Passage Five:
Building a Global Community

On the Road to Citizenship

Jenny

I have early childhood memories of streets, roads, and seemingly endless highways. My family was always going somewhere, somewhere that offered a better way or a better life, a place that offered peace and understanding.

I was born in El Salvador, a country torn apart by a bloody civil war. I suffered the chaos of my country as a small child. The suffering was so deep that the images of the war were pushed from my conscious mind. The pain prevented me from remembering my childhood. My parents' strength during those traumatic times helped my brother, my sisters, and me survive. They have helped me retrieve some of those memories. Now I need to relive those events so that I can free myself and move on. I am the person that I am today because of the experiences that I have endured. As my parents have helped me recall the events of the past, I have been able to gain a greater appreciation for the value of my culture and for the value of my life.

In the mid 1970s, people were still prosperous in El Salvador. My grandparents owned a small restaurant; my dad worked in a big fancy hotel in San Salvador and attended the university; my mom sold cut flowers in her small shop. My brother played ball with kids in the neighborhood and my sister was just learning to talk. Our family had a new baby in the house—they named me Jenny. The ***gringos*** from the north brought big tourist dollars into our country. People spoke proudly of the crowning of El Salvador's own as Miss Universe in 1976. We were a small country that depended on other countries for many of our needs, but we were a hard-working people. Life was simple. Then things began to change.

In the seventies, as now, fourteen families owned ninety-eight percent of the land and controlled the economy. They, especially, enjoyed the fruits of the prosperous seventies. While the masses wanted land reform, those in power wished to hold onto the status quo.

My family was poor. We were descendants of the great Maya civilization that built great pyramids, developed a calendar, and created an advanced systems of mathematics. When the Europeans came five hundred years ago, the Maya civilizations had crumbled and my people were left to toil in the

fields for their colonial masters. In recent times, the ruling class has been wealthy upper-class ***Mestizos*** (mixed ancestry) and people of European descent. Indigenous people, like my family, had to struggle.

In the late '70s, a guerrilla war broke out. At first bankers and businessmen were kidnapped and held for ransom to fund the peasants' revolt. Fearing for their safety, big cruise ships carrying wealthy tourists quit coming to El Salvador. The economy suffered. Dad lost his job—no ***gringos***, no jobs. Businesses closed; wealthy Salvadoreans began depositing large sums of money in Swiss bank accounts. Escalation of guerrilla activity in the countryside prompted a heavy response from the government. Army troops conducted a country-wide crackdown on anything that looked like a rebellion by the peasant population. By 1980, a full-scale civil war had begun.

Before the war, we lived in a modest home, but when my dad lost his job, we had to live in a small room that was sub-divided so that other families could share the house. Everyone used the same bathroom, kitchen, and yard. Soldiers with guns used to come to our house looking for young men to conscript. My sister, Wendy, was only four but she remembers that, as they passed through our yard, we asked, “Are you here to knock on our door or are you going to kill us?”

These questions were not the product of children's fantasies. My mother recalls many times that we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes we were walking to the market when suddenly gun shots rang out on both sides of us. She had nowhere to run, so she huddled in a corner of a building to protect my brother and sisters. She drew us together, hugged us tightly, and used her body to cover us like a shield. We waited until the gunshots died down and the skirmish was over; then, as we were leaving, we saw signs of the madness that had taken place. The streets were littered with dead bodies; the day was as silent as the night. My mother tells me that I used to point out where the lifeless bodies were lying and count them as we walked back home. I was a typically curious child, taking in the world around me like a giant unfolding movie. But my natural curiosity didn't protect me from the harshness of my surroundings. I was not equipped to un-

derstand what my small-child eyes took in; nor did I know enough to look away from a sight that a small child should not see.

