



Association for Experiential Education  
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**2007 Kurt Hahn Address by Dr. Nina S. Roberts  
Little Rock, Arkansas**

**“How multiculturalism in a changing society  
can influence experiential education”**

*“One cannot truly appreciate and understand the roots of experiential education, without studying the life and writings of Kurt Hahn (1886-1974). Hahn's personal experiences led him to make helping young people develop into healthy, happy, ethical and compassionate adults his life's calling. To that end, Hahn founded numerous colleges and programs dedicated to educating the whole person.”*

*The Kurt Hahn Address was established to honor the exceptional people who make a substantial contribution to experiential education for a significant length of time; every year the AEE Board of Directors invites a leader in the field to present the Kurt Hahn Address. The Kurt Hahn award is the highest honor of AEE and is presented annually by a person who has contributed to the development and advancement of experiential education with the tenacity and conviction that was exemplified by Kurt Hahn.*

*This year's presenter is Nina S. Roberts, Ph.D. ~ (Note: A series of props were used, a brief experiential activity occurred, and closing slide show to a song called “change is coming” pulled it all together).*

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## INTRODUCTION

Good Morning and welcome, everyone! Thank you all so much for coming. My gratitude goes out, especially, to my parents, Jim and Colette, for being here and for raising me to care. Thanks to the AEE staff, the Board of Directors, the Host Committee, and also to Steve Pace for his work as President of the Association and for being an amazing ally. Sky Gray, a special thanks to you for that wonderful introduction; and for your steady support and friendship. And to my partner Michele, having you here is very important to me. Thank you for being my spirit sister.

I am honored and thrilled to be delivering the 2007 Kurt Hahn Address. At the same time, I'm feeling very humble about being recognized for the work that I do. I do it because I love it! Experiential learning nourishes my soul and I'm educated by my work every day.

I'd like to talk about multiculturalism by looking at this through the lens of people of color, women and youth as these are three primary ingredients that make up a big part of both my life and scholarship. I've asked myself, throughout my career, what is the real meaning and potential of experiential education in a multicultural and changing world? If multiculturalism is an inclusive process where no one is left out, why do so many people get left out? To begin, we might answer these questions with a question as simple as *what have we learned?* When we go to school to get an education, we can learn a lot in terms of history and theory, for example. However, the most valuable source of education is our exposure to the diverse beliefs and cultures of women (and men) from around the world and be open to the mindset of today's youth. To me, the real gift of experiential education would be to embrace and further social justice.

This year consists of several landmark anniversaries: It's the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Little Rock 9", and also the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Loving Case regarding the legalization of inter-racial marriages. My parents were married in 1959 when interracial marriage was illegal in many states. It's the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on the Pentagon against the Vietnam War. It's also Betty van der Smissen's 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday – Happy Birthday Betty! And, this year marks the 10-year anniversary of the Take Back the Trails initiative sponsored by the AEE Women's Professional Group (as many of you know this was organized in the name of safety for women outdoors and I'll come back to that later).

I hope you were lucky enough to see Minnijean Brown Tricky speak yesterday. I was exploring her background online a while back and found a couple of video clips concerning the fight for integration in Arkansas in the 1950s—one quote that I want to share is this: "There was no way that anybody could have predicted that nine black teenagers were going to shift the world... There was no possible thought that this was going to happen... the real changes in the world have come about by ordinary people."<sup>1</sup> For Minnijean, these statements were affirmations. If only all of us would ask ourselves, "Am I doing whatever I can to make a positive difference in helping to create change? Do I embrace diversity and make time to work with people from a variety of different cultures and viewpoints? Do I as an experiential educator see the value and connection of the work we do and the relationship to social justice?"

The first words in another documentary I watched began with this one line: "Minnijean Brown Tricky is an ordinary woman on an extraordinary mission."<sup>2</sup> At the age of 22, Minnijean was active in the non-violence movement for civil rights and for peace. Then I thought about my life at that age. When I was 22, I was in the process of recovering from a tragic car accident that nearly took my life. Aside from that, during my early 20s, I was learning how to survive in the wake of segregation and busing in the Boston area. I was still uncertain of how segregation had truly impacted the local communities, much less what my place was in my chosen career. All I knew was that I wanted to make a difference. Learning about injustice in New England, where I spent part of my upbringing, actually gave me hope that change was, in fact, possible.

I thought a lot about my near fatal auto accident while reading Kurt Hahn's work because I had actually lived his truth about overcoming adversity in my own way. Such a dreadful episode had actually turned me into a mightier, more motivated and dedicated woman. That catastrophe had actually caused me to live my life with more determination, and even greater stamina to turn ideas into action. Embracing opportunities is part of who I am, because I've learned that I may never be given another chance.

