

*Passage Eight:
Being in Service*

Discovering the Essence of Learning

Janna

My first school experience was in a private school. My parents enrolled me in a Montessori school so that I could get a good start in life. Classes were small and only extended to the third grade. I felt close to my classmates and enjoyed the combination of freedom and structure that the school provided. When I transferred into the local public school in the fourth grade, I adjusted well, but things were obviously not the same. I wasn't very aware of the contrast then, but looking back with the perspective that I have now, I can see that the two schools had completely different views on education.

At the Montessori school, there was some structure, although it was minimal. The amount of free time exceeded the amount of teacher-controlled time. Students were required to learn basics skills, such as reading and writing, but a major portion of the learning was left to the students' initiative. It seemed to me that their philosophy was to teach the basics and let the children develop independently by following their own interests. As students, we thrived on creative activities—we were constantly designing projects, organizing field trips, or putting on plays. We learned responsibility and real-life skills as we organized and carried out our activities.

I was only eight when I entered the public schools. I adapted easily to my new environment. I learned to do what I was told so I sat dutifully at my desk most of the day. It didn't seem to really faze me at the time. The basic philosophy behind the public school seemed to be that the a student is like a blank slate and doesn't really have much to offer to the process of learning. The belief seemed to be that a young mind needs to be filled with information in preparation for the “real world.” Participation in that world was to be delayed until later. I had some inspirational teachers who made me think that there might be something more to education, but most of my experiences in public schools reinforced my view that the student's role was meant to be passive.

The atmosphere at the Montessori provided a better learning environment for me. It wasn't perfect, sometimes kids made fun of each other and weren't very supportive, but we were given the freedom to explore, to communicate, and to work things out socially and intellectually. When I got to the

public schools, I was far ahead of my classmates because of the accelerated pace at Montessori. I enjoyed having that edge, but I lost it after a few years. I think, perhaps, that I adapted too well to the public school environment. I was so eager to please that I hardly noticed the change and quickly got used to being told what to learn. I always got good grades and was considered one of the “smart” kids.

My fifth-grade teacher kept a list of the five “smartest” students on the wall of our classroom. I was always on the list, but my best friend was always right above me on the list. Even now, I don't understand what purpose the list served. If it was some sort of motivator, even for a few students, wouldn't it be motivating us in the wrong way? Isn't the purpose of school to learn, not just to get good grades?

Junior high wasn't any better for me. I continued to get good grades and tried to please my teachers, but something didn't feel right to me. By the time I got to high school, I had grown pretty discouraged with the public school system. I didn't feel “seen” by the the system. I began to think more critically about my situation. Grades seemed arbitrary and lost their power of motivation for me. Teachers seemed to make mistakes, too, and didn't always know the answers. My life revolved around lectures and homework. I wondered why, if the process of regimentation and schooling was really working, our time was still being controlled as we got older.

Still, I realized that I, like most other high school students, was dependent on external forces for control. I lacked true self-discipline. I went to class every day and did my work to get good grades and approval from my parents and my teachers. But I wanted more from school and I wasn't sure how to get it. Things didn't get better. I developed a problem with tardiness. I was late to my first period class almost every day. I think it was my way of passively and secretly rebelling against a system in which I was beginning to doubt.

During my sophomore year, even though I continued to get on the honor roll, I thought seriously about quitting school and teaching myself at home.

I read the ***Teenage Liberation Handbook*** by Grace Llewellyn and was even more inspired to quit. My mind was pretty much made up that I would not return to school for my junior year; my parents supported this choice. And I probably would have left school if I hadn't heard about The Learning Community.

When I first heard about The Learning Community, I feared that it would not provide me the amount of freedom that I wanted with my studies. I was concerned, though, about the potential isolation I might experience in home schooling. As I found out more I realized that, although I would not have as much freedom as I wanted, The Learning Community would be a huge improvement over regular school. I also realized that I could become really close to a group of people my age. That had never happened to me before in the public schools and it would be very difficult to create as a home-schooler.

On the last day of my sophomore year, The Learning Community called a meeting for all the students who had enrolled for the coming year. I was annoyed at having a meeting on the last day of school. I didn't want to talk about school; I wanted to be free for the summer. But I decided to go in with an open mind. I walked into the room and watched as my future classmates filed in. We spent the entire meeting going over the commitments that we were asked to make when school started again. The commitments seemed like a good idea, but I didn't really take them very seriously. I had grown accustomed to "accepting" what went on in school; I treated this experience in the same manner.

