

Listening for a Change

By Jo Imlay and Jerry Howard

DENHAM, SPRINGS LOUISIANA - white supremacist David Duke's parish. Late spring, 1992. A cross was burned on the nearby Louisiana State University campus the night of the Rodney King verdict, just weeks before. Racial tensions are rising faster than the humidity. People are worried about riots; rumors fly that the Klan is moving after dark.

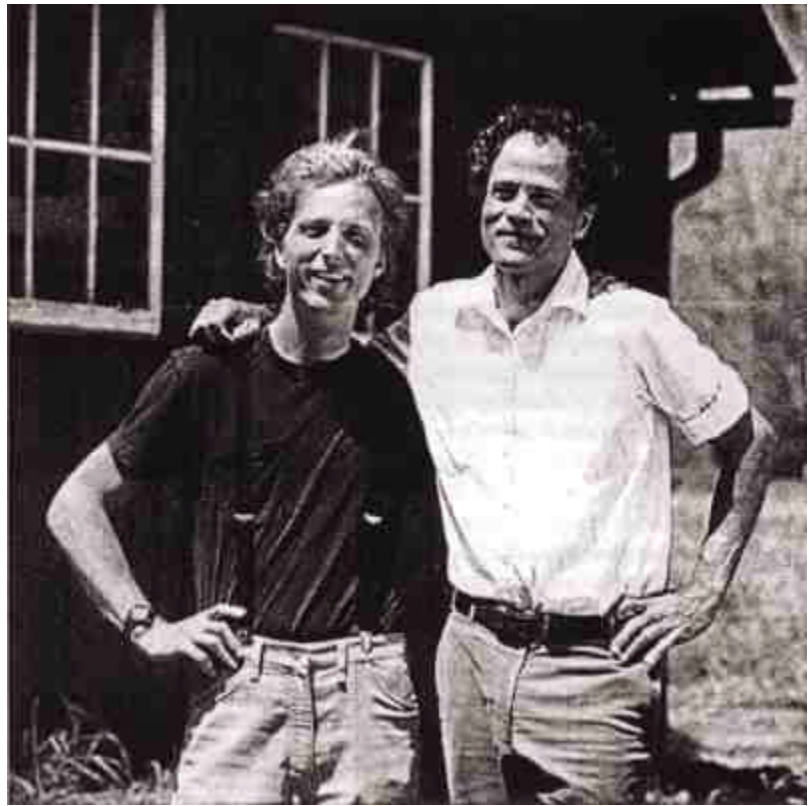
In this white, working-class neighborhood that went heavily for Duke in the recent state election, it's mid-afternoon. Clipboards in hand, Herb Walters and his partner rap on the screen door of a small house. They are one of thirteen pairs of activists working in this neighborhood with an organization called Rural Southern Voice for Peace, which has been invited here by a local peace group to conduct an innovative social action program called the Listening Project. Their mission is to change negative racial attitudes in this neighborhood. They do it by going door to door.

A bare-chested young man responds to the knock. Asked if he'll answer some questions about racial issues, he shrugs, says he's tired from a party the night before. His name's Jeff. He invites the two in, leans back in his chair, and lights a cigarette, viewing his drop-in guests with wary interest.

Walters, a southerner himself, puts the man at ease with some casual questions, then poses an open-ended query: "What are your hopes and fears about race relations today?"

Jeff's answer: "I think it's hopeless. I'm not a racist or anything, but Abe Lincoln should have sent them back to Africa," states he, pointing towards a nearby black neighborhood.

Walters lets this statement sink in without judgement, then encourages Jeff to explain why he feels this way. "There's such a gap between us



Building durable community bridges to reconciliation and peace: The Listening Project's Herb Walters (left) and David Grant.

blacks and whites. We don't understand each other. They're not developed like we are," he says. "When you drive through there, it's like going back to Africa."

"What has helped create such bad conditions in the black community?" Walters probes. "Is it just because they're black, or are there other reasons?"