Over the years, I have taken Hahn's tenacity of spirit and applied it to my own work. Like Hahn, I have a living, breathing passion for learning and for turning adversity into strength. Amazing and brave leaders have set me on my path and I've definitely been inspired by the genius of Kurt Hahn, among other leaders of course, many of whom are in this room today. Together we learn that change isn't possible without action. Last year, in 2006 for example, I enjoyed one of the highlights of my life as a Fulbright Scholar conducting research in India. Opportunities abound if you're willing to explore the possibilities and act by first enabling change in your own life.

Some of what I do is on a voluntary basis because I firmly believe we can accomplish everything we put our minds to without sacrificing anything. Volunteering and service learning totally makes me happy because the folks you're engaged with know for sure, in different ways, that you really do care. Volunteering is a gift relationship that revolves around reciprocity and not just a unilateral transaction. Don't get me wrong, money is a blessing, and yes I do some consulting to stay afloat. After all, money is hard to come by! And sometimes we just throw it away any how, right?! Volunteering focuses on a level of energy that is potentially more valuable than cash. The

way I see it, much of what I am today I owe to someone else, it's only fair that I give something back to the different communities I am part of.

AEE means the world to me, as does the opportunity to give this year's Kurt Hahn Address. Kurt Hahn wrote at length about human nature and its effect on our actions, both as children and adults. From my time spent with AEE, over the years I have been particularly inspired to focus my action on multiculturalism and diversity, to explore experiences of women outdoors, and in the last couple of years I'm revitalizing my involvement in the world of youth.

### **EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY - "POKER FACE"**

Now I want to do a little something experiential with you all this morning. Everyone who entered the room should have a jumbo size playing card. I'm going to ask you to stand up in a moment, but I want to first explain what I'd like you do. When you stand up, you will trade your Card with 1 or 2 other people somewhere nearby you who have not seen the value of your card. Your task is to find another person and hand it to them face down so they do not see the value. When you receive a card from someone else, do not look at the card, rather, hold your Card on your forehead like this [*demo*]. This activity will involve you mingling around in your little area all while holding your Card on your forehead. To play the game, once you stand and exchange cards, holding yours on your forehead, you will begin to treat each other based on the face value of the Cards you see on other people's foreheads. Kings have the most value in this game and the Ace has the least.

The trick here is not to tell anyone what the actual face value of their Card, in fact, your communication is silent – You do not have the resource or luxury of your voice! Use only your body language and hand gestures to treat that person based on how much their card is worth. Now please stand up and trade your card with 1 or 2 other people who have not yet seen your card and begin the game. [*The audience was shortly asked to be seated*].

The value of this game is based on how you were treated during the non-verbal communication. What behaviors did you notice going on around you? It's fascinating to watch how the royalty cards are bowed to and the 2 cards get pushed away and treated poorly. This type of game is great for discussion around who places value on you, how and even why. Think about this: If we're treated poorly, sometimes we don't want to play anymore. Sometimes, we just get tired of trying to be like a 9 or a 10, or frustration sets in when we try to connect but end up feeling left out. How and why do we treat people of lower status poorly versus people who are privileged and have power? If you were a Royalty card, how did it feel? If you knew you were a lower number like a 2 or even a 3 or 4, by how you were treated, did you want to go and beat down all the Kings?! What do you suppose really happens when people feel left out? In other games, isn't the 2 card sometimes the most valuable card such as when playing blackjack and you have 19? At what point do we learn to appreciate others at face value for what they contribute to the entire deck?

Think about how this activity is like everyday society? ... Try this game sometime with groups you might work with; you can play this game silently or you can allow verbal mingling, both ways can be powerful. (*Special thanks extended to Michelle Cummings and her company, "Training Wheels" for both the idea for the activity and for donating the Jumbo Cards*<sup>3</sup>).

### **MULTICULTURALISM/SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Why do you suppose we are hearing about all the "changing demographics" in the U.S.? It's important that we keep reality in perspective. The Census Bureau's predictions of changing demographics are coming true and are actually exceeding original expectations. Instead of rattling off a variety of statistics, here's one important fact from a 2006 Census report I reviewed. When you break it down, it looks like this: "One in three people in this country is a person of color."<sup>4</sup> In general, demographic statistics can be both exciting and overwhelming. Why is this so critical to our

work in experiential education? For one, organizations and agencies are competing for good talent, and increasingly, that talent is being found in people of color.