I was pretty wary when Paki, a second-year student, first mentioned "choice points." He defined a "choice point" as a point in time when we still had an opportunity to affect the future. Gary helped explain it by saying, "If we really want to have power in our lives, we need to be accountable for who we are and what we do." He continued, "When we make a commitment and break it, we can learn from the experience. All we need to do is look back over the most immediate time frame and discover the point at which we consciously or unconsciously chose to break our word. Doing this will en-

able us to be more conscious the next time we are given such a choice. If we apply this principle consistently, we can begin to gain true power in our lives.”

I didn't have a problem with the concept during the summer meeting, but when school actually started the next year, I saw choice-points as rather “point-less.” If I was in danger of being late, I hurried to class to avoid having to sort out my choice with the class, not because I had agreed to be on time. If I thought that I was going to be late, I would plan out exactly what I was going to say. My words might not have had anything to do with my choice. More often, I used whatever excuse sounded good or seemed fool-proof.

I'm not sure exactly when I realized the importance and the value of choice points. But as the weeks continued, I found that by being in the Learning Community I changed tremendously. One of my major changes was realizing the power of my own word. Knowing that my word actually meant something gave me more power in my life. I chose more consciously and was rarely tardy after coming to that realization.

Shortly after school started, our class went away to the mountains for a three-day retreat at a place called Venture. Our group response to the experiences at Venture completely amazed me. The closeness we created brought in an extra measure of trust and honesty that helped carry us through the school year.

The activity for the first night at Venture was something that we often referred back to as “meal planning.” Everyone assembled in a big circle in the main meeting room. Our second-year students and our teacher were to be observers during this community-building process. They brought out all the bags of food for our three-day retreat. Gary gave a long talk about our purpose for the year and explained that we were to plan our meals “as a microcosm for the entire year.” He said that we wouldn't be able to eat our dinner until all the second-year students and Gary agreed that we had completed our task.

Everyone started by attacking the problem in his or her own way. People were running around chaotically; some had to yell to be heard over the confusion. A block of cheese was thrown here, and a loaf of bread was thrown there, but we were getting very little accomplished. A half hour went by, then an hour. Finally, the food got sorted out in a semi-organized fashion. We had to get the observers to approve our plan, but when we asked if our task was completed, we got an unceremonious “no” from every single one of them.

We responded by developing more elaborate plans; these got turned down, too. Some students got discouraged and just sat around or slept, some got mad and argued with other people's ideas. We were up against what seemed at the time to be an enormous challenge and we didn't know what to do. It wasn't until about two o'clock in the morning that we finally figured out that planning the meals was not the real point of the exercise. Our challenge, it turned out, had little to do with what we would eat or who should cook.

The point was that we all needed to cooperate and pull our group together—without direction or help. Also, we needed to create a sense of community and a mutual respect that would guide our experience throughout the year. There were times that night when I wanted to cry, and a few people actually did. When we finally got the point of the exercise, I felt elated. So did everyone else. The lesson we learned could never have been taught. It had to be discovered. The experience brought everyone much closer together. We had established our basic trust and our own way of being together.

At last! A real learning experience in which everyone in the group drew from his or her own inner source of knowledge and found a way to communicate and build a group trust. Each of us had to go beyond our old ways of working together to obtain our goal. We truly discovered a way to work together. Our next step was to perfect our new skills.

Over the next two days, we learned to examine our behavior, give and receive feedback, and support one another. This was to be an ongoing process

that was an essential part of our experience together. Our level of sharing and disclosure deepened with each new experience. I poured some of my feelings into my journal:

I can't believe this whole thing is making me so emotional. I don't even know what to write. I just want to break down and cry, but I can't. I feel so close to everyone now. People said completely personal things. I cried constantly. In the beginning, when Brenda, Paula, and Wendy were talking, I couldn't believe that more people didn't break into tears. When I see people I care about cry, I can't help but join them. I get so emotional so easily. I feel close to everyone now. So many times, I just wanted to get up and hug people, for them as well as for myself. I feel like we have all become much closer. I keep repeating that, but it is definitely something that bears repeating.

In the weeks that followed, I made significant changes in my awareness and conduct because we took the time in class to hear and support each other. I wanted a close relationship with my peers, and, by opening our schedule to include human issues as well as academic pursuits, I was given a chance to become really close to a group of people my age. The bond among the students in The Learning Community is something that wouldn't be possible in mainstream classes the way they exist today. I gained a closer relationship with the twenty-five students in The Learning Community than I had made with any group in my entire life.

