

Creating Healing Camps for Victims of School Violence: Camp leaders meet in Little Rock to learn from Ferncliff's experiences after the Jonesboro shootings

By Susan S. Renault, PDA Volunteer



Any sense that this was going to be just another camp conference was shattered as soon as I arrived at the meeting room: "WELCOME, RESPONDING TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE TRAINING."

I entered and walked past the coffee and snack table, past a box of frosted cookies decorated with another sobering message about why we were gathering: #NotOneMore. On another tray of cookies: "Moms Demand Action."

In March, 1998, two gunmen — ages 11 and 13 — opened fire on their fellow students at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Their fifth and sixth-grade classmates were evacuating the building in response to a fire alarm. They were gathering on the playground when the shooters began their assault. Four students and one teacher were killed. Another ten students and a teacher were injured. This gruesome tragedy created a media frenzy, and in less than twenty-four hours, everyone in the world knew about *The Jonesboro Shooting*, also called *The Westside School Shooting*.

The dead were remembered with tears and flowers, funerals and vigils, and hearts so painfully shattered they would never feel complete again. An entire community mourned their unimaginable loss. There was a fellowship of grief and disbelief.

The "survivors" were also part of a new fellowship — a fellowship of confused and fragile pre-teens...kids who had nightmares and started sleeping in their parents bedrooms and who stammered with confusion when reporters maneuvered microphones inches from their young faces: "How are you doing?" they asked. "Did you have friends who were killed?" "Where were you when the bullets came?" For some, this experience was the second most violent episode of *The Jonesboro Shooting*.

About 150 miles south of Jonesboro, Presbyterian Pastor David Gill, Ferncliff's camp director knew he had to help the kids of Westside Middle School. Within a couple days, he was

imagining a safe and holy place where broken children could begin to heal. He could not shake this vision; it consumed his heart.

Gill knew that he could not simply send out invitations to a special summer camp for traumatized kids. Their community and their parents had wrapped a tight circle around these vulnerable young children. They would protect their “survivors” from more intimidating media, more hapless therapists, and more inconsolable pain.

Instead of planning a camp program and “hoping they would come,” he started forming a coalition of pastors...liberals, conservatives, and faiths in between. He identified exceptional mental health professionals. He met with teachers, parents, and administrators. He assembled a caring community of “safe” adults who came to share his vision of a healing camp. Little by little, these exceptional people were able to gain the confidence of Westside families. Little by little, the camp registrations started to come in.

The summer following the shooting, sixty-eight kids began “healing camp.” They assembled first, for their welcoming program, outside of their school in Jonesboro. Friends and parents were by their sides, Gill’s new friends, colleagues, and counselors joined hands in a circle of support. Camp was open! Later, they boarded buses for the ride to beautiful Ferncliff to begin an experience which many campers say later, “This saved my life.” (A neighboring school lent them a bus, so that the media would not follow them to Ferncliff.) Over half the campers on the bus that day were taking medications to help their post-traumatic stress. During the ride, an emergency vehicle with sirens blaring, sped past them and left many of the kids in tears.

At the end of that first camp, kids and parents were asking: “Please do more.”

Ferncliff started by offering one summer camp. As they got to know the Jonesboro kids, they decided, “We will stay with you until you graduate.” The one-camp-per-year model grew to two camps a year, one during the summer and one during mid-year vacations. These continued for five years. Parents reported, “Ferncliff is one of the reasons our children are alive today.”

Part of their “therapy” during these years was to work together on special efforts to help others. Among the early responders after the Columbine shooting in 1999 was a group of 22 Jonesboro students who traveled to Littleton, Colorado to enfold Columbine’s survivors into their understanding community. Many of the kids from these first camps eventually became camp counselors, helping other kids from other states and other countries cope with the trauma of school violence.

According to Ferncliff literature, “it grew to include students from Columbine, Paducah, Bosnia, Los Angeles, New York City after 9/11 and other sites.” After the first year, many parents said, “You gave us our kids back.” Please do this again.

This April, at the request of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, a conference was held at Ferncliff Camp so that other camps from around the country could learn about “the Ferncliff model.” Camp leaders arrived eager to learn how to create healing camps in their own regions that PDA can turn to when school violence occurs. Attending, also, were survivors from Jonesboro, Sandy Hook, and Isla Vista, California; also, friends and young professionals who now lobby for extended background checks and other issues related to gun safety. A delegation from Ferguson, MO, attended. PDA national coordinator, Laurie Kraus, was on the speaking team.

Gill reminded this group: “Camp, as a means of healing, began with Jesus. He took people fishing and hiking, swimming and boating. He was a camp director. He taught Nature...*Look at the Flowers*. He did touching and healing.”

I represented PDA at this meeting. On the morning of day one, I took my seat behind an attractive young woman whose tee shirt spoke loudly of her passions: “Americans are 20 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE MURDERED WITH A GUN (illustrated with rows of red and blue bullets in the shape of a flag) THAN PEOPLE IN OTHER DEVELOPED COUNTRIES.



We started with the usual, “Let’s go around the group and say our names and, perhaps, a sentence about why we are here.”

My new friend in the tee shirt stood up: “I am Erica Lafferty,” she said. “My mother was the principal who was shot at Sandy Hook.”

A few more introductions and then Richard. “I am Richard Martinez. “My only child was shot and killed in the UC Davis murders.” Richard’s wrist is ringed with colored rubber bracelets, each bearing the name of a child killed in school violence. “Any one of us would rather die than lose a child,” he said.