Put simply, diversity leads to better decisions. You cannot achieve diversity of thought, of critical thinking, without a diverse group of people. It's NOT about making sure that our agencies simply "look like" our clients or participants, it's about a **commitment** to mix things up...to diversify our staff because different perspectives – based on different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures – are needed to address unique challenges and to capture the BEST, of those best ideas. Only then can you truly engage in what we like to call "best practices", keeping in mind that *A Collaboration of Best Practices* is the theme of this conference. And, if you think about it, this conference is also a tribute to NAALA in so many ways so (for people who are unfamiliar, that's the Natives, Africans, Asians, Latinos and Allies affiliation group) – so a huge thanks and shout out needs to go out to Sanford and Binky Tollette and other NAALA leaders. I understand there are 14 countries represented at AEE this year! Thank you for helping make the world a better place.

When it comes to multiculturalism in a changing world, and we want to break barriers to achieve our dreams, how can we engage one another in community? How can we share and talk and debate through educating one another and argue in circles in this crazy world without going insane or killing each other? This is more than a notion-- and to do IT, whatever IT is -- you may have to break some rules! I'm not talking about breaking rules that will put you in jail; I'm talking about the old rules and ways of thinking about who can lead, what they should look like, who their family is, and what neighborhoods they're from. I'm also talking about the seemingly unbreakable barriers that suggest things **cannot** be changed, and that problems cannot be solved without decision-makers who have no time, no experience or lack the willingness to search out new techniques, to research the best practices, and to try, at least, what's best for the generations to come.

When we break down barriers, we open up new possibilities and find different answers to our challenges. We may even learn new leadership skills, engage people with unique perspectives, rise to a new level of empathy, and create solutions that nobody else ever thought was possible.

Personally, I learned how to break the rules and barriers of traditional thinking when it came to fighting for women's rights growing up in a feminist household. When I was a child, in the 1970's in New England, my mother was deeply involved in the Women's Movement. I grew up surrounded by people who were constantly shouting at the top of their lungs for equality and justice! I was just a kid growing into my teenage years and while I didn't always understand what the marches were all about, I knew this thing called "justice" needed to exist, even if it had to be demanded. Today, as a woman of mixed race heritage, I continue to run with my enthusiasm for both women's rights and for rights of people of color. Making the connection to experiential education began, for me, at a very early age and has been one of the greatest rewards not just of my career, but my entire life.

Along these lines, the word "Kuleana" is Hawaiian for 'Responsibility' or the literal translation: "That which you are born to do." I participated in this Bay Area Environmental Summit last spring. The facilitator, a native Hawaiian, taught us that beautiful word. I thought about it throughout that entire day, and quite honestly, I'm still thinking about it!

As a teenager, my Kuleana was that I wanted to work with people in some capacity, especially kids. And, for me, that meant following my heart to pursue a career in parks and recreation. As a field of study, it has historically been misunderstood and still today is occasionally criticized for not being a "real job". Not only that, especially on the parks management side, there were few women in professional positions, and even fewer people of color, and I wanted to participate in that change. Now, there are many more women working in the field, but I still want to know, where are all the brown people?! What about people of Asian descent? How come they're not managers or directors of our programs either? Conforming was never something I was very good at! As I became more involved in outdoor recreation, parks management, and of course

experiential education, I continued to hear the same old thing: “You do what for a living!?” Fortunately, because of my background, I knew well enough never to simply accept the comments that “you won’t get very far” or “you’ll hit the glass ceiling along the way”.

I have a feeling that everyone here has had at least one private thought regarding a belief that you can do something great, and you want to know, “how can I create change in the world without being criticized or looked at sideways for my efforts?” The answer is to **nurture** and **cherish** that belief. **Own** that vision, no matter what anyone says. Make it your own “Kuleana.”

The deeper I got into the arena of multiculturalism and gender issues I made a point of surrounding myself with both like-minded people and people who may not agree with my vantage point or ideas for action at all! It’s essential for me to hear ALL points of view because challenge only serves to broaden my way of thinking. I appreciate that and, like Kurt Hahn, I value people with dissenting views. Over time, I have developed the creativity and independence to say “yes” where others had told me “no.” And, it’s an extraordinary time in our society to be speaking with you about change, fear in some ways, as well as courage, and their juxtaposition with multiculturalism. Consider all the ways we can break barriers and create new possibilities.

In order to do this, we must heed the enormous social, political, and economic challenges we are currently facing. For example, as Kamala Harris, District Attorney for the City of San Francisco said recently, “Our civil liberties are under fire, and our federal government is not just failing to enforce them, but is frankly contributing to their deterioration.”<sup>5</sup> Even in our own little world of experiential education, we can all stand against those nay-sayers regarding issues that are important to us and we must do it with conviction if we’re going to rise to the challenge.