Another powerful experience that gave me greater confidence in myself and helped our group develop an even deeper bond of trust and teamwork was the Ropes Course. Our experience began with an exercise in which we had to fall backwards off a picnic bench into the arms of our peers:

“Spotters ready?” / “Ready!” / “Ready to fall?” / “Fall on!”

These shouts rang in my ears as a gut-wrenching feeling entered my stomach. If I had known then the things that I would accomplish later on that day, my nervous feelings would have quadrupled immediately.

That day was one of the most physically and emotionally demanding days of the year—and certainly the scariest. As I watched one person after another fall from the picnic table into awaiting arms, I got more and more nervous. By the time it was my turn, I was scared to death. Despite my fear, I climbed up, squeezed my eyes shut, and let myself fall backwards. I was caught in a net of clasped arms. Relief flooded over me as I was lifted up and placed back on my feet. That was just the warm-up exercise. We spent the rest of the morning on a progression of events at ground level. We became more confident, built group trust, and learned to cooperate—and we had fun.

After lunch, having completed the low events, we moved on to the high events. The first of these was a tightrope about thirty feet in the air. We put on a belay harness, climbed the tree, positioned ourselves on the tightrope, and walked across it using only a rope tied to one of the trees for balance. Again, I watched the other people go, but I only got more and more scared. When Brenda panicked, I could no longer control my fear; I started crying. As I stood on the ground, looking up at that wire, I felt that I would never be able to do it. When it was my turn, I was still sniffing. Then I started to climb up the tree. I climbed, walked across the wire, and jumped. The belay rope caught my fall and I was lowered to the ground as if I were Peter Pan in a school play. I had completed the event before I had even realized what I had done. I was amazed. I felt liberated!

After I completed the exercise, I felt as if I could do anything, no matter how impossible it seemed at first. The entire day at the Ropes Course was exhilarating. I gained skills that I will use the rest of my life, skills that had little to do with climbing trees. I was gaining confidence in my ability to work through my fear and to complete whatever task I might try. Sometimes I look back at that day and think, “I was able to do **that** then, I can do **this** now.” It was an experience that I will never forget. At the end of the day, I felt strong inside, connected to the group, and elated.

We developed positive group attitudes at Venture and at the Ropes Course that found their way into the daily workings of our group. When we en-

countered an emotional or intellectual challenge, we dealt with it directly and supported each other through it. We knew how to succeed.

I remember one day when Alma came to class very upset and said that she didn't feel connected to the group. It was uncharacteristic of her to bring personal issues to the group or to share her feelings with the group. She was like me in that way; I really didn't want to be the focus of a group "interpersonal." She started to cry; she spoke of random thoughts and feelings that she had stored up all year and had never mentioned. Most of our group members were caught by surprise at this sudden flood of emotion—but not me. Withholding feelings was all too familiar to me. Through her tears, Alma recounted a dream that she had had the night before. In the dream, she said, I had confronted her—without fear—for not really being involved in the group. When she said my name, I felt the same kind of terror that I had felt at the Ropes Course. "Am I going to have to be involved in an interpersonal?" I wondered. "Surely not," I thought. "Besides, I don't even know Alma very deeply."

Paki, Brenda, and Joanna consoled Alma, saying that they thought she seemed really involved with the group. Gary agreed that Alma seemed comfortable in the group, but he questioned whether "comfort" equaled "involved." As the group gave support to Alma and drew her out, she mentioned my name more than once. Apparently, I was a symbol for her of someone who was involved and assertive—a model that she could not live up to. Frankly, neither could I; assertiveness was not my strength.

Gary saw something in the group's dynamics that gave me more anxiety. He asked Alma and me if we were willing to explore the process together. We consented. We started by unraveling our thoughts and feelings about our involvement in the group and about our fear of bringing things up in the group. Gary noticed that neither of us spoke directly to one another or looked into one another's eye. He asked us if we were willing to stand up and experiment. I consented, hoping to end my part as soon as possible.

He asked us if we would explore the space that we had between us. We were on opposite sides of the circle; the space seemed like miles. As we probed the space between us by moving into the circle, the air took on the properties of thick glue. It was hard to move. Alma said her feet seemed stuck to the carpet. As we looked at each other and shared our feelings—mostly fear at this point—we began to move into the circle. The closer we got to each other, the harder it was to move or to speak. When we were a only step apart, we both froze momentarily. The moment seemed like an eternity.