My father had been unemployed for one year. He took care of us kids when my mother was at work at the floral shop. Sometimes he went to the university; that was where everyone shared the news about what was happening in the country. Sometimes teachers and students didn't come to school because they feared they would be killed. One time in San Marcos, we were on a bus and some soldiers made us stop and get out. They made us file past a pointed stick that had a school teacher's head impaled on it. Sometimes, soldiers even killed teachers in front of their students.

My mother was a devout Catholic. She attended Bishop Romero's church in San Salvador. Romero openly supported the plight of the poor people. When my mother couldn't attend the masses, she listened to his daily broadcast of the religious services. The day Romero was assassinated my mother was home. She went to San Salvador to attend his funeral services. During the services the army opened fire on mourners in the town square who hadn't been able to get into the already packed church. She was among the anguished people running everywhere looking for cover. The next day my dad found piles of shoes in the town square, left to represent the innocent victims of a cruel war. My father and mother desperately wanted to get us out of the country.

Mother's Day was a good time for my mother's flower business; also, it was a good time to make money for the trip north. Our family had worked hard and had saved two hundred dollars. This was enough to get my dad a passport, a bus ticket, and a visa to Mexico. His visa was difficult to get because government workers siphoned off most of the legal visas and sold them on the black market. Dad shared many tearful “good-byes” and left our village the day after Mother's Day.

Everything on his trip cost money. He even had to pay to cross the Guatemalan border. The soldiers wanted fifty dollars and threatened to send him back, so he waited for the night guard who insisted on only twenty dollars.

From there he took several weeks to get through Mexico. He spent several days on busses and even longer periods waiting in small towns until the time was right. It was a long passage, and he took careful notes so that we could eventually follow the same path. After a long, hard journey, he reached the U.S. He lived with his sister in California and found a job. He sent money to us as often as he could. Our own journey had to wait; we would not follow for another year and a half. To complicate matters, mom had gotten pregnant just before my dad left.

During the long year-and-a-half, events didn't get any better in El Salvador. One day my mother was in a bus with my brother; someone threw a Molotov Cocktail at the bus and it became engulfed in flames. In the fury as everyone tried to escape, my mom became separated from my brother and he had to break a window to get out. Often when we accompanied my mom on the twenty-minute ride to her workplace, we saw soldiers in helicopters swoop down and shoot at people. Sometimes, in the big city of San Salvador there were plastic bags with body parts lying on the streets with blood oozing out of them.

Some memories weren't so gruesome, those I seem to remember without my mother's prompting. I remember when my brother's pet chicken died; we sang the guerrilla anthem over its grave. And then there was the night that my mom started to have labor pains. Martial law had been declared and the soldiers wouldn't let her go to the city. She insisted, so they drove her to the hospital in a big army tank.

Other images are harder to remember without my mother's prompting. She recalls grimly the time that she was walking through the market place with us kids. She had to grasp my hand real tight and tug on it to get me past the ugly and brutal sights left by the government's death squads the night before. My natural curiosity, once again, tugged back as we passed a dead body left in the street of our village, a symbol left there by sick-minded soldiers to warn our people against getting involved in the war. I wanted to stop and stare at the lifeless form lying limp on the street just a few feet away from where I stood. The blood from this young peasant oozed from a ragged hole

in his chest and thickened as it formed little rivers of red in between the cobblestones at my feet. At the time, I was more curious than shocked; now, I shudder and cringe.

The dead boy was like so many others in our village and from villages like ours throughout El Salvador. Yet, he seemed so still, and the vacant expression on his face seemed to cry for comfort. The flies that crawled across his open eyes and into his nostrils and open mouth had no understanding or compassion for this young man—his passion for life, the family he left behind, the land or freedom that he fought for, the desire to escape from poverty and oppression and brutality and death.

For years I effectively repressed the ugly memories of death as well as the sad "good-byes" that my mom, my brother, my sisters, and I made to our dad as he left us to flee to the north in search of a better life for our family. We repeated these difficult "good-byes" to our grandparents, aunts, and uncles, cousins, and friends months later when we had accumulated enough money to join my father in the United States. With his directions, we were able to follow the same long route to freedom that he had taken.

