

Menninger: Continued from page 13

still demonstrates its genuine desire to become the beacon of psychiatric treatment.

Karl Menninger aptly expressed the Menninger Clinic of his day in his book, *"A Psychiatrists' World, the Selected Papers of Karl Menninger,"* 1920. The excerpts below were Karl's thoughts on the opening of Menninger Hospital's new building.

"Nevertheless, someday its strong walls will crumble, and what we look upon so proudly today as new and fresh and beautiful will be old and worn and tawdry. Some of the folks here then will be saying, 'What shall we do with the old building?' The old building, they will call it--the low vaulted past for which a new temple, nobler than the last and a dome more vast, will be in the making."

"We shall be gone by then, most of us. But the meaning of the hospital will outlive us all. It will out live this building--it will out live the memories of this glorious opening day. The vision and the faith of a kindly man who loved rocks, and flowers and trees, and shells, and books--and, most of all loved people, and believed that they could help one another. This vision and faith, carried on by a thousand sons and daughters--this will live forever."

INTERVIEWS...

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM BRATTER

Founder of John Dewey Academy
Great Barrington, Massachusetts

By: [Lon Woodbury](#), April 19, 2005

Two things stand out in talking with Tom Bratter. First, in his early years, he qualified as a "struggling teen." Bratter explained that during his adolescence in the 1950's, he was lucky because the availability of drugs had not yet arrived in suburbia. "I have no false illusions or sense of righteousness in this reality because had they been available, I know I would have become a casualty of the chemical dependency movement. The odds are high that I probably would have died from my addiction to them because I was that kind of kid."

Bratter said that due to his "ignorance and stupid behaviors," he was in a lot of pain and graduated in the bottom 10 percent of his high school class. In addition, Bratter's father was a very successful "workaholic" who started one of most respected law firms in New York City. "He always rescued me by convincing everyone to give 'Tommy one more chance.' I was a loser, reject, retard



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and failure by choice; my only successes came in my athletic ability in track, my records endured for 44 years.”

However, the very things that were destructive and negative in Bratter’s life also became the things that influenced his passion, ability and life-long devotion to helping adolescents. It also inspired him to create the unique school he calls John Dewey Academy, in admiration of the early 20th century philosopher and educator John Dewey.

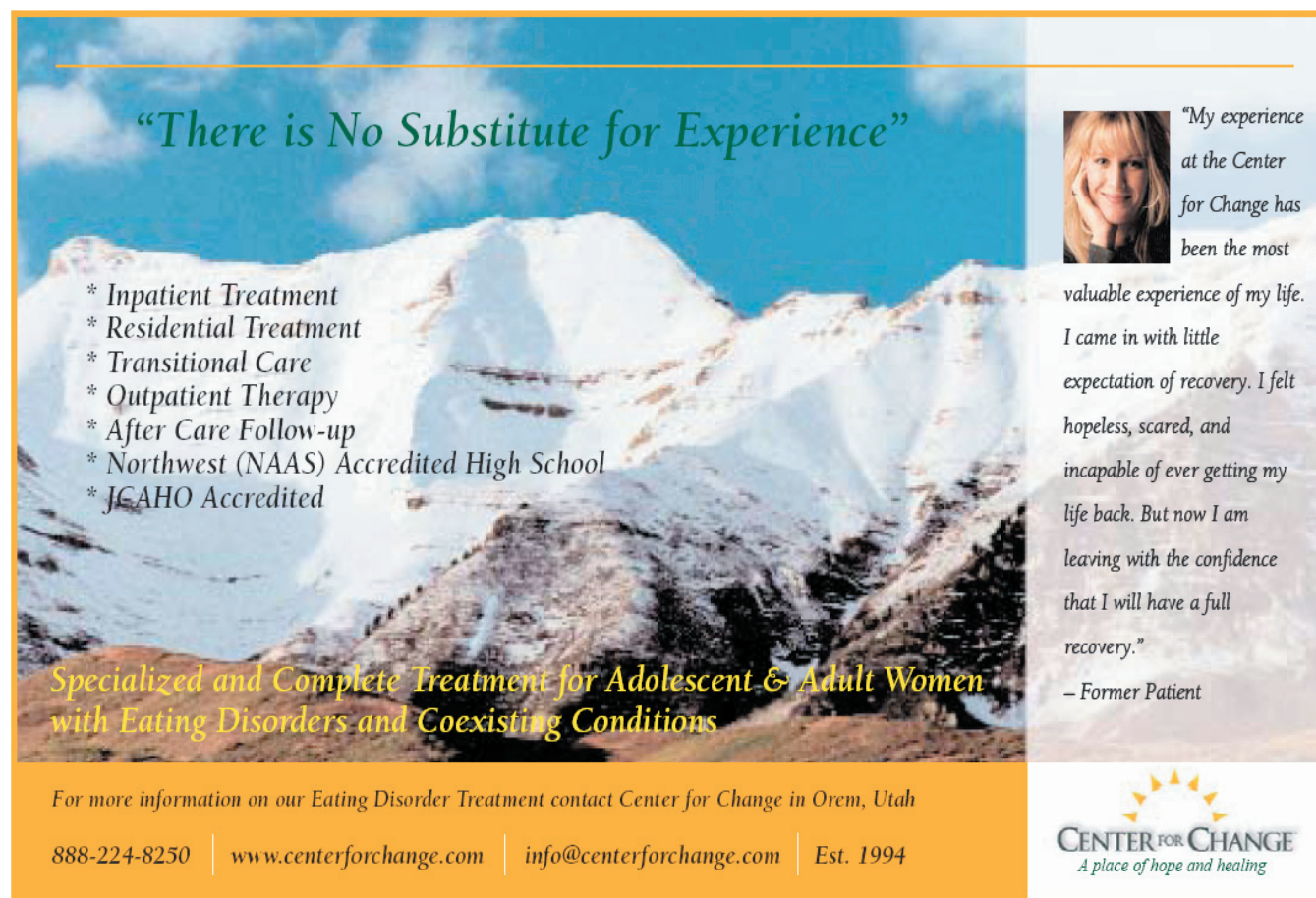
Second, for almost a half century, Bratter has worked exclusively with bright, unconvinced and self-destructive adolescents. After receiving his Ed.D. degree from Columbia University Teachers College, with a dissertation titled “Confrontation: A Group Psychotherapeutic Treatment Model for Alienated, Unmotivated, Adolescent Drug Abusers,” Bratter started and directed six community-based prevention and treatment programs in Westchester County (NY) for alienated and angry kids.