It was clear to me that Alma wanted to reach out. I felt frozen, scared, and confused. Then Alma stepped forward; she was vulnerable and open. My arms extended outward, as if guided by instinct, and we hugged. The hug felt almost like the reunion of a long-lost mother and daughter (I am easily five inches taller than she). As we hugged, I felt tears streaming from my eyes. I could feel Alma's quiet tears expressed in her labored breathing. I felt other arms close around us as people from the circle came forward and joined us. Soon the entire group closed in around us. The room was aglow with twenty-five people encircled in a giant hug. One word best described the feeling in the room—love. Our whole group was open and involved; the sticky glue of fear was dissolved. From that day forward, I found it easier to open myself up to the group.

Throughout the semester, each of us gained greater awareness of ourselves and became more open to each other. Our group got closer and we learned to resolve conflicts and make decisions. The group goals that we made opened a window to the world, and, as our studies expanded, we started seeing how events in the world were interconnected. The most important shift of consciousness came when our group began to understand that we had the power to make changes in the world. As the first semester drew to an end, we were completing the activities that we had planned in our goal-setting process at the beginning of the year; we were ready for the next step.

Gary said that over the years some groups had chosen to create their second semester in the same manner as they had created their first semester and that others had not. It was our choice to make. He offered to take us through the

goal-setting process again as one option. We decided to find our own way. We wanted to make the second semester more **project based** than the first semester had been.

We arrived at our mid-year point with a semester of enriching experiences, a group of finely-tuned students, and the freedom to create our new semester any way we liked. That opened many doors. We started by spending one day evaluating the previous semester and another in brainstorming what we might do second semester. The two activities actually blended as one. Our first semester had been a success, and certain project strands had emerged from our work together. Members of our group had already been trained to teach in elementary schools as Environmental Volunteers (EVs), and International Development Exchange (IDEX) had already helped us become aware of development issues in Third World countries. We made proposals for the second semester based on what we thought might be most productive, most beneficial, and most fun.

We debated and discussed which activities would be best for us. Our first semester's activities had taken us **into the world**. We had hiked at Jasper Ridge Biological Reserve, shared African drummer Samate's performance and cultural overview, and studied global events. Now we wanted **to get involved with the world**. Some people in the group wanted to do something that would make a difference in the local community. Some wanted to reach out and connect with people around the world. A few expressed the concern that we might just get too busy, be too task oriented, or become too fragmented as a group.

Our brainstorming produced five proposals: to fund a Third World development project, to continue to volunteer at local elementary schools, to plant demonstration gardens, to travel to Mexico, and to write a book. We spent an entire day discussing the time and energy required to complete each project. Each project had its own appeal, and it was hard to eliminate the favorite project of any particular group member. "How do we get past this one?" I thought. We had found a way to overcome almost every obsta-

cle during the year, being creative and inclusive. Perhaps that approach would work now.

Adrienne came up with the magical solution. “Maybe we could find how these ideas are interrelated. Then we might be able to find a way to do them all.” We were able to find many common threads in our proposed projects. We started by reviewing our first semester goals: ***understanding nature, appreciating diversity, teaching children,*** and ***conserving the environment.*** Our vision was to ***build a strong community so we could explore and contribute to the world.*** The five project proposals were consistent with our first semester goals and with our vision statement.

We could serve the local community by teaching at one of the neighboring elementary schools. We could serve the larger global community by helping to fund the project in Mexico that IDEX had introduced us to. We could learn and apply organic gardening principles at our own homes and compare our efforts to those of a Mexican community where people were learning about healthy living. In the midst of these projects, we could self-reflect as we collaborated on a book about our experiences.

The projects could be ongoing, such as with the writing project; periodic, as with the Environmental Volunteers project; seasonal, as with planting our garden; or concentrated, as with the Mexico trip. We had eighteen weeks in which to accomplish everything. That seemed like enough time.

Piecing together such a comprehensive plan was too inviting to pass up. After deliberating, we decided to do them all. We agreed to implement the five projects and began making plans for the new semester. Time permitting, we would intersperse other activities that supported our first-semester goals. Our basic plan was to

- Support a Third World development project. Through a school partnership with the International Development Exchange (IDEX), we will raise \$780.00 to support a nutrition and school-ecology project in Mexicali, Mexico.

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- Teach environmental science to elementary-school students. Through a training program offered by the Environmental Volunteers, we will teach science-discovery units to elementary school children.
- Plant vegetable gardens. A group of us will enroll in organic gardening classes at Ecology Action and then teach the theory and methods to our class. The class will plant demonstration gardens at some students' homes.
- Take a field trip to Mexicali, Mexico to visit the Nutrition and Ecology Project. The class will take a six-day field trip to Mexicali to gain a greater understanding of our development efforts and of the Mexican culture.
- Write and publish a book on our educational experiences. We will write about our stages of learning and show how students of diverse backgrounds and abilities can learn to work together for the betterment of the world.