"Their environment affects them a lot," Jeff replies. "They don't want to work. They need to try to get off welfare. I worked for what I have, and they could work hard and make it, too."

Walters steers the conversation towards specifics: "Do you know any blacks trying to get off welfare?" Jeff says he knows a black woman living nearby who is struggling to find work. He's let her use his phone to set up job interviews. Talking about the woman's situation - no phone, no car, kids who need care - he realizes that his own experience with this is at odds with his beliefs. Without prompting, he begins to question his own stereotype that "blacks are lazy."

The interviewers' nonthreatening questions and accepting manner make Jeff comfortable. At their invitation, he explores his views about the Los Angeles race riots and the beating of Rodney King. In the give-and-takes that follows, he's surprised to learn that whites and Latinos were also arrested; that blacks had also risked their lives to save whites; that black unemployment is more than double that of whites; and that more than 44 percent of African-American children live in poverty.

Jeff is asked why he thinks these differences exist. His answer is a breakthrough: "It's partially racial. I know guys doing the same work as me get three or four dollars less an hour. It's not fair. Blacks are almost still in slavery a little."

Jeff's wife, Wanda, comes into the room, affirming her concern for the black neighbor who wants to get off welfare. She speaks about getting local blacks and whites involved in a neighborhood watch program to decrease crime - "something we could do that would help us all."

Walters sees Jeff's attitude take a decidedly positive shift over this hour. Though he's not in favor of racial quotas, Jeff says he'll support other aid programs and affirmative action efforts "if they really help people out". Both Jeff and Wanda ask for more information on racial issues and express interest in talking to others. They part as friends; all four have learned from this encounter and enjoyed it.

THIS WARM, MUTUAL EXCHANGE IS THE essence of the Listening Project, a process for community organizing and social change developed by the Quaker-influenced Rural Southern Voice for Peace (RSVP) - a networking organization that Herb Walters started in 1981 to support activist groups throughout the South.

Since 1985, RSVP has offered listening projects in dozens of tension-torn communities as an alternative to conventional activist approaches - debates, protests, vigils, litigation, civil disobedience. Coming into volatile situations and confronting the issues that might send seasoned mediators running for cover, they use compassionate listening - a model adapted from counseling and psychology - as a way to understand underlying problems, to introduce new ideas, and to help communities develop their own positive solutions for change. This process not only uncovers and empowers many "bystanders" who have feared to speak out or have

never been involved - it often brings opponents, even bitter adversaries, face to face in a nonviolent way, helping to build durable community bridges to reconciliation and peace.

"We don't change people by clobbering them over the head," says Walters, a lanky, easy-speaking man with kind eyes who looks younger than his forty-one years. "We change people through a process of active, justice-seeking love. We teach empathy. Empathy isn't agreement. It's understanding where people are starting from and seeing the potential. It involves listening at a very deep level so that one builds a relationship of trust and respect. To listen at a deep level, you have to let go of your own strong beliefs. It's a spiritual process of seeking God in the other person."

RSVP has brought dozens of listening projects to communities throughout the South, where it has designed surveys to help groups gauge and change attitudes toward homophobia, abortion, AIDS, defense spending, racial conflict, community development, breastfeeding, and the death penalty. Four armed forces listening projects have helped peace workers and military personnel to discuss alternatives to violence near bases from Georgia to Virginia. In Harlan County, Kentucky, an Oak Ridge, Tennessee - communities economically dependent on local toxic and nuclear polluters - RSVP has helped organize frightened residents living in poisoned neighborhoods, empowering them to pursue constructive solutions. In West Virginia, it has helped youth in the child welfare system learn to advocate for their own needs. It has taken its mission as far afield as Palau to help Pacific islanders air conflicting feelings about the US military presence there, and to villages in Serbia and Croatia to help ethnic enemies reestablish nonviolent communication.