I found myself in a room of pain, surrounded by people desperate for hope. Every person there wanted to learn skills and plant seeds, and pass legislation, and make schools

safe, and mend the wounds of heartbroken parents. Every person wanted to become a minister of peace and healing through camp programs or advocacy.

During the morning, the Survivors told their stories. One told us, "I am lucky to be alive; but I will *never* be the same. This is who we are now. This is who we are."

Another talked about "Linda time: Linda Van Blaricom was the camp psychologist who gave them the opportunity to explore their feelings without ever feeling they were doing "therapy."

Another said, "Here at Ferncliff, we could finally smile and have fun. I was suicidal; coming here helped me survive."

Christine, a Columbine survivor, told us, "We're Survivors the rest of our lives. This is who we are."

The Survivors entrusted us with their stories. They were honest, candid, and fearless. We passed the tissue box, wiped our tears and went inside the heads of kids who would come to our own camps: kids who panic at the sound of a popped balloon, kids who've been told, "Get over it. You have to move on."

Lesson one: Anyone wishing to create a healing camp will have to understand this tragic reality: young survivors are fragile; handle with care.

For the next several sessions we heard camp stories. What did David Gill and the Ferncliff staff do right? What do the campers remember? What activities helped the healing?

To begin with, Gill had three basic goals for his camp: to have FUN; to help kids move towards feelings of trust and safety; and to meet kids where they are, recognizing and responding to each child's needs. They would seek "community" while exploring Nature, Art, Music, and just about any crazy activity that created noise, movement, and fun.

Random memories:

*Skit Night with a local DJ, lots of humor and laughter

*Bringing "Elvis" to Ferncliff for a pool party

*Stars, Strums and Stories night with the astronomer and telescope

*Music and playing Australian instruments. Each child was given a turn at directing the "band." (This, says Gill, gave kids *control* of something...therapy disguised as fun.)

*Nature walks (“A great way to de-stress,” says Gill).

*Ropes course (personal challenges)

*A backpack filled with a journal, water bottle, letter from older survivors to new ones, for every camper, each with the camper’s name. (“We know you by name. This is your place).

*The Crazy Art Lady whose lively inventions never felt like therapy. Fishermen’s knots and pendants.

*When musician, songwriter David LaMotte taught a class in Lyrics, and doing a Musical.

*The year six Muslim kids and six Christian kids came to camp from Bosnia. (“*We dodged bullets every day.*”)

*Making stepping stones from broken things (Making broken things *whole*). “The kids like to come back to Ferncliff and find their stone,” says Gill.

*Writing in our journals with Chuck Anderson, creative writing teacher at University of Arkansas. (They could share or not share, keep or burn; read later with a counselor. “I still have mine,” one survivor told us.)

Two special events come up whenever campers tell their favorite stories. The first is the Night of a Hundred Hugs. Gill wanted to give folks *outside* Ferncliff Camp an opportunity to show their love for these kids without “putting them on display.” He invited “Huggable Presbyterians” to an evening of music, food, square dancing, and hugs. Forty-one children and 120 Presbyterians came. Everyone received a tee shirt and a sharpie to collect signatures and hugs. They ended the evening with worship. The happiness was electric, the hugs were enthusiastic; the night was a hundred reasons to experience God’s love.

The other memory that campers talk about is the labyrinth. During their first camp, they had gone to the nearby 4-H Camp and walked a labyrinth. Charmed by the tranquility of this ancient ritual, they returned to Ferncliff and asked to construct a labyrinth of their own. They ran into a problem finding a perfect location until (“A God Thing”?), the ice storm that took down two big trees on the land adjacent to the small stone chapel. The 52-foot diameter Chartres-patterned labyrinth was in the planning stage for over a year. Labyrinth designer Stuart Bartholomaeus of Oak Ridge, TN, spray painted a pattern, and Ferncliff campers — with temperatures in the 90s — laid 3,500 pounds of softball-sized rocks, one at a time, to outline the labyrinth.



“The Ferncliff Labyrinth was dedicated with children from each of the seven locations presenting a stone from their home to be included in the labyrinth. Then the group walked the path, some on foot, some sitting on the perimeter benches following the path with their eyes.” (From David Gill’s paper, “Summary Article for Ferncliff Camp Connection 2001)

On the third morning of our camp conference, I went to the labyrinth early in the morning. Alone, I walked its circles just as Gill had instructed us: *intentionally*. Walk the path inward breathing out concerns and fears. I breathed out the worries about moving and concerns about leaving old things. I breathed out the things that flow from dark places and take up space for His healing. At the center, I came across the stones painted with names we know: Sandy Hook, Columbine, and Jonesboro. Just this week someone had added Kenya. In my heart, the stones became parents. I asked God, “What should I do? How do I become a healer too?” I walked out of the labyrinth breathing in new faith, new hope, and new openness to all He has in store.



The labyrinth walk was an act of worship. I rejoice that it has comforted so many children of violence.

At the end of the conference, I walked away with some of the visions David Gill had back in 1998 and hoping that other camp leaders will embark upon this sacred mission to use their camping expertise to begin the healing for kids affected by school and other disasters.

For additional information about the Ferncliff experiences, contact David Gill, Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center, 1720 Ferncliff Road, Little Rock, AR 72211, 501-821-3063, ferncliff@gmail.com.