Phases of the five projects overlapped and intertwined throughout the semester. We planned fund raisers to kick off the semester. We discussed many ideas on how to raise \$780 for the Mexicali Farming Project. Adrienne brought a proposal to us from a professional acting group: We could sell tickets to their production of Shakespeare's ***As You Like It***, and we could keep half the proceeds from our ticket sales.

Greg liked that idea. He pointed out that one of our group goals was to experience and express our creativity. He said that a partnership with the acting company was one way to fulfill our goal. As the idea caught on, Greg offered another suggestion. He proposed that we act out some scenes from another play, ***Romeo and Juliet***, to give us more appreciation for the work of Shakespeare. He also said that we should all go to ***As You Like It*** with our parents as part of the fund raiser. It took less time to get everyone to agree to sell tickets than it took to get everyone to agree to read and act out a Shakespearean play.

In just two weeks, the group sold enough tickets to earn the money for the Farming Project. During that time Greg got us copies of ***Romeo and Juliet***. Our reading culminated in acting out the famous balcony scene on the football bleachers. Greg played Romeo and I played Juliet. I felt pretty strange hanging over the rail of the bleachers saying “Wherefore art thou, Romeo?” to Greg who was standing below. It must have played pretty well, though, because when we finished there was more applause than laughter.

The Nutrition and Ecology Project appealed to me. The project was designed to assist the people in a ***colonia*** (neighborhood) in Mexicali, a transient Mexican border community, to increase their understanding of and involvement in core community issues. The project seemed pretty simple: the community would be brought together at two elementary- school sites to plant gardens. The people (and the children at the schools) were to share the vegetables that were grown and were to receive lessons about nutrition and the environment. We worked with two organizations, IDEX and Los Niños, to carry out our part. IDEX (in San Francisco) connected us with the project. Los Niños (in San Diego) worked directly with the Mexicali population to set up the gardens and to teach the people. Our part was to fund the project and expand our knowledge.

Throughout the year, IDEX made enrichment presentations to our class. They conducted games to help us become more sensitive to people of other cultures, helped us understand the role of non-government organizations in Third World development, and facilitated role-playing exercises to help us understand the function of the World Bank in Third World countries. They also brought the project director of Los Niños from San Diego to visit our classroom and to help us understand the impact of our project on the people of Mexicali.

Another of our projects focused on local service. The connection that we established with the non-profit Environmental Volunteers during the first semester continued to thrive. The EVs train students as science instructors to teach in elementary schools. Fifteen of our students went through the five-day training. Then we were linked with adult volunteers who provided us

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with sets of lessons and teaching materials. The Learning Community sent teams of students to each of three schools—Monta Loma in Mountain View, Hoover in Redwood City, and Beechwood in East Menlo Park—to teach one day every two weeks.

The remaining students in our group found other community service projects on which to work. Mitchie volunteered at the Veteran's Hospital; Shawn and Joe planted vegetables for the Hidden Villa kids project; Andy tutored at Peninsula School. Paki organized files for the Humane Education Network as well as teaching at Beechwood. Alma kept the books for a kid's soccer league.

Alma also taught at Hoover with Jenny, Paula, Victor, and me. Alma's situation was unique. She was giving back to the people who gave to her. She was born in Guatemala and had moved to Redwood City with her parents when she was eight years old. She spent four years at Hoover learning how to speak English; now she was teaching in the school. It was gratifying to see the delight on her face the day she reunited with her former ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in the faculty room. I'm not sure who was most proud. They both just stood there and smiled at one another.

Hoover is located about fifteen miles from our school in a neighborhood with a large population of recent immigrants from Mexico. Although I hadn't worked with limited English speakers before, I felt comfortable because the children welcomed us with such great enthusiasm.

We were assigned to teach first and third graders. The science units provided by the EVs covered subjects ranging from fish to rocks to seeds to animal tracks. All the units had hands-on activities with ample opportunity for discovery. We even had the kids making paper. The teachers welcomed us into their classrooms and helped us feel comfortable. I did feel some frustration because the lessons were so structured and didn't emphasize enough of what students could do at home to help the environment.