Though RSVP sometimes initiates listening projects, it is far more common for groups to approach RSVP with requests for help. To be effective, Walters believes, a listening project usually needs to be part of a comprehensive strategy. Typically, RSVP enters a long-term consulting relationship with a group that includes organizational development as well as assistance in identifying problems and defining goals for the particular challenge at hand. RSVP also trains staff and volunteers - often over a long weekend, which culminates with a door-to-door survey. The staff helps interpret results, charts follow-up steps, and offers ongoing support as needed. Groups are asked to pay as much of RSVP's expenses as they can afford.

THE SON OF A US ARMY MASTER SERGEANT who served in three wars, Walters grew up in a working-class, conservative family on military bases primarily in the South. At the time he went to register for the draft, his father was fighting in Vietnam. "I was suddenly faced with being forced to fight, an issue I'd never had to face before. Suddenly it seemed so logical: I became a conscientious objector." The wounds of that father-son rift weren't fully healed until 1989, when Master Sergeant Walters acknowledged that he was proud of his son's work. He was then dying of cancer, which doctors suspect may have been caused by exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange in Vietnam.

"While it's difficult for many people to understand," Walters explains, "my father was probably one of the main inspirations for my involvement in peace work. He was always a very honest, forthright person. He felt that by serving in the military, he was serving humanity in the best way he knew how; he genuinely felt he was a force for peace. I got this sense of service from him. It's the essence of what RSVP and the Listening Project are about."

Before starting RSVP at the age of twenty-nine, Herb Walters had studied at Goddard's Institute of Social Ecology; farmed in West Virginia; worked on peace and justice issues in Georgia, Maine, and West Virginia; and worked as a counselor for disturbed teens, a role in which he first discovered the power of active listening. In 1981, while living in rural North Carolina, Walters decided to intensify his work for social change. He considered going north to more politically active urban areas, but he really wanted to work in the South, "with my own people, where I felt most at home." In 1981 he took a ten-day Buddhist retreat to clarify his confusion and emerged with a clear message: The real need is in the rural South, right where you are now.

Home was, and remains, near Burnsville, Yancey County, in the Appalachian mountains an hour north of Asheville - Senator Jesse Helms territory, an ideal testing ground for Walters to try to change entrenched attitudes about race, social injustice, ecological destruction, and war. "People in the rural South are very friendly, good people; they're an important part of grassroots America," says Walters. "Until we build bridges to these people and build a movement that includes them, we're doomed to keep falling back. And if we can develop models that work here, these will apply elsewhere."

He also realized that this mission would be difficult. To succeed, it would require developing some "home-

grown" organizing methods that differed markedly from those of '60s-style social activism. "Activists sometimes help polarize the situation," Walters says. "We create enemy images, just as anyone else does. They are the bad guys; we are the good guys. Or they are the people who don't understand, and we are the people who do. When we approach people in this way, the potential for change actually decreases."

The first goal in listening, he says, is to accept other people at their starting point - not to try immediately to change them, but to establish trust and allow change to come out of the listening process. "It's the polar opposite of the normal method, which is to focus on your differences. With listening, you bypass the debate format and can overcome the barriers of defense and mistrust. When people feel safe, they challenge themselves. When you give people a chance to open up, they really examine their beliefs, and sometimes reinvent them."

The Listening Project is designed to change activists as much as the people they interview. "Sometimes," acknowledges convert David Grant, forty-seven, a field organizer who joined RSVP in 1991 and is now its executive director, "much of the transformation is with volunteers." The son of middle-class black parents from St. Louis, he had a long history of fervent activism that began with his decision to resist the Vietnam War (he was featured protesting as the Grim Reaper on the cover of 1972 New York Times Magazine). Grant's approach has changed markedly. He's now helping listeners in Virginia lobby resistant lawmakers to end the death penalty, a process he likens to aikido: "Instead of cajoling and threatening, the group will ask legislators what they feel - giving opponents a nonthreatening opportunity to 'discharge.' As in aikido, once the attack is understood, accepted, and gracefully avoided, the attacker is usually on the floor and ready to listen to reason."