We’re facing both exciting times and troubled times and during times like these it’s downright dangerous to remain quiet and stay on the sidelines! People like you and me need to stand up, to be inspired, to change our attitudes and behaviors to inspire others. To break barriers and drive change, we have an obligation to roll up our sleeves instead of throwing up our hands in frustration! That’s just my opinion. Why do so many people throw in the towel and give up?!

In terms of ethnic diversity in any realm of our lives, consider whose voices are missing or not being heard? Indifference to cultural inclusion in experiential education is not an option! In some of our work with experiential learning, we find there is a need for greater education, awareness, and first-hand experience in regards to the benefits and values of the outdoors -- the wild places, for example-- to a growing segment of our population. People of different cultures worldwide have been playing, working, and traveling in the outdoors and wilderness areas, in some capacity, throughout history. But the effects of this history, societal trends, and politics have created changing patterns and preferences regarding use of our public lands. I observe a lack of people of color in every wilderness area I’ve traveled through in the last 20 years. It’s no secret that fewer people of color actually venture out to the backcountry and this is for an assortment of reasons - a lot of research (including my own) substantiates these explanations. A Park Service colleague shared this one-liner with me once. Although not empirical, he simply stated: “There’s a lot of trees out there and rope is cheap!”

We can do better. But what does “better” mean? Shirley Malcolm, a prestigious African American scholar, has been involved with the American Association for the Advancement of Science and is a former member of the Nat’l Park Service Advisory Board. She says, “Better is more focused, more coherent and cohesive, and more connected. Better is creating bridges with the systems around us in both formal and informal education.” Dr. Malcolm speaks about “wild” places as being “inspirational,” yet she asks the question: “What next?” She goes on to say, “inspiration is an aspect of motivation but it is not education. Provocation is an aspect of motivation – but it is not education. Education is the ‘what next?’”<sup>6</sup> she offers wisely.

The work of Shirley Malcolm has taught me that to educate certain ethnic minority communities is to connect their ‘sense of place’ and the idea of ‘parks and outdoor places’ with their

true values of inspiration, learning, enjoyment and relevancy to their own life. And, all that needs to be connected to actions and outcomes that are accepted by any given individual or community regardless of their background. During a focus group interview I did for a study in Colorado a few years ago, this African American guy says “Just because I love going to go hiking in national parks or other wild places, does that make me less Black!?” This relates to seeking a sense of acceptance or social permission from one’s community.

I believe that our real challenge is not to try and bring people of color into the woods to teach them, but more importantly, to create opportunities for them to learn on their own, and to find joy in the process. One way is through education, as this will provide the open door that is all too often closed. Doing “better” requires land management agencies to go beyond where they are now, from an institutional viewpoint. Wilderness, for example, may or may not inspire people for very different reasons. Doing ‘better’ requires us to go further than simply having a sense of appreciation alone. It takes action and community engagement with intention.

## WOMEN/GENDER

Understanding the relationship between women, the great outdoors, and experiential education is the second of my three main focal points. The fact is women are working with great dedication in the outdoors and backcountry every day as forest technicians, park rangers and superintendents, wildlife biologists, outdoor education leaders and guides, adventure-enthusiasts, and just plain wild women having a helluva good time!

I could tell you about the history of women outdoors, but most people already know, for example, that women have been traveling across wildlands and climbing mountains for centuries. Over the years, the backcountry has taken on a different dimension, a fresh and exciting horizon, an opportunity for freedom, something sublime and breathtaking, and for certain as an opportunity to grow stronger and braver. Over the years, women have learned to harness their own power and come together as creative, mighty, caring and curious sisters working and experiencing the wonders of nature together. Over the years, even girls have become less afraid, and rather more curious, as their dreams are being filled with adventure.

Today, experiential education thrives in women-only outdoor programs that have been around in a more organized form than their predecessors for 30 years or so. While a surge of opportunities occurred in the 1980’s and 90’s, today there are more outdoor and adventure programs for both women and girls than ever before. The number and quality of programs—and publications—continues to expand.