We boarded a bus for Guatemala, our first link to the long road to ***el norte***. We were headed away from political repression, poverty, and war in El Salvador and toward freedom, abundance, and peace in the U.S. I remember the bus ride; mostly I remember snuggling around my mom and holding her tightly as if she were a rock in the middle of some kind of raging river. We boarded and unboarded many buses. My mother carried most of our possessions on her back. When Wendy got sick, she had to carry her, too. My brother and I had to take care of our little sister and carry the rest of the family possessions. We carried everything that we owned—things to sustain us along the way and things to give us a new start in our new home. All our other possessions had been given away to family and friends back home.

I remember the hum of the tires and the drone of the engine as the bus spewed diesel fuel behind us. Out of the window I saw green mountains—the dense tropical rain forest of Guatemala. Thick mist clung to the

tree tops around us. I remember the bus slowing down on mountain roads waiting for slow traffic or burros to get out of the way. We slept and ate on the bus, getting out only to change busses, go to the bathroom, or wait in a crowded station for a transfer.

At each stop, people crowded in to fill the bus and food vendors passed through the aisles to sell their wares. I remember the mangoes that we bought for pennies; they left my little sister's mouth and shirt covered with yellow juice and pulp. I remember seeing mountains and valleys changing shape as we wound our way northward. Even the colors and styles of clothing changed after we made our way through Guatemala, Chiapas, and Oaxaca to the central states of Mexico.

We pushed on up the road toward Mexico City. It seemed like an eternity, but the road became my teacher and I knew that every mile took me closer to my father and to my new home. Travel and being uprooted were new to me and I didn't know what to expect. I knew nothing of the difficulties that lay ahead—traveling hundreds of miles through Mexico, running out of money, waiting for more money to arrive, and finding a way to cross the Mexico-U.S. border.

“Where are we going?” we asked my mom whenever we got restless and impatient.

“To see your dad,” she replied.

“When will we get there?” was our comeback.

“The one who will see your father is the one who will sleep,” was always be her final refrain. And sleep we did.

After four days of non-stop travel, we arrived in Durango, Mexico. In order to cross the Mexican-U.S. border, it was important that we be seen as Mexican citizens. Central Americans would be suspected of emigrating and stopped. We stayed in Durango with some friends for a month while we ac-

climated to the mannerisms and language of Mexico. After traveling this far, we didn't want to get caught crossing at some border town and get sent all the way back to El Salvador. We borrowed our friends' Mexican birth certificates—these would be returned by mail after we were safely in the U.S. While staying in Durango, we had to sleep outside in a three-walled building; my face got discolored from the extreme cold temperatures at night, a dead give away that I was not from that region. My mother kept me out of sight.

In the Durango bus station, my mother got off the bus to buy us some food. While she was gone, the bus started up and left the station. In panic, my mother ran to catch the bus, but it left the station before she could catch up. Here we sat, my brother, sisters, and me, struck speechless as our mother ran behind the bus in city traffic. She cast aside her prized possessions that hung around her neck to increase her pace, almost catching up when the bus was delayed, then losing ground as the bus surged ahead as the pace quickened.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, she caught up with the bus and pounded on the door to get in. She had lost some of her possessions: our family pictures, milk bottles for my baby sister, extra clothes, shoes, our toys, identification papers, and money. When she got back on the bus, we didn't worry about what was lost. We were relieved and happy to be back together again. We all huddled together tightly, wondering if we would ever get to our new home.

After the bus incident, we could afford only three seats on the bus for the five of us. My mom even had to give up some of her meals for us. She got pretty thin during the rest of the trip from eating so little.