The students enjoyed learning from people who were close to the ages of their older brothers and sisters. Looking back, I realize how good it was for the kids to learn from us. We were young enough to be able to relate to them. We could be friendly and make them laugh and keep their attention. And we could get serious and teach them simple scientific concepts or inspire them by our example. I felt special because the students always asked us when we were coming back.

I was particularly happy to be teamed up with Jenny. I wanted to teach in a school with a diverse ethnic population, but I was anxious about teaching so many kids who couldn't speak English. Reaching these kids was made easier by team teaching with Jenny. I was able to teach in English while she taught in Spanish. Teaching was a challenge for Jenny, too, since she hadn't learned science or ecology terms in her native language. She was not shy about asking the students for help with Spanish words. As the kids were called upon to help provide some of the vocabulary, they became more involved in the class and more responsible for its content. They felt special because we were learning with them.

Not all of the students spoke Spanish, however. I remember Ricky, a little boy in the first grade, one of two students in the class who spoke only English. He was bright and was usually interested in what we taught, but he had trouble paying attention and was usually punished by being made to sit in the back of the class. He was further isolated by his peers.

At first I didn't really like him because he seemed to act out a lot in class. When Jenny and I were teaching about owls and having the class dissect owl pellets, his interest was really sparked by a book about owls that we brought. I spent a lot of class time explaining the pictures in the book to him. He became interested and wanted to learn. I discovered how a teacher can spark interest in a student simply by showing an interest in him or her.

At the end of the year the children wrote thank-you notes to us. Their Spanish or broken English was so sweet. Jenny and I cried when we left, knowing that we would probably never get to see this group of kids again.

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Dear Jenny and Janna—I joup you remember has. Thank you for cher-
ing has some roks. I am going to miss you pecous you ar, the beats. I am
not going to sy you peacas I am going to Mexico to visit my fam-
ily.—Love Yesenia

(Dear Jenny and Janna,—I hope you remember us. Thank you for shar-
ing some rocks with us. I am going to miss you because you are the best. I
am not going to see you because I am going to Mexico to visit my family.)

To Janna from Angel—I love you I have lurnd to not pult in mother
nacher. Becous then all of the animels wiil disuper and so will we. I owe
it all to you. NOT PULTE.

(...I have learned not to pollute in mother nature. Because then all of
the animals will disappear and so will we... DON'T POLLUTE!)

Querida Jenny y Janna, Les quiero desir gracias por venir al clase por que
ustedes ayudan an español. Les quiero desir que as ponido el corason
para ayudarno. Si todavia todos los niños desimos gracias por venir a
esta clase que ustedes an luchado para nosotros.—Cristina

(Dear Jenny and Janna—I want to thank you for coming to our class be-
cause you helped in Spanish. I want to tell you that you put your heart
into helping us. Still all the kids want to thank you for coming to our
class because you have worked for us...)

The kids we served benefited, and so did our student volunteers. Mitchie,
who always wanted to be a nurse, worked as an aide at the Veterans' Hospi-
tal. She said that she made lots of friends there and felt close to her patients,
but she concluded that nursing would be too demanding as a career for her.
Brenda concluded the same thing about teaching. Wendy taught kids who
had disabilities; she observed that some kids get labeled and lose their es-
teem in the process, something she vowed not to do in the profession she
chooses.

Greg observed that while he taught kids about owl pellets and bird beaks,
they taught him about love and generosity, and showed him how to have
fun. He said, “Children make me glad to be alive.” Paula, another one of our

bilingual students, felt satisfaction in teaching children how to better the world by recycling and conserving water at home. Ali gained more respect for children and realized how important it was to teach them respect for the Earth. Shawn said that he felt closer to the Earth by working in a demonstration garden for children; he loved to work in the outdoors.

Andy, who taught at Peninsula School, took an interest in the class isolate. Andy got the boy interested in basketball. As the boy's self-esteem improved on the court, Andy helped transfer his interest to math in the classroom. Paki learned that, to get close to a child from a poor family, he had to accept gifts instead of giving them. Jenny learned that children respect and value teachers who reveal personal things about themselves. I re-learned that children thrive when they are drawn into the learning process. The students got more responsive as we allowed them more responsibility.

Another of our group projects was the garden project. Working in our gardens gave us a greater appreciation for the delicate balance in nature. Greg, Joanna, Andrea, and I took weekly classes at the Ecology Action/Common Ground store. Then we taught our class what we had learned. In microcosms of the world (our backyard garden sites) we applied principles of organic gardening that could be applied to the macrocosm (our Earth). We also learned that lessons appear in unexpected places in unexpected ways. This was the case, for instance, when we had to discuss commitment after Shawn, Evan, and Andrea smoked pot in the garden.