Activists speak highly of the benefits of this training. "I know, now, that I can talk to someone who is really angry or upset on the opposite side of the issue from me," says former RSVP staff member Judy Scheckel. Skip Gladney, a peace worker in Louisiana, has found that he can apply what he learned as a Denham Springs listener to everyday situations: "When you hear racist comments from your neighbors or co-workers, people you're close to, you want to strike some balance between silence and jumping down their throats. Now I have a way to respond." Volunteer Ruth Dahlke, seventy-six, says that after "red letter" day interviewing Navy

men in Norfolk, Virginia, she has become "acquainted with a new part of myself, feeling less cynical and hopeless about fellow Americans whose values differ from mine."

While listening projects often have specific goals to change community attitudes and behaviour, what distinguishes RSVP's method from more-manipulative or coercive approaches, Walters believes, is that they are trying to generate organic change from deep within an individual rather than imposing change from without by hectoring or telling people what to believe. "We tell our listeners that you cannot be attached to how people change, or even if they change; you only create an environment in which change is possible and encouraged. Any time you push in a specific direction, you begin to lose them. It's the basic Buddhist concept of detachment."

Walters' month-long sojourn to run listening projects in Serbia and Croatia in September 1992 required all the detachment he could bring. A student of Thich Nhat Hanh, he spent some time at the Buddhist leader's Plum Village retreat center in France to prepare for the arduous trip. Though passions were running high, Walters found most villagers eager to have someone listen to their fears. The questions helped Serbs, the majority group, see that the war and its terrible effect on the economy, not the Muslims, are the real enemies - and that the government may be using ethnic tensions to strengthen itself at the expense of the people.

The project was successful, Walters feels, because people spoke out constructively; participants isolated and defined key problems (such as the unmet needs of volatile young men) and diffused community tensions by listening; leaders identified strategies for change; and, perhaps most importantly, villagers realized their own power to act. "People often aren't used to seeing themselves as part of the solution," says Walters. "We always tell people they're part of the solution. We assume they want to stop the violence." RSVP recently helped Serb and Muslim peace activists develop a program of ethnic and bias awareness for Pancevo/Brestovac youth who have been at the heart of their village violence.

Walters has no illusion that the seeds RSVP has sown in Brestovac are likely to end the strife in the former Yugoslavia, or that the Listening Project can solve the countless conflicts in the rural South. The field work is exhausting, administration is challenging, and resources are tight. With a shoestring budget of about \$100,000 this year,

RSVP has only two part-time trainers (Walters and Grant) and is in the red for the first time.

There are other frustrations: Some projects cry for follow-ups that the budget or circumstance don't allow. Marines at Camp LeJeune in North Carolina couldn't get volunteers to lead the study groups on nonviolent alternative that they asked for after the Gulf War. Louisiana activists haven't been able to capitalize on the fine organizing opportunity presented by Joe, Wanda, and other residents, who expressed interest in a biracial neighborhood watch group in Denham Springs. And to keep up on projects in Brestovac, it can take a week just to get through on the phone.

But there are more reasons to take heart. In Asheville, North Carolina, a father who had adamantly opposed an AIDS home on his street came to acknowledge that "maybe if our kids grow up with a person with AIDS next door, our children may become sensitized to people with such needs." In Harlan County, the toxic waste group that people once feared now has wide support and new volunteers. In North Carolina, a poor, retired black laborer who had joined the Piedmont Peace Project after being "listened to" went to a national SANE (now called Peace Action) peace conference and helped his delegation refocus the group on the neglected link between military spending and local needs. In Keyesville, Georgia, a listening project decreased racial polarization and helped a beleaguered black community succeed in getting clean water, health services, and other community improvements.

Herb Walters is nourished by these triumphs. He affirms his faith in this listening process and in the disempowered people of this land, who he insists can make a profound difference if they believe that they really matter. "My belief is that when you go deep, there is a core of goodness in everyone," affirms Walters. "And everyone has a piece of truth."