Unfortunately, there still remains an element of fear associated with the backcountry for many women. In 1996, two women were brutally killed while hiking through Shenandoah National Park. Infuriated and moved by a desire for change, the Women’s Professional Group of AEE organized a national grass-roots initiative called “Take Back the Trails” (TBTT) that occurred one year later to get women back on the trails, into the woods, and feeling safe and powerful.<sup>7</sup> I say “back” on the trails because I personally talked with many women throughout the course of that year who told me they stopped venturing into the wilderness after those murders and this initiative re-energized them. As I mentioned earlier, this year 2007 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary when thousands of women (and male allies) in 33 states across the U.S. took part in that initiative as well as reported participation from Australia and New Zealand.<sup>8</sup> A few of you were in the session I did yesterday with Deb Bialeschki; thanks for being there.

Again, change is not possible without action. As National Coordinator of that effort, I am constantly reminded about the lasting impact of this initiative on the lives of women and girls across the country. What we’ve found is that while fear has been reduced, in many ways, it still remains in others because the harsh reality is that women and girls are still violated, harassed and even killed in our nation’s parks and public spaces despite attempts at increasing education and awareness. The

seriousness of our mission, along with other major attempts to improve women's lives, will persist; and that is to ensure that the outdoors remains a safe place for all. This is a reflection of the critical changes that have occurred and will **continue** to occur as we think (and act on those thoughts) about how to make sure that women and girls will always have a voice in our programs and in their own communities. The TBTT initiative was an act of courage, and when we engage in an act of courage, we create space for someone else to be courageous too. That is when real and everlasting change truly occurs. Thanks to the WPG for organizing and supporting the Women Outdoors Memorial Gatherings that continues to occur during Memorial Weekend each year.

I'm on the advisory council for GirlVentures in San Francisco and attended their Empower Girls Fundraising Breakfast this fall. It really was an amazing event all around yet the best part was listening to the stories told by a few of the girls as well as testimonials by leaders. Afterward, I wanted to say hello and introduce myself to the keynote speaker, Sandra Hernandez, who is the Executive Director at the San Francisco Foundation. She is absolutely brilliant! She was talking to a woman in her 60s who was strikingly tall. I was thrilled to learn that woman was Arlene Blum and there was no way I was going to leave without meeting her! For those of you who know her, you can imagine how I felt standing there. For those of you who don't, Arlene Blum is one of the finest female mountaineers in America, best known for her role as the expeditionary leader of the first all-women ascent of Annapurna I in 1978, a climb that also made history because they were the first Americans to accomplish that feat. She also took part in the first all-women ascent of Mount McKinley, among others. I was beside myself with glory! I gave her a big hug and thanked her for helping pave the way (along with other pioneers) for the women and girls today who attempt to do what others (on occasion) still try to tell them is impossible.

In the last decade, and particularly since TBTT, I have been lucky enough to be surrounded by expanding voices. Perhaps luck has nothing to do with it. Maybe it's that I've allowed those voices to penetrate my heart and mind. My personal experience with women and girls outdoors has taught me so much. In many ways, I've learned about my own innate power by being exposed to a variety of viewpoints and experiences of other women, including many who are at this conference. I think you'll agree that while traditions are important, there are hundreds of thousands of women worldwide, who want to live their lives their own way, not necessarily determined by tradition. It's the trailblazer who does what she wants, knocks down barriers as soon as they pop up, sees challenges as opportunities, and prefers to explore for herself, regardless of venue or subject.

As far as young girls of today are concerned, they are dealing with enormous pressures. Based on studies completed by the National Council on Research for Women<sup>9</sup>, for instance, we know girls are twice as likely as boys to experience depression and, 1 in 4 girls is sexually abused before the age of 18. And we wonder why there's an increase in number of girls being arrested for violent crimes! Yet on the other hand, the teen birthrate has declined steadily since 1992 and girls' achievement in math in our schools now **almost** matches that of boys (now let's keep working on that science and technology!)

So girls, especially, benefit when they are encouraged to tap into their inner strength—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Suddenly, the world becomes a luminous expanse of possibilities rather than a dark and frightening unknown. That's why I've loved my work over the years as a leader and mentor in experiential education for girls, especially racial and ethnic minorities. To see a shy and powerless adolescent from the inner-city, lacking confidence and strength, turn into a roaring tigress living life on her own terms is miraculous. In general, we need more girls working together, uniting with elders, and being engaged with intention in their own communities to innovate and improve this unstable world in which we all need to co-exist. As stated by Gloria Steinem written in the foreword of a book called *Girls Speak Out*: “We have to be truthful about how hard life is sometimes. But we also need to know there is a special place inside of us where no one else can go. That is where our unique voice comes from.”<sup>10</sup>

## YOUTH

That being said, I want to talk more about our youth, in general, as my 3<sup>rd</sup> and final theme. I want to talk about **why** we need to teach them about the value of experiential education and train them to be effective leaders. Teens are growing up in a turbulent world right now, so the notion of leadership may feel foreign to many of the young people we serve. When it comes to enriching the lives of youth through provision of leadership opportunities, I agree with Kurt Hahn, who theorized the following: “There are three ways of trying to win the young: There is persuasion, there is compulsion, and there is attraction. You can preach at them, that is a hook without a worm; you can say, ‘You must volunteer,’ that is of the devil; and you can tell them, ‘You are needed.’ That appeal hardly ever fails.”<sup>11</sup> This Hahn quote, in its brilliance, settled firmly in my own heart, mind and soul—hence the focus of my work with young people today.