The project that touched me most deeply was the Mexicali trip. Our six-day trip to Southern California and Mexico, was prompted by our work with IDEX to support a Third World project. We had raised money to help fund the IDEX project in Mexicali, now we had to find a way to fund the trip.

Andy was our fund-raising genius for the Mexicali trip. We needed to raise \$1000 to rent three vans and buy food for the group. Two fund raisers were proposed, sponsoring a dinner and putting on a talent show. We decided to do both at once. Andy volunteered to organize the dinner. He got his mom and stepfather, who are professional chefs, to volunteer to cook and serve a

dinner. We organized a talent show to entertain our guests. Tamika volunteered to be the emcee for the program and perform. Greg wanted to juggle, Paki offered to play his flute, Greg and I revived our scene from ***Romeo and Juliet***, Joe warmed up his sitar, and the rest of the group teamed up to write and perform a comedy. Over one-hundred people showed up to support our event, mostly family members, friends, and former Learning Community students. We reached our goal with just one activity. Then we prepared for the trip.

Our plan was to camp two nights at Joshua Tree Wilderness Reserve in southern California while en route to the farm site in Mexicali. We chose early April because that is the time of the year when the desert comes alive with greenery and colorful cacti blossoms. It is also the time between the seasons of torrential winter rains and parched summer earth.

We thrust ourselves into the austere Joshua Tree landscape. We, with our technology of pop-up tents, light-weight sleeping bags, and cooking gear, poised against nature's steep rocky mountains, unseasonably hot sun, and unseen reptiles. Our first day we got up early and watched the sun as it seemed to rise out of the sand, exposing the moonscape-like terrain. We drew deep breathes of the clean, desert air. The conditions seemed perfect for a day hike, so we tried to roust the rest of the group and start breakfast.

Wendy, Tamika, and Jenny shared a tent and shared late-night stories. They were the hardest group to roust. By the time we got everyone up, made breakfast, cleaned up, and filled dozens of water bottles, it was close to ten o'clock. By then, even the lizards were beginning to crawl under the giant boulders that covered the landscape. Our exuberant group wilted before noon. We noticed that every living creature in the desert was under the rocks. We joked about how the spirits of the indigenous Indian population were probably laughing at us as they perched ***under*** the big rock overhangs.

The next day, we waved our goodbyes to the Joshua Trees and continued on through the painted deserts and arid mountains of southern California. As we drew nearer to Mexico, we followed a dry riverbed into the lush green

agricultural oasis of the Imperial Valley. It felt surrealistic driving through the citrus orchards after having spent three days in the desert. I also felt a sense of anticipation, knowing that Mexicali was just a few miles away. As we crossed the border into Mexico, I wondered how Wendy and Jenny felt. I knew that they had not crossed this border since their mother had brought them across illegally when they were children.

We were met at the border in Mexicali by Alonzo, our Los Niños contact in Mexico. Los Niños, a non-profit organization, had set up the garden projects and had invited us to visit the sites. They assist transient populations and seasonal workers in Mexican border communities to address health and environmental needs. Our fund-raising efforts had provided money for creating gardens at two elementary schools. The garden sites became focal points for community development. As people are brought together to plant, they talk and become acquainted. When the project is completed, people will have a base on which to further organize themselves for larger community concerns.

Our entire group had bare accommodations in an old home in a modest neighborhood near the *mercado* (market). At night the family that lived in the home fed and entertained us; we felt welcomed. We had difficulty sleeping since more than twenty of us were crowded into two rooms in the hot, sticky night heat. Los Niños arranged our daily itinerary which included going to the market, visiting a farming cooperative, discussing how development organizations help the poor, and visiting the two school sites where the demonstration gardens were located.

When we arrived at the first school, **18 de Marzo** Elementary School, I was rather shocked at the surrounding environment. The houses were dilapidated. The people lived in extremely poor conditions, poorer than anything that I had ever seen at home. Absolutely everything was covered with a layer of the thick dust that flew up from the road every time a car drove through. I didn't know what to expect from a group of children living in conditions like these.

As we entered the school yard, all the children, the teachers, and the staff lined up in front of the classrooms as if they were soldiers in the militia. The classrooms were located around a big central playground on which everyone's attention was focused. A color guard of six young girls marched out carrying the flag. One of the girls called out commands and sounded the cadence. The girls led the assembly in saluting the Mexican flag and singing the national anthem.