After we left Durango for Mazatlan we had a long, scary drive over mountains to the coast. Our bus driver told us that the route was called ***El Paso de la Muerte*** (The Path of Death). He explained that, if a bus went over the edge, the authorities would leave it where it fell, because the terrain was too steep and rugged to pull it out. Our family squeezed closer together at that

thought. We passed through some of the mountain region at night. I remember that the full moon was so bright that we could look over the edge of the highway, way down into the canyon below. I remember saying, "***Es hondo, hondo, hondo, hondo, ...*** (It's deep, deep, deep, deep, ...)" over and over to myself because, in spite of the intensity of the moonlight, I still couldn't see the bottom of the canyon.

From Mazatlan, the drive to Tijuanna took another three days. We had to wait there two weeks before we could arrange for a ***coyote***—a person who helps smuggle non-citizens across the border—to take us into the U.S. We lived in a shack and had very little food or water. I remember that my mother crossed the border one day to make arrangements for us. I had to stay back with the woman who served as our ***coyote*** because my skin was so dark that I might be seen as a Central American and attract too much attention at the border. Many refugees were fleeing the war in El Salvador and the Border Patrol readily stopped people who looked like me.

Everyone I had ever known spoke of the goal of getting into the U.S. We would be safe there, and that thought comforted me. Finally the day came. I remember the exact moment that we crossed the border.

We traveled on to Los Angeles, we had to wait for two weeks for my dad to drive down from Sunnyvale in northern California to pick us up. My dad said that I didn't recognize him. It had been a year and a half since I had seen him. For a long time I just called him ***tio*** (uncle). The older men living in our house in El Salvador were my father's and mother's brothers, so I was used to calling men "uncle." I was not living with my uncles any more; this was my dad!

My mother and father wanted us to come to the United States so that we could be together in peace and could live better than we had among the horrors committed in El Salvador. To accomplish that dream, we had to live without my father for a year-and-a-half. My mother had to take her four children on a journey that lasted thirty-one days. Now we had arrived in the

land of the rich, the land of opportunity, paradise. But the reality we encountered was different from the glorious stories we had heard.

When we arrived in Sunnyvale, we stayed in a house where ten other people lived. We were a family of six, so all together we filled the tiny two-bedroom house with sixteen people, half of them children. My mom recalls those days vividly. She told me that she hated living in such crowded quarters and often longed to return to her native country. We were very poor, but we still strived to make the best of it. As a family, we never asked for much, and what we had was enough. Our parents worked hard and saved their money, until we finally could afford a place of our own.

We left the Sunnyvale house behind, but the experience is still with me. Those sixteen people were my family, and every day their love nourished my growth. I've always felt very close to my family and my love for them is very special. My home has always been so full of love that I grew up never believing that we were poor. My parents made little things seem like the world to us; I thank them for that. They taught me to be grateful for everything I have. Material things are not what is important in the world.

We settled in Mountain View, California, and eventually we applied for and received legal status as permanent residents through the Amnesty Act. My brother, my two sisters, and I enrolled in school and we learned English quickly. Soon we were making a new home for ourselves in the U.S.

Much later, when I made a brief visit back to El Salvador, I found that the situation had not improved. In the night I could hear bombs and see sparks of light fly. The concussions kept me awake until dawn. My trip reminded me that I am very lucky to have gotten out.

School was another road for me. It was a road to success, to share in the abundance of the American culture. I studied hard and learned the language, got good grades, and entered high school. In some ways, I guess, traveling this road was easier for me than for my classmates. They already had the security of citizenship, I didn't. I saw what hard work and study

might give me someday; they just took what they had for granted. I looked for special challenges along the way—I did extra work in school, volunteered to help the teacher, and looked for opportunities to advance myself.

When I got to high school my world grew even more as I realized how much there was to learn that didn't fit in the textbook. I was a skinny freshman lost in the halls of high school. I couldn't even remember where my classes were or where the bathroom was. I was forced into a world of independence because I had to work. Yet I felt lost between school and my job. I didn't feel that I belonged anywhere.