I spend a lot of time connecting urban youth with the outdoors in many ways; one is through my work with the Pacific Leadership Institute at San Francisco State University where I now teach. Thanks to Don Taylor, Dean of the College of Health and Human Service at SFSU for his continued support. Many of these kids have never visited a national park, paddled a canoe across a lake, or explored the trails surrounded by majestic Redwoods and wildlife that many of us take for granted. I am also involved with the Crissy Field Center which is a dynamic partnership between the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. I’ve been engaged in conducting youth evaluation and work closely with them to enhance their ability to have the greatest impact on their kids as possible.

As a result, I also enjoy keeping up with the trends among our youth. This Generation X crowd (or is it Generation Y?) continues to be glued to Game Boys, Nintendo, and X-Box, and so many other technological toys and gadgets that I can’t keep up with, in what appears to many of us as some kind of brainwashing fanaticism! Research shows participation in physical activity for children and teens ages 6-18 continues to decline at alarming rates while the number of overweight children in this age range keeps increasing. Studies also show that kids spend an average of 6 ½ hours each day with some form of media – mostly T.V.<sup>12</sup>

By now most of you have heard about, or even read the book written by Richard Louv called, “Last Child in the Woods.”<sup>13</sup> This 2006 publication has recently become a common topic of many conference events across disciplines, not just in **our** various fields of study. Last spring, that book made it to the NY Times Top 25 Best Seller List. Louv, like many of us, investigates the divide between children and the outdoors. He links the lack of interest in nature in the lives of today’s Xbox generation to some of the most alarming trends we’re facing today, namely childhood obesity, growing attention disorders, and severe depression, among others.

While I respect much of the content of this book, I kept finding myself asking, “Where is the cultural connection?” In general, he writes about constraints, fears and social issues of youth and families today regarding why *learning by doing* in the outdoors seems to have faded amongst our kids. Obviously, nature is everywhere if you look for it. And, it’s essential to realize that everyone has some sort connection to nature. The problem is that we don’t always understand what the meaning of nature is to people from different cultural backgrounds – yet there’s a control factor by public land agencies placing constraints on certain types of use often without consideration for cultural traditions, or even access, in the name of “protection”. I’ve been a park manager, too, so I fully comprehend the natural resource issues; point is, some barriers exist because of internal leadership issues and level of dominance maintained within segments of our land management agencies. Their increasing efforts to change the way they do business and increase in outreach, however, is also commendable.

In other words, one part of Louv’s book that’s missing for me is that there is a clear imbalance of the types of kids who have opportunities and easy access to parks and open-spaces or

even neighborhood parks that are safe enough to play in. Trends? Here's a few more: Arrests for robbery, assault, drugs and arson are higher among juveniles than adults; 72% of young people living in urban American report knowing someone personally who has been shot; homicide is now the leading cause of death among inner-city youth; and more than ½ of all city kids do not graduate from high school.<sup>14</sup> We wonder why a frightening number of inner-city youth are overwhelmed by feelings of futility, desperation and even anger. They live life with a hopeless view of their future.

"Urban Sanctuaries" is a book I use in one of my classes consisting of a series of case studies looking at successful neighborhood organizations that work with teens. Here's a statement made by one of the Black teenagers interviewed by the authors, and I quote by sliding into the dialect to accentuate how this was written:

*"You don't plan your future, you just take it as it comes. Life's a constant struggle 'cuz you can't count on anything. You don't know for sure what's even gonna happen the next day. You could get shot walkin' down the street. You get more respect for carryin' a Uzi than for goin' to school. Ain't nobody gonna cheer you on with "I hope you do well, go onto college now ya hear." Lyin' by getting' high, drinkin' beer, smokin' weed, lyin'! Yeah, boy, that's our future. The future be dead."<sup>15</sup>*

Statements like that break my heart yet I also know that neighborhood centers are a safe haven for these kids. Many professionals and scholars today are concerned about measuring program outcomes and finding the evidence to prove what we do works. Well, the most important outcome for many inner-city kids is "ducking the bullet." For many city kids, a primary measure of success is making it through adolescence without joining a gang or committing a crime, without having a baby, and without witnessing a crushing burden of failure in family life.