I was quite impressed. Here we were in the middle of a poor neighborhood watching as six uniformed girls marched in cadence while the rest of the school stood proudly in neat rows singing and saluting their flag. We were five miles from the United States border but light-years away from our culture.

After the salute, the children showed us their garden and told us about the nutrition and ecology program that had grown out of the garden project. Some of us were put to work planting *nopales* (a flat leaved cactus) with some of the kids. Then we watched a cultural show put on by the Mexican children. As a gesture of friendship, the kids gave us handcrafted gifts, drawings, and writings they had made for us.

The next day we visited Solidaridad Elementary School. Once again, we were welcomed enthusiastically. Some of the children led us to a place in which we were to draw murals. While the kids drew one for us, we drew one for them. The theme for the murals was *Kids and Ecology*. The murals were an ongoing project for the rest of the day. We had time to make friends with the kids. It was unusual for them to have visitors, so the teachers weren't very strict about keeping them in class. Some of the children took us to visit their classrooms or tour their garden.

When recess came, the rest of the students came out to play with us. Our guys teamed up with the boys to play soccer. I was mingling among a sea of children, practicing my limited Spanish here and there: "*Hola! Como tellamas?*" The children also shared soybean ceviche with us. The food is part of Los Niños' health program.

Suddenly, a little girl came up behind me and wrapped her arms around me. I turned and looked down at her; our eyes met. I don't know what it was, but for some reason, something clicked between us. We talked a little. My limited Spanish prevented any in-depth conversation, but I found out that her name was Ana and that she was six years old. We were inseparable for the rest of the day. My popularity grew as Ana and I walked around the school hand-in-hand. I developed a following of little six-year-old girls. They were excited to show me around their school.

Later in the day, I was playing volleyball with some of the older girls when Ana came up to me and asked me if she could wear my necklace. I almost started crying right there. I wanted her to have something to remember me by, so I gave the necklace. Then she went to class.

When the volleyball game ended, it was time for us to leave. I realized that recess was over and Ana was nowhere to be found. I went around looking for her but couldn't find her. I was filled by a deep sadness; it was strange. I had only met Ana earlier in the day, and yet I felt so connected to her. I couldn't imagine not seeing her again. I wanted to cry. I knew that once we left, I would never come back here. I would never see these people, this town, this school, and Ana, again.

As we made ready to leave the school, Ana came running. She took my hand and followed me to our van; then she got in with me. I sat there with her in my lap until the very last second before we had to go. I had to say "good-bye." I wanted to smile and wave as we drove away, but instead I held one hand in the air and, with the other hand, I wiped my tears away. I can't believe we made such a strong connection in such a short amount of time. I know that I'll remember her and the rest of the people I met in Mexicali for the rest of my life.

The next morning as we left Mexico and drove up the California coastal highway, thoughts of Mexicali and little Ana kept tugging at my mind. That night, we camped on the beach by the Pacific Ocean. We awoke to see dol-

phins swimming in the ocean just past the breaking waves. Then we drove toward home sharing thoughts of a wonderful trip.

Our final project, one that took far more time than we had ever expected, was to write a book about our experience in The Learning Community. Writing, I found, didn't always come easy. Sometimes I got frustrated when I tried to write, especially if it was something that I knew other people would read. In regular English classes, I rarely wrote about things that really mattered to me. I could always b.s. my way through papers about characters in books. It was a lot easier to write when I didn't care at all about the subject matter. Now I care because it does matter to me. I want to speak from the heart, but sometimes the words just don't come.

What to write? What to write? Why can't I write anything? Everyone writes such good papers. I don't know what to write about anymore. Whenever I have an idea of something I want to write about, the ideas never fall into place in the right way. No matter what I want to write about, I can never get it to sound right in my head. If I just start writing without thinking about it, letting the ideas flow, maybe I could write something worth reading. I feel as if I need to be inspired. Even when I do have a few things I'd like to write about, I just can't make them work out on paper. What to write? What to write?

Our publishing project was a collaborative, hands-on learning project. We discussed, we planned, we organized, we wrote, and we edited. We almost bit off too much and we almost didn't come through. We wanted to write personal stories about our stages of learning and share them with others. Reflecting on our experience enabled us to see beyond ourselves.

In the end, the book project took on a life of its own, well beyond our intended deadline. It became a test for those of us who stuck with the project. It became our way to reflect, sort, evaluate, and understand the experience we created. It helped me to see learning as a moving process between people. I realized that learning is commitment, communication, collaboration,

magic, and life—all at once. And as we approached the end of the year, I felt that I was inseparable from the process.