



Bushfire Project – A Parent's Point of View

Steve Thompson

On a Thursday evening in February at about 5.00pm. I drove up a long drive in Gloucestershire to an impressive house, that once must have been the residence of a member of 'the landed gentry', but would be, for the next 3 days the venue for the latest Bushfire Projects junior youth weekend course, 'Sex and Drugs and Rock & Roll' (or SDR²). This was my second visit to a Bushfire weekend. Now, as then, I was helping with the catering for the event. After my experiences on the first weekend – e.g. lack of sleep, backbreaking work and endless chores to be done, I kept asking myself why had I come back again? Well the answer to that is, I hope, revealed in this article.

My role for the next 3 days was as a member of staff, but I had not had any involvement in the planning and organisation of the event. In addition, I was bringing along two of my sons who were attending as junior youth. This meant that I had an almost unique position – a parent on the inside, experiencing it as it happened. I was able to see what went on, to feel the atmosphere, to observe the event – (oh yes, and also to set tables, do the washing up, chop vegetables and so on....).

So what were my impressions? Well, the strongest one was the happiness of the youth themselves. Here were 36 young Bahá'ís together for 3 days, many of them possibly the only youth in their home community and now learning together, sharing experiences, and gaining a great sense of Bahá'í Identity. This was an all too rare opportunity to be together with other young people of similar ages, and be able to relate to them in a way that can't be done with their school friends. I saw old friendships being reformed, and new friendships just starting off.

In addition to their happiness, the youth also exhibited great courtesy, never taking anything without first asking, always thanking the staff and, although sometimes boisterous were never 'out of control'. They were a credit to their parents and their communities, and were demonstrating that they were Bahá'í youth.

My next impression was the realisation of the staggering amount of planning, organisation, thought, administration and management that the organisers had put into the event. A hundred and one details had to be considered and scheduled. And the staff was brilliant. Some of the staff travelled quite long distances to be at the event. Most of them had been involved in other Bushfire events and their commitment to them, their handling of the subject matter and their rapport with the youth was all amazing. Hats off to the organisers who must have spent **at least** 10 times as much time organising the event as they spent actually running it.

So what about the learning? Did the youth actually get educated? Well, of course, they did. They learned about Sex and Drugs and Rock & Roll. Actually they learned about the Bahá'í point of view for such topics as chastity, homosexuality, drugs, alcohol and a host of other topics related to these subjects. They learned them through talks, workshops, discussion groups and seminars. The topics covered could not easily be learned at home or at a community school. It is difficult for parents to address some of these issues with their children, and just as difficult for the children to hear it from mom and dad. But the various staff members who **did** tackle these sensitive subjects were able to communicate with the youth as an impartial third person, and really get across the Bahá'í views and laws.

But it wasn't just the learning that was important. Equally important were the experience of the learning, and the experience of the whole event. The atmosphere of the weekend, the community spirit that seemed to be present and the sense of unity that came with the communal experience would reinforce the learning. The lessons learned would have benefited from the commitment that the youth seemed to make to them, and the knowledge gained would perhaps be more long lasting and more relevant as a result.

The Universal House of Justice, in its Ridván 2000 message, specifically mentioned the special needs of junior youth, and told us that "Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programmes of activity that will engage their interests..". The Bushfire Projects have done just that. I felt that the youth

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were interested in what they were learning, and the way they were learning it. It wasn't just straight teaching. It was "...involvement in programmes of activity...". The Ridván message also went on to tell us to "...involve them in social interactions with older youth". Although older youth were in the minority at this event, the social interaction between the staff and the junior youth more than made up for it. We are all 'youth' at heart, anyway.

All too soon it was time to leave, and as I drove home on the afternoon of the last day, the car full of happy but tired youth, I considered what I had experienced. Three days of sheer non-stop work, punctuated by all too short periods of sleep which were broken by Gawayne's 7.30 am wake up calls (very loud rock music) was just the physical experience. Far more important was the spiritual one, and I felt confident that the youth had gained a great deal. The success of the event, and of previous Bushfire Project events, speaks for itself. The demand for places in the next Bushfire Project weekends is sure to be high. The youth **want** to come to these events, and we need more such events in other parts of the country to give them these much-needed opportunities. Armed with this insight to the Bushfire experience I started wondering about the possibility of creating such an opportunity in the North West. Watch this space!