In a world where city kids struggle to grow up, to merely survive, exceeds the imagination of mainstream America, even those considered experts in issues of youth programming, policy or urban environments. Even when the facts of urban life are intellectually understood, it is impossible for an outsider to know what it really feels like when some kid's brother or sister is murdered, when abuse occurs daily, when crime and violence are the norm, and messages of rejection surround them constantly.

In his book, Richard Louv asks: "Why is there a decline in kids going out to enjoy the natural world and explore the rivers... we used to build tree houses, why don't kids do that any more? ... there are fewer children learning about snakes and frogs out there...there's no sense of wonder and joy about nature any more...what will it take for kids to simply hit the trails and play in the woods for hours on end?"<sup>16</sup> Sure, I did all that when I was growing up, but it sounds like utopia now. Given what I was just saying, my initial reaction is "what kids are you talking about?!" I think we all know. Most times, it comes down to sheer privilege.

With this federal "No Child Left Behind" Act in place, there's now new legislation being reviewed at the state level called the "No Child Left Inside" Act, which hopefully will be taken more seriously. Keep in mind, though, any legislation without funding is completely meaningless. But there IS hope! The incredible efforts and work of many of you here today, must continue to strengthen what we already know to be true: Experiential education changes lives and in some cases saves lives! If you work with youth, they must be at the center; they must be the ones to tell you what they like about your organization or programs. They must be the ones who drive the ultimate success of their lives. We are merely the facilitators of their experience. Our leadership and mentoring is essential for any kids we work with (not just city-kids) to open their minds to new possibilities and new opportunities since they often don't have the tools or the resources to do what they'd really like to do. At last November's AEE conference in 2006 in Minnesota, the keynote speaker, Dr. Verna Price, asked us to keep in mind, "it's not about your organization, it's about you

– what you can bring to their lives. It’s not whether the kids you work with care at all...it’s also about why.”<sup>17</sup> I invite you to remember that.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the highly emotional “Jena 6” case in Louisiana.<sup>18</sup> The initial incident occurred during the start of a new school year in 2006 when a group of Black students from Jena High School asked the principal whether they could sit under this tree traditionally “reserved” (so-to-speak) for white students (it became known as the “White tree”). “Sit wherever you want,” the principal replied, so they took this as permission. The next day, the kids arrived at school to find three nooses hanging from the tree. The Black kids were justifiably furious, yet were told “It’s only a prank.” I’d go so far as to call it a death threat, myself. As Beverly Daniel Tatum, President of Spelman College and renowned author wrote in a Washington Post essay:

*The black residents of Jena saw the nooses as a vivid, threatening reminder of the thousands of African Americans who were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968—an unmistakable message to “stay in their place.”*<sup>19</sup>

A week later the black students protested under the tree and there were even sporadic outbreaks of violence between blacks and whites around the town. Over the next several months at school, many horrible verbal exchanges occurred and eventually a malicious fight erupted. A White teen was beaten unconscious, treated and released 3 hours later and attended a school function that night. In the end, six Black teens were initially charged with attempted murder (a sneaker was allowed to be used by the prosecutors as the ‘dangerous weapon’). The White teens, on the other hand, who originally hung the nooses were suspended from school for two days yet never prosecuted in any way.

In light of the court’s initial charges, just this past September, more than 30,000 protesters filled the streets of small town Jena in support of the six Black teens with many people wearing T-shirts saying “Enough is Enough.” Black students arriving by the bus loads from around the country said they hadn’t come to Jena because they wanted to, they’d come because they HAD to.

From a positive youth development standpoint, what was so compelling here was how other teenagers, by themselves, had mobilized from all around the country. They gathered in the name of race, civil rights, and justice. The initial act of hate—the hanging of the nooses—has now taken on a much greater scope than the discipline problems of a small town. Think about the after-effects. I’m not sure if you’re aware, since the Jena 6 court cases, there had been a flurry of hanging nooses around the country (including on the office door of a Black race-relations professor at Columbia University). Some say this is a dire warning and grim sign of a new racist hate upsurge in America. What do you think?

While there are, and should be, multiple perspectives in everything we do and discuss, this situation is a great example of peer response of injustice by Black youth, in particular. We are beginning to see similar reactions by Latino youth in light of a new concentration on immigration. During the early part of 2007, Latino kids in Los Angeles, as well as classmates of other races, left school and took to the streets in protest. Think about what this means. The teenage response across all races, really, was so very inspiring. You can see the social change, it’s there, it’s inevitable, but these kids are not in charge – yet! Teens of today are not yet making decisions in the courts, in our schools, or in the health care system, but we’re seeing powerful leadership in these young people and some day they will be in charge. What will that look like for you and for me?

