

## Disturbing the Peace

Contributed by Ed Griffin-Nolan

A 40-year era of quiet social action will be coming to an end this month when the American Friends Service Committee officially closes its Upper New York State Area Office, located at 2013 E. Genesee St., on Sept 30. The Quaker-inspired peace group is not declaring Mission Accomplished, but has instead found itself facing Mission Impossible due to the global recession. The same economic downturn that claimed the likes of Lehman Brothers and AIG has contributed to a dramatic decline in donations and a dwindling endowment that ultimately led the Philadelphia-based AFSC to cut in half spending on its programs worldwide.

The AFSC, the social justice arm of the Quakers, has been an active participant in local movements dating back to the Vietnam War. They supported the nuclear freeze and detente with the Soviet Union, and worked in coalition with other organizations to try to stop both Bush presidents from going to war in Iraq.

In recent decades they have expanded their programming to include work with women and families in need, provide support for traditional Mohawk values in northern New York, and sponsor training of urban youth to stem violence in the city. CAFFE (Community Advocates for Family Empowerment) has been working for many years to help low income women become advocates for themselves and their families. The AFSC's Environmental Justice Project helps to support people struggling to maintain their traditional way of life in Akwesasne, on the St. Lawrence River.

Christine Rizzo: "We've been a quiet voice behind the scenes for people who have been suffering."  
MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO

The HIP Program (Help Increase the Peace) trains young people to find nonviolent ways to deal with conflict in their daily lives. It is part of the Youth Empowerment Project run by Cherlyne (Twiggy) Billue, who has been an energetic presence among city youth for decades. She also has dedicated much of her effort toward working with young men and women at Corcoran High School to find ways to end the cycle of violence that has killed their family members and loved ones.

Anthony Nocello, a Westcott area resident who teaches at Le Moyne College and SUNY Cortland, is one of dozens of volunteer trainers who carry out the HIP program. On Sept. 26, from 2 to 5 p.m., friends of the Friends will be holding a farewell party and celebration of sorts at the Westcott Community Center, 826 Euclid Ave. Nocello is one of the organizers of the commemorative event.

"We're going to celebrate and talk about wonderful experiences we've had at AFSC," he said. "We want to celebrate the staff of this office, which is one of the older offices in the United States. They have done a tremendous amount of work."

Nocello, who also sits on the AFSC national board, insisted the friends are coming together not to end the work of the Quakers, but to transform it into a volunteer operation. "We're working on finding folks who can carry on pieces of the programs," noted area director Christine Rizzo, who has headed the office for the past eight years. "It can't continue the way it had been with paid staff people, but we will still have a presence in the community."

Nocello said the HIP program hosts 15 to 20 training sessions each year, with up to 20 participants at each gathering. "When conflicts arise and gangs appear," said Nocello, "rather than waiting for them to go at it, we bring them together. In every workshop wonderful things happen. We talk about how to deal with violence and gangs. We try to work on dreams. We deal with issues of poverty and race."

Not all AFSC staffers agree with the priorities that prevailed in the current downsizing. Eric Wissa, who formerly headed HIP in Syracuse and now does similar anti-violence work in Boston, complained in an e-mail to colleagues that the need

to cut back should have been foreseen, and that administrative costs, not programs, should be the first budget areas to be cut.

“The agency was very hard hit by the economic meltdown,” explained Rizzo. “Our very committed donors were committing only about half as much as they had in the past. Our investments took a major hit as the stock market tumbled. The board of directors decided that our agency had to be half the size that it was. Heather Wynkoop-Beach is taking over a piece of the work at Corcoran. Twiggy will continue to work with those kids one Saturday a month. We have a request in to the Friends meeting to use their space after December, when we have to move out of our current office. Our projects are ending Sept. 30.”

Mark Muhammad of the Nation of Islam has been working with youth violence issues in Syracuse for many years. He said he will miss the work done by the AFSC trainers. “I’ve known of the program for a number of years, going back to when Eric Wissa was the staff person. He wasn’t out on the street stopping beef; he was training people. They trained a number of people in the American Friends way. They get with groups of young people and teach them other ways of thinking, and they do it through fun. They get to them through music and dance and culture.

“For me,” added Muhammad, an assistant professor of communications at Onondaga Community College and an adjunct professor in the honors seminar at Syracuse University, “anything helps. All of us do different levels of work. I like to see anyone helping. I hate to see the funding gone.”

Added Nocello: “It’s a very difficult and sad reality. With the economy in a global crisis, one of the major things affected is social justice. AFSC is based on a tremendous amount of volunteers. There is still energy and hope in this region.” Nocello himself plans to continue conducting HIP trainings at Hillbrook Detention Home, 4949 Velasko Road.

Asked what she will miss most about the work, Rizzo said without hesitation that it will be “the relationships we have established. We’ve been a quiet voice behind the scenes for people who have been suffering. I’m hoping that other people and agencies will be able to step up to carry forward those voices. It is something Syracuse needs. I’m not sure who will be able to step up. I’m hoping that the vacuum will draw in other people.

“I’m really proud of the relationships we’ve been able to build. We’ve helped make a real difference with young people who are facing violence, help them make new choices, help them connect with people who can help them make better choices.”

As for the end of her eight-year career as the voice of those who listen to the silence within, Rizzo still has work to do. “I’m being kept on to clean out the office until Dec. 31,” she noted. “I’m mucking out the stalls.”

—Ed Griffin-Nolan