could make an informed decision on whether peers were capable of learning counseling techniques and whether a self-sufficient operation was possible.

### **The Awesome Power of Arbitration**

The high esteem given the professional by the laymen sets up a condition similar to an autocratic social system where society gives the power of arbitration to an authority figure. This has advantages for a Facilitator as the lay leaders give serious consideration to all indications of direction.

This advantageous position has serious pitfalls also because a Facilitator may misinterpret the smoothness of group progress as evidence of group initiative and agreement in common goals when the **only** agreement may be to **follow** directions.

Direct arbitration was avoided either by listening until we came to our own conclusions or by the suggestion "Why don't you talk this over with your colleagues."

He participated in the group discussion of problems and solutions "as though" we were only interested in sharing ideas and experiences. He talked **with** us, not at us. It would have been so much easier if he had simply told us what to do. In a group meeting we did most of the talking. He made no effort to group lead in these meetings. If there was to be order, it was our responsibility to supply it.

It is interesting to note that the silence of an "authority figure" has different meaning in a meeting than the silence of a peer. The authority figure is given the power of veto. Thus if he is quiet, it is assumed he approves. We progressed confidently in these meetings "with professional guidance" when in silence he was permitting us to guide one another.

Inspiration and guidance were frequently obtained from his informal stories, impromptu teaching sessions, and formal talks on a subject we had requested. Sometimes he would ask permission to change the subject of the talk explaining he had something he thought was important for us to think about. Other times he would suddenly go off the subject into something which on the surface seemed unrelated. Perhaps the unexpected changing of the subject is what made these times so influential.

One of the FEC Coordinators recalls an incident that made an important impression on her at the time we were reorganizing ASA and FEC. The Facilitator was giving a talk on a subject like "Working with Teenagers" when suddenly he began describing how our society must learn to live with rapid change and learn how to operate quickly and efficiently in this kind of atmosphere:

He said Adlerians must be willing to change also since in five years what we are doing now may be obsolete. I can remember groaning to myself "I don't know what I'm doing **now**, and he's telling me that I've got to change in five years!"

But I continued to think about it, and it dawned on me that we shouldn't organize like traditional organizations since we would soon be protecting our outmoded rules and regulations as an end in themselves. I'd seen this happen in other organizations. We had to incorporate ways to perceive and adjust to change. This concept made a real difference when we designed our organizational structure.

The Facilitator had trained us in the skills we would need to be self-sufficient and thereby assured us that when the time came to consider a commitment, we would have freedom of choice.

## **Epilogue**

In our reference library is a paper entitled “Toward a Therapeutic Community”<sup>1</sup> which refers to work done in this concept in Wenatchee, Washington, during the 1960s. The last two paragraphs are particularly pertinent to the evolution of the self-sufficient status of The Family Education Center of Delaware:

The concept of the therapeutic community is useless without the implementation. Developing a therapeutic community is a complicated process. It requires the unified efforts of many people who think divergently and who often protect vested interests. The time it takes to convert divergent thinking to convergent thinking and eventual coordinated planning is an absolute prerequisite.

The time invested will pay generous dividends in several respects. One of these is the extent to which vast numbers of people of the community perceive the plan of action to be theirs. This avoids the “Icarus fate” of many a worthy project.

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Manford Sonstegard, “Toward a Therapeutic Community,” *The Individual Psychologist*, 1960, 4, 14-17.