## CONCLUSION

*(Note: A slide show to a song titled “change is coming” concluded the talk and these final words were spoken to the conference delegates following the slides)*

I hope you found some meaning and inspiration in those images and that song. They say I'm an educator, so I have some homework for you! It doesn't matter what you do for a living, how much money you make, who you love, or what you value. Your homework is to spread your devotion, to spread your love to help lift the hearts, minds and souls of others around you, to spread your commitment to experiential education, and to find ways to create change within your various organizations. Your homework is to encourage people around you, who might be struggling to hold on, to seek positive change!

Again, Beverly Daniels Tatum in response to the "Jena 6": *In the end, the tree -- the source of shade and the symbol of separation -- was cut down. Now there is no refuge for anyone.*<sup>20</sup>

Powerful, indeed. We must work hard to create equity everywhere. To me one of the key ingredients is courage, another is perseverance! Ask yourselves: "Am I doing whatever I can to make a positive difference in helping to create change? Do I embrace diversity and make time to work with people from a variety of different cultures and viewpoints? Do I as an experiential educator see the value and connection of the work we do and the relationship to social justice?"

Thanks for taking the responsibility to make a difference - Do you know what your "Kuleana" is? Thank you all so very much! Dhanyavad!

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Minnijean Brown Trickey. "Journey to Little Rock" - Video clip. <http://www.journeytolittlerock.com>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cummings, M. (2007). *Playing with a full deck*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2006). American Fact Finder - American Community Survey (ACS). <http://factfinder.census.gov/>

<sup>5</sup> Harris, K. (2007). Commencement keynote address. San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>6</sup> National Park Service (2001). Rethinking the National Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, National Park System Advisory Board Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service

<sup>7</sup> Take Back the Trails. 1997 National initiative sponsored by the Women's Professional Group of the AEE: [http://www.aee.org/skin1/pages/US/wpg/gather\\_main.htm](http://www.aee.org/skin1/pages/US/wpg/gather_main.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> National Council for Research on Women: <http://www.ncrw.org/about/about.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, A. (2005). Foreword by Gloria Steinem. *Girls Speak Out*, p. xxiv.

<sup>11</sup> Kurt Hahn Quotes. Retrieved from the World Wide Web, <http://www.wilderdom.com/Hahn.htm>

<sup>12</sup> "Unplug and take your kids on outdoor adventures for physical, mental health: <http://www.idahostatesman.com/zimo/story/101711.html>

<sup>13</sup> Louv, R. (2005). Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin.

<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin, M.W., Irby, M.A., & Langman, J. (1994). "Urban sanctuaries: Neighborhood organizations in the lives and futures of inner-city youth." San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Louv, R. (see 13 above)

<sup>17</sup> Price, Verna (2006). Conference Keynote Speech, the Association for Experiential Education, St. Paul, MN, November 2-5, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> "Jena 6" Case – For more information: <http://www.diversity.inc.com>

<sup>19</sup> Daniels-Tatum, B. (2007, September 23). "It's the same old story in Jena today." Washington Post.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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If any part of this speech is used, in any capacity, the following reference should be included:

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### Speaker Bio

Nina S. Roberts, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at San Francisco State University. Her areas of emphasis include outdoor recreation, parks, urban programming, leadership, and youth development. She also is currently serving as the Project Director of the Pacific Leadership Institute, which connects urban youth with the outdoors. Nina formerly served as an Education and Outreach Specialist with the Natural Resource Program Center for the National Park Service. Prior to that, she was a Research Associate and Assistant Director of National Urban and Diversity Programs for the Student Conservation Association.

Nina has an impressive volunteer record that also has served the field of experiential education well. An active AEE member, Nina has served in a variety of AEE leadership positions for more than 17 years. She currently serves on the advisory board of GirlVentures in San Francisco and is a social scientist engaged in both community outreach and youth evaluation in the Bay Area. In 1997, Nina was the National Coordinator, and worked with a team of women to lead the well-known "Take Back the Trails" initiative. This grass-roots effort was in response to the tragic deaths of two young outdoorswomen in Shenandoah National Park.

A 2006 Fulbright Scholar, she conducted research in India as part of the Indo-American Environmental Leadership Program. Her work has been published in numerous scholarly journals as well as books and magazines. She has presented at conferences nationally, as well as in Southeast Asia.

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