

Interview with Micah Bot-Miller

(May, 2009)



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

I was in 8th grade. The biggest thing I remember was the amount of people who were there – just to see so many young people who were interested in taking a day out of their school lives and coming to this conference to learn about social justice, and were interested in giving something a try that they hadn't tried before.

Why did you choose to go?

I wanted to take a more active role in pursuing social justice – and up to that point in my life, before attending the conference, I hadn't done that. So I wanted to take a more conscious effort to pursue the issues that were important to me.

What do you remember specifically from the first conference?

The workshop that stood out the most was the nonviolent theory and practice. I had always thought of myself as a pretty nonviolent person. But the workshop facilitator went deeper than that, and [helped me to] realize that, in certain situations, it takes a lot of energy and courage to truly live a nonviolent lifestyle. That made me think critically about my own life, and how much respect I have for people who have achieved their goals through nonviolent measures in the past.



Micah listening in a small-group discussion, as a participant in the fall, 2004 conference

What effects did that experience of the conference have in the weeks that followed?

I didn't immediately take any concrete actions directly connected with the conference. I think it started a more general awareness within myself that there were local issues that needed addressing, and broader issues.

I had participated for many years in [a school activity called] Future Problem-Solving – but there was another version of that called Community Problem-Solving. I started to seek out more social justice-related activities and actions in my life than I had before, and I think that was largely attributable to attending the conference.

Do you have any memories of subsequent conferences (9th and 10th grade) prior to joining the planning committee?

Listening to Craig Kielburger, the keynote speaker when I was in 10th grade, is always something I'll associate with the conference. Hearing about his past, and about young people who were told that they wouldn't really have a large impact on the world, who then kind of defied those odds – hearing that as young people not in big positions of power, that we really can have a large impact on the world, and that our actions do matter – [was empowering].

[I also remember how] going to workshops that challenged me to think in new ways. One I remember particularly was of the choices of farmers in a country in Africa. [We explored] the tough life decisions that many people around the world have to make. Getting a taste of what that's like, to make decisions where either outcome is not really desirable – just how hard that would be to sit down to do that – was another eye-opening experience, and started helping me to think as a global citizen. There are a lot of people out there that I'll never meet, but every day of their life is a challenge to get through. [That workshop helped me] to be aware of that, and to start thinking about ways that I could help reduce some of those tough situations for other people.



Micah as a planning committee member at the fall, 2005 conference

Why did you join the conference planning committee?

I was interested in taking a more active role. I had gone to three conferences; it was something I felt was worthwhile. I was interested to see what it would be like to be on the organizational side of it, and what goes into putting that kind of conference together.

I think it was also looking for a community of other students who were interested in doing that, interested in pursuing social justice issues and creating a conference about them. That community aspect is one of the first things that pops into my mind when I think of the planning committees that I participated. Getting to know people from other schools, as well as people from my school that I hadn't known that well before, and just interacting with them in meaningful ways at our committee meetings.

Do you have any specific memories from the conferences were like or that community of people that developed?

So many times, we were discussing various logistics, the set-up of the day, or keynote speakers, and just that back-and-forth of challenging people to think in different ways, and coming out with a better product than just one person could think of by themselves, was really a great experience for me and something I truly enjoyed.

Logistically, it was a lot of work to make everything happen, but there was a sense that we were all working together, and at the end of the day, that we had accomplished something that was worthwhile. Seeing many months' planning process come to fruition in a really positive way was something I remember

What effects did your experiences of participating in the conferences and being involved in the planning committee have going forward?

It challenged me to think of what work is important to do in our lifetimes.

Keeping that in mind, I have gone to the School of the Americas' protests in each of the past two years. In my travels down there, I have had time to reflect; I think the conference really pushed me to think about my role in the world, and what is worth spending my time on.

There are a lot of problems that can be addressed without any fancy technological advancements, that really only require people caring and being compassionate, and something about spending their time and energy on. That's really challenged me about where I want to go career-wise down the road, and find something that I'm both really interested in but also that has a direct, positive impact on people. I think the conference definitely gave me that perspective, and pushed me to take an active role in social justice issues, wherever I am.

In my college town of Grinnell, I've been involved for the past year and a half in the Grinnell community meal and coordinating that, which has been a really great opportunity to meet people from the community, and also realize that homelessness and issues of hunger are not only found in big cities, that they occur in cities of 11,000 as well.

Can you describe the community meal in Grinnell?

The community meal in Grinnell – it's a once-a-week meal. It's free, and open to everyone in the community. Different groups sponsor it from week to week, in terms of preparing the food, cooking the food. Sometimes it's just me; sometimes it's church groups or student groups from the college.

The people that come to the meal is really diverse, from all economic backgrounds, age-wise.

It's a very neutral atmosphere, where people feel comfortable coming just having a meal with people from their community, and having time for conversation, and for some people getting one of the better meals of the week.

It's something that means a lot to see, see in action, and to have a chance to make connections with some of the people in the community I've met, many individuals I can call out by name when they walk in.

We just got a newspaper clip from a school in Morris, MN – someone who went there knew someone from Grinnell, and got an idea about starting a community meal there. Seeing how you don't think your work is having an impact outside of your city or your target area, it can pop up in unexpected ways and spread to other places, was interesting to see.

[For more info about this activity at Grinnell, see:
www.grinnell.edu/offices/studentaffairs/chaplain/socialjusticeactivities]

[Note: During the spring of his senior year in high school, Micah and three other planning committee members traveled with Kevin LaNave to take part in a "Faith-and-Resistance retreat in Washington DC.]



Micah, along with Erin (front), Jason (back), and Kassy (right) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial

Can you describe your experience of the Faith-and-Resistance retreat?

One of the activities I remember was going to Marriott Hotel, where there was an arms bazaar going on. Just to see defense companies coming together to display their latest weaponry to, you know, kill people was something that was sobering. To realize that goes on all the time, and just how that environment or line of work perpetuates violence, and how some of those companies have sold weapons to people on both sides of the same conflict, and seemed to have a lack of morals or of positive influence in the world, [deepened my sense that they] are worth standing up against.

[Seeing others] at that protest calmly standing up for what they believe in was really powerful, and made me think, “Would I go to those same lengths to stand up and speak out about issues that were important, and that people need to hear about?”

That was one of the events that we participated in.

[I also remember] protesting outside of the Pentagon. Just seeing how many people in the US are employed by Department of Defense-related things, coming out of the subway into their place of work, [made me] realize that it’s worth working towards reducing or eliminating that need for countries around the world to have large militaries, especially the US. Seeing how much money and how many employees [are devoted to] militaristic purposes, and how those funds could be better allocated to improve people’s lives, was something I took away from that.

[I also remember] our round-table discussions back at the church, including listening to the wife or fiancé of a soldier from Iraq. It was really powerful just to hear her story of what it was like for her husband coming back home.

One of the things [I remember most] was just seeing the integrity [of the other people on the retreat], living their lives with their words and actions in line together. It’s something you don’t

see very often. It was encouraging to see those very interesting people coming together; and people who were older and more experience with these issues talking about their history and their path and what they've done in their lives was something that I'll definitely remember.

Did you feel out of place because of your age?

I guess at first, I was a little bit apprehensive about not having the experience that other people had at the event. A lot of them were older, and had come from different life experiences than I had had up to that point – but ultimately I did not feel out of place. Everyone was very welcoming, and made an effort to talk to [those of us] who were younger, who had not done some of the things they had done. After a few minutes of being in the room and talking to people, I felt very comfortable; it was not scary at all. It was a very welcoming community for sure.