“Again, I was lucky. My beloved mentor, Alex Bassin, who wrote the proposal that created Daytop Lodge,

predecessor to Daytop Village, introduced me to the program when it was in its infancy. I learned more about effectively treating this difficult population from ex-addict counselors and recovering alcoholics than from my professors at Teachers College. I was a confused and conflicted graduate student, but I knew what worked and why it worked. My professors espoused theories which made no sense. They were either Freudians or followers of Carl Rogers, neither of whom confronted the true issues behind the behaviors.”

In the 1970s, Bratter worked as a psychotherapist at Teen Centers and as director of a Methadone Clinic. He was a part time consultant for many programs, an independent psychotherapist in Scarsdale, NY, and an adjunct professor at Union Institute and the College of New Rochelle. He was very much in touch with the experiments of creative solutions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985 Bratter decided to implement what he had learned by founding the John Dewey Academy, a residential boarding school for adolescents with problems. Bratter refers to himself as a gunfighter and says “there are two rules when working with adolescents. “Rule One: A few will fail and die. Rule

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Two: Tom Bratter cannot change rule one. Before I symbolically burned my membership card in the American Psychological Association, 10 kids died of drug overdoses, committed suicide, or were murdered, which radicalized me. I view psychotherapy as a war. If I cannot convince a kid to change, I know damn well they will live wasted lives, so I accept this as a mandate to force them to change."

As an example of the intellectual ferment of the 1970s, Bratter recalled an International Conference on Therapeutic Communities in Bangkok, Thailand in the mid-1970s, where he met Mel Wasserman, Founder of the CEDU Schools. Both men were very much involved in the intellectual stimulation around the concept of therapeutic communities, and attended as many conferences as they could on the subject. According to Bratter, they discussed how these concepts could or should apply to schools for troubled adolescents.

Bratter explained that he started The John Dewey Academy to prove to psychotherapists and educators that it is a crime to assume that some are too damaged to change. "No kid in our history has been maintained on any psychotropic poison. All graduate and attend competitive colleges. A third make the dean's list, a third become responsible role models and student leaders, and more than a third attend graduate school. There is no residential treatment program or special purpose school in the world that can duplicate these results."

Interestingly, Bratter said that few psychiatrists and psychologists refer patients; instead they send their own kids. "I would wager that at least 20 percent of our graduates have a parent who is a therapist or teacher. We work with a special bunch of kids who are not amenable to traditional techniques and convince them to 'bust their asses.' Our kids spend at least three hours a day, every day, studying, and we are accredited by the New England Schools and College Association. They attend at least 10 hours of groups. And there is no secret why they work so hard; they know that if they produce, we will convince the best colleges to admit them. Where is the controversy? What we do obviously works!"

Bratter says heavy peer pressure and using treatment as a catalyst is very important in the healing of the students. He emphasizes peer pressure for three reasons: "Kids don't give others an inch, the helper learns more, and it is vital for these kids to stop masking their feelings and start getting honest."

His goal with each student is to provide hope. He enrolls children who have either given up on life, or never bought into it because they have never felt challenged. Looking through the mask, he sees a child with good potential but who also needs work to bring it out.

In John Dewey Academy, Bratter brought together all the elements of structure and challenging academics in a unique combination to prove a point, which is that there are better ways to work with difficult children than the all too common mainstream procedure of diagnosing and medicating on a mass scale.

"We trace our origins to the ex