Then something special happened. I was invited to participate in a pilot program to help an existing program called The Learning Community expand. A lunch meeting was scheduled to discuss the "School of the Future." At that time, the subject didn't interest me, but the free lunch did. I went to that first meeting just to satisfy my hunger. To my surprise the meeting was not what I expected; by the time it was over, I felt excited by the concept of students being responsible for their own education. I decided to help work for the expansion of the program.

As we continued to meet during my freshman year, I grew to like the meetings and the people. In the end, the expansion did not go through and our pilot program disbanded. I felt really crummy because I had grown to like the group. They gave me a sense of belonging, and I felt that I was contributing to something special. Then I was given a chance to be in the existing Learning Community. I jumped at the chance. To me, here was a new road to travel, a new challenge to conquer.

My sophomore year started. I had found a program that actually gave students the freedom to help design their own studies. Here, I could follow my interests while achieving the education I needed in order to succeed. I wanted to learn more about the world and understand why things were so bad in El Salvador and so "good" in the U.S. I developed my study contract, researched areas of personal interest, and shared my ideas with the class.

Some of the things that I learned through my research were disturbing to me. My former country was involved in a bitter class war, one that involved the whole region of Central America. It was a war of the rich versus the poor, the "haves" versus the "have-nots." The rich, it turned out, were a very small minority of the country. They owned most of the land, directed the economy, and controlled the Army. When peasants tried to organize, they were imprisoned, relocated, or killed. Right wing death squads, funded by the rich, kidnapped intellectuals, teachers, and political activists. They intimidated or killed them and massacred entire villages. Even priests and nuns were assassinated. A most disturbing fact, to me, was that the people in power were funded by the U.S. government in its attempt to stop what was branded a Communist threat. My idealized road to U.S. citizenship took a rocky turn at this point.

I added my new research data to the old information that I had been taught in schools. The history lessons that I had learned in nine years of U.S. schools had not taught me about Central America, at least not what I had learned studying on my own for a few weeks. The official texts and courses of study appeared to be careful not to embarrass or offend the government. The texts were careful not to expose the foreign policy of its own government. I guess my teachers either didn't know what had happened or were protecting us from losing faith in the system and its officials.

Researching further, I learned that the period of my life in El Salvador—which seemed like an eternity to me—was a mere blink of the eye in the history of persecution and brutalization of native peoples in the Americas. One evening Gary attended a talk at a local bookstore by Victor Perera, a Guatemalan-born writer and journalist. Gary loaned me Perera's book, which traced the four cycles of conquest of Mayan people in Central America. The book described how the early conquerors took our resources, how the colonialists took our land, how the missionaries repressed and destroy our religion traditions, and how, in present time, the imperialists are stripping and destroying our environment. I had experienced first hand some of what Perera was writing about.

But my immediate challenge was to find some way to share my interests and studies with the rest of my class. Each week in our Community Meeting we planned the next three weeks and took responsibility to make presentations, facilitate discussions, contact local speakers, and organize field trips. Small sub-groups were responsible for implementing the larger group's objectives. My sub-group's objective was to understand how social systems affect the people of the world. Our task was to set up several activities through which the group could work toward their goal.

One of the activities was proposed by Erika, who had come to the US from Mexico. She wanted to conduct a seminar on ***Proposition 187***, a state-wide ballot initiative that would prevent non-citizens from using the state supported schools and hospitals. She wanted to describe the volunteer work that she was doing with an organization that opposed the measure. Also, she wanted to conduct a debate on all the propositions that were coming up for a vote in our state in November.

I was surprised at the directions our group took these ideas. The discussions we had were different from those in my other classes. People opened up; they were really sincere. The day that Erika tried to explain Prop 187 and why she was opposed to it, Jeremy interrupted her presentation and said, "Well, I don't see why we should let ***those people*** into our country." His voice hung on "those people," emphasizing the distance he probably felt from migrants. Then he added, "They just use our schools and hospitals; they also get social security benefits when they don't even pay taxes."

