

Interview with Anna Boyle

(June , 2009)



What do you recall about your first experience with the conference?

I was in 8th grade.

I think one of the reasons I decided to go was that my sister, who was nine years older than me, and in college, had really been involved in social justice work, and social justice education, and that affected me a lot, and I thought it was really neat, but I hadn't ever really done it myself.

I remember Craig Kielburger, who was the keynote speaker, was 17 years old, which was older than me, but not that much, because I was 14, and it just struck me, what an exciting, passionate, young life he had had in social justice work.

But beyond that, the conference was filled with other kids my age, and a little bit older, who were there because they were interested, and a lot of them were passionate about the same kinds of things.

I met people who were a couple of years older, who were serious about organizing – and seeing that those people were in my community, I remember walking away feeling really overwhelmed – overwhelmed with the content of the conference, but [also] overwhelmed with the possibility that might happen afterwards.

Is “overwhelmed” a good thing? Is it a bad thing?

Overwhelmed in the long run is definitely a good thing. At the time, it was mixed – a little bit scary – it's disorienting. It was the sort of thing, the sort of feeling where everything I saw that day, and the next few days, looked different than it had looked before the conference. The people around me, the things we did, the things we were learning in school – everything was sort of in a new light because of what I had learned, and what I had experienced, and what I had felt at the conference.

So, it was mixed feelings. But in the long run, definitely a very good thing. It was 10 years ago, and in the time since then, I don't know that I've ever had such a strong emotional reaction to an educational experience as I had at that conference.

Talk about the experience of being involved in the "Free The Children" chapter

Craig Kielburger's international organization Free the Children was based out of Toronto, because that's where he grew up, but then there were these local chapters all over the world, especially in the United States and Canada, but all over the world.

There were some students at the conference – mostly sophomores and juniors in high school, mostly kids from other schools – who thought that we could have a local chapter in St Cloud. We all put our name on this sheet of paper, with one or two really strong leaders whose names were at the top, and they were kind of organizing, and said they would call with a meeting time.

The conference was in October, and January was the first meeting I went to. It was at someone's house. I went with a couple of other of my friends from middle school.

I think at that meeting at that point, the group was already doing events, and they had already sort of structured themselves into an organization with some leadership responsibilities for certain people.

I think that what we did during that first year was mostly community awareness and community education events around the issue of child labor. I remember that that was [challenging] – feeling like I needed to learn and understand this issue, and would also be learning and planning actions at the same time, and it was a lot for an 8th grader especially – but it went on for about three years. It was really productive and active while it existed, but then it phased itself out.

Describe why you joined the conference planning committee, what it was like to join, etc.

I was thrilled, because it was exactly what I wanted to do at that point. The "Free the Children" chapter had just closed within that year, and I was really looking for some other way to be active and to be in a leadership position where I felt would fit my strengths and gifts.

The planning committee was great because everyone who came to the table was coming from different places. We got to think through every step of the process. What's important to students? What's important to us? What's going to be important to our classmates? What are the issues we want to talk about? What are the ways we want to talk about them, or engage with them? What's realistic in a day? What's effective in a day? And those are the kinds of things that, as a student, no one ever asks you. But it's really important, and thinking through those questions out loud together, we could actually come to decisions that we could then implement, was really great.

Then seeing it happen, and watching our peers experience what we had planned was really exciting. And we did it again the next year, and we did it differently, and we did it better.

I think that was maybe the first time that I really thought about the fact that there are different approaches to education – what we learn, and how we learn it – and it improved me as a student in general.



Anna facilitating an action-planning discussion at the fall, 2004 conference

How has your participation in the conference and your participation in the planning committee affected your journey?

I cannot exist for very long without thinking of what I'm doing through a social justice lens. I'd say that's great.

The year I graduated from high school, I had an AmeriCorps position, and I moved to another state by myself. I wanted the excitement of being in a place that was new and uncomfortable. And trying to simultaneously learn something about my national community, and do something to make it better, which is the social justice ethic that I learned surrounding the conference.

Could you describe your AmeriCorps experience further?

I had applied to college and been accepted, had received some scholarships, and was really excited. But then in about October of my senior year – right after I had finished that process, I suddenly realized that I didn't have to go to college. Even though I was excited about college, there might be other things I would be excited about, too.

So I started applying for different positions, looking at different volunteer networks, and I ended up getting this job – it was a volunteer position with a stipend, and housing and insurance and all of that stuff – sort of a job with a foster-care agency in Houston, Texas, and then I ended up working with AmeriCorps through that.

Anyway, what my job was being a part of a small staff of caregivers in a foster home with six children, birth through six years old, who had been victims of abuse or neglect, and some children with HIV. And the reason they were there, rather than a traditional foster home, was because their legal status or situation was really volatile, changing often, so it was really challenging to be in and out of a traditional foster home.

So it was a very fast-paced, a lot, it was the most intense experience I've ever had in my life.

And as an 18-year-old, it was especially intense, because most of my co-workers were college graduates. But I felt very prepared to be there. After a few weeks, I felt like I really have something to offer here in this setting, even though I'm younger. And I think part of that confidence, or part of that sense of, like, I am significant, I can be influential, came from that experience of the social justice conference oriented towards youth, saying, "You are an important part of social justice work now – as a 13-year-old, as a 15-year-old – and as an 18-year-old, you're an adult. You can seriously work, devote your life to something that's really scary, but something that's really significant. And the motivation, the passion, the confidence – I think, definitely came back, that whole learning process that the conferences were a part of.

It was a little bit hard to leave it, to settle into a college life, because the intensity was just at such a different level. But it was a great choice, and the fact that I was able to make that kind of a brave choice at that age, it just sort of upped my expectation of myself in the future as a college student.



Anna (fourth from the right) with colleagues and children in AmeriCorps

(Note: for confidentiality purposes, children's faces cannot be shown)

What are your areas of study in college?

Well, I started in the music department, and I love music. It was a comfortable, happy place to be. But I was in music education, so I was in the education department for a couple of years. And Augsburg College, where I go to school, has really a hands-on approach to teacher education, and really focused on urban schools – which is exciting, but it's not a good fit for me. And it was a hard decision for me to leave it.

Then I explored different social sciences and humanities for a semester, did some philosophy, some political science, and some off-campus internship, volunteer experiences, and ended up in the political science department, and that's where I am now – doing a lot of research work, both in school and out of school, spending a lot of time in the library, which is not the same as the intense kind of experience I had in AmeriCorps, for example, but it's motivated by some of the same passions, which is the sense that I am a part of something bigger than myself – I'm an important part of it, and I'm an influential part of it if I want to be.

My interest in public policy comes from that same spirit. It's a different discipline, and there's a lot to learn. But I'm going to graduate in December, and spend some time traveling and working, and I'm thinking about law school eventually, focused on public policy work. We'll see where it goes.

Do you have any final reflections that you want to share?

One thing I can say is that, especially as a student of the age that I went to the first conference in 8th grade, one event can be hugely influential, but it is not enough because life happens very fast at that age.

One significant event can be out of mind. It can be too hard to incorporate it into your sense of self if it's isolated. And so a sense of continuity, which involved having mentors, teachers, classmates, family – who were aware of and supportive of the fact that I was on this journey, made it so that the issues didn't go away.

And my sense of, like I said, that social justice ethic – the fact that everything I learn and everything I do can be part of this process, that it was continuous, that it was chronic throughout my high-school experience and into college.

Yeah, the conference is important because it is powerful – it has the potential to be a powerful event – but if it's isolated, it doesn't serve its purpose.