My sister Wendy was pissed. She tried to speak through her anger and tears: "***Those people*** you are talking about are people like me! My parents had to leave our country so we wouldn't get killed; and my dad has worked almost every day that he's been here."

"Yeh, well, illegal immigrants get Social Security, and it's breaking our system," countered Todd.

"No, non-citizens don't get Social Security," answered Erika, "and we do pay taxes! I work over thirty hours a week, and a lot of my money is taken for taxes." The discussion went on for about an hour before we took a break. It left a cloud of bad feelings hanging over the group.

We spent most of the next days processing our discussion. In the end, we agreed that, in the future, we needed to do a lot better job of researching our facts. Also, we needed to listen to one another and respect each person's point-of-view.

Wendy explained her frustration, "My family went through a lot—largely because the U.S. government supported the wealthy class in El Salvador." She continued, "We saw soldiers carrying new guns and wearing new boots, all provided by the U.S. We saw caravans of tanks and Grand Cherokee jeeps (we even saw the president of our country in one) that were used against our people. They, too, were supplied by the U.S. We had nothing. We came here for a new start, becoming legal residents through the Amnesty Act, and now, we've become the object of white America's intolerance toward Latinos."

The next day, Jeremy, who had been her chief antagonizer, brought up our discussion again, wanting to settle something with Wendy. He said, "I discussed the topic of immigration with my parents last night. My grandfather, who is living with us now, reminded me of my Jewish background and his flight from Nazi Germany to escape persecution. I'm sorry, Wendy."

I think we learned more about mutual respect from the discussion than we learned about immigration. Our group had grown close, but our behavior was still influenced by a lifetime of deeply-seated reaction patterns. I learned that it isn't easy to convince another person of my viewpoint just because I have lived it. I also saw how ugly things can be when people feel that their own quality of life is threatened. The road to the truth, I realized, is a long, hard road and needs to be lived with tolerance, understanding, ***and*** patience. Every time I tried to convince others, I was forced to grow inside,

too. It seemed that every issue appeared in a new light as I saw it from other people's view, too.

The challenge, I realized, was to look for the value in each point-of-view from the perspective of a global citizen. That would be a worthwhile road to travel in the years ahead. For the immediate future, our group was learning valuable lessons to guide us in our discussions and in the way we related to each other.

When Erika shared her work as a political volunteer, we began with a simple presentation which turned into an unplanned class debate. We found ourselves embroiled in a full-fledged interpersonal, trying to unsnarl the hurt and angry feelings and misunderstandings that erupted in our group. Then, we set time aside to make sure that everyone had resolved their emotional issues; it was important to understand what was fueling our disagreements. Finally, we explored ways to conduct better discussions in the future.

In the end, we agreed that, while the issue of immigration was complex, our group's health was more important than winning or losing. So we decided to study the issue in more depth. We didn't want to avoid issues; we wanted to become better informed; we wanted to understand each other; and we wanted to understand the world. This decision opened the way for richer activities. Exploring cultural diversity became one of the themes that our group developed for the semester.

Some of our students were interested in learning more about the American Indians and how their lands were taken and their culture destroyed by the immigration of Europeans. Wendy, Alma, and I wanted to know more about the indigenous people of Central America, especially the Mayas from whom we are descended. The economist in our group decided to research the financial motivation for colonization of the Western Hemisphere. Our government specialists looked at civil law and ways in which whole territories and civilizations in the New World were traded about by the European nations. Some students were much more interested in contemporary political events and issues; they studied U.S. foreign policy in Central America

and how it has evolved over the past forty years. Some studied the effects of foreign policies on domestic issues, like immigration. Some wished to read novels or poetry that brought eras and issues to life.

It became a very exciting adventure, with each person finding some way to share with the group. One student suggested that we each share our heritage; we ended up having a lunch at which everyone shared foods that represented their cultures. We shared places where we had found our favorite resources. We went to the public library and book stores together. Joe brought back a schedule of authors speaking at a local bookstore. We ***surfed the web*** and found data on almost any topic. We watched films: ***The Mission***, ***Romero***, ***El Norte***. We hosted speakers from local development agencies. In addition to becoming informed, we were invited to get involved. Students facilitated discussions and gave presentations. We had more debates. After our first debate on immigration, we researched our positions more carefully and often chose to argue the opposing view. Words like ***colonialism***, ***imperialism***, ***neo-colonialism***, ***tyranny***, and ***sovereignty*** took on new meaning. Our whole class gave a technology demonstration at a teacher inservice using the curriculum that we had created.

I got to facilitate the playing of an immigration game for the class that I had learned from International Development Exchange (IDEX), a non-government development agency with which we were working. IDEX is a sustainable, global organization that matches First World donors to Third World projects. A few weeks earlier they had invited me to accompany their staff to Los Angeles to help make a presentation to the California Teachers of Social Studies annual conference. I accepted the invitation. After my presentation, I got to go to other presentations. That's when I participated in the ***Immigration Workshop*** for the first time and met the people who developed the game. They provided me with all the materials that I would need to run the game and encouraged me to conduct it for our class.

The class jumped at the chance to role play; and they met the challenge to think critically. The appealing thing about the game is that it offers policy positions in which there is no predetermined right or wrong choice. Partici-

pants are, however, asked to describe their underlying principles, and consider the ramifications of their positions. I asked the students to choose one of the following position statements about their country: 1) We should adopt a policy of open borders and let any citizen of the world enter and leave our country at will; 2) We should establish and enforce a fair quota of immigrants entering the country each year; 3) We should set up a quota for highly trained professionals and permit them to immigrate to this country only when we need them; 4) We should suspend all immigration and restrict residence in this country to current legal citizens. Then students formed small groups consistent with their position statements, discussed their positions, and presented to the larger group.

Later in the year our school sponsored a Multicultural Week. Janna, Adrienne, and I were invited to run the simulation for other classes. Our experience in working with The Learning Community gave us confidence and helped make our presentation more effective. Before Learning Community, there was one obstacle that held me back, and that was myself. I was not confident that I could work independently, that I could be my own teacher. Now I have done it. I have become more open to ideas, and my awareness of global issues has grown. Learning in such a unique way has made me want to become a better student for myself.

In past school experiences, I looked for understanding, but didn't receive it. Sometimes I felt as if school was just rushing by like a train that wouldn't stop to pick anybody up, and never slowed down. I felt left behind, and I struggled to get on the train, but I couldn't. I felt that, even if I was a passenger on the train, I would have little control of the route or pace.

In the Learning Community, I feel that everyone is on board and looking out at the world from the train. We are all on task because we all are willing to work together. That is the difference between being understood and being told or forced to do something. I don't feel pushed or rushed in the group. I learn things better when they are studied as a whole rather than being broken up into disciplines. Lessons stay with me, and I remember what I learn because I am active in the process. I enjoy learning. I can be a leader in

The Learning Community. I am a person with a voice, and I can be understood for being myself. Now I am conductor of my train, and I am off to visit the world, wherever I wish to go.

As our school year progressed, the group had many more opportunities to develop group studies. We became more effective and learned to explore very controversial subjects with a spirit of inquiry. In fact, the ***spirit of inquiry*** became the focus for us. We enjoyed each other, and we enjoyed learning from each other. To me, that's what community is all about. At this point of my life, the road I had chosen was no longer simply leading to a safe refuge for my family or leading to the "American Dream" or even leading to some place. Rather, I had found access to a higher road which places real value on liberty and justice for its travelers all along the way and which has a high tolerance for truth. My road becomes our road; it can be shared by everyone on the planet; it is paved with ***the spirit of inquiry***. On our road, we are all equal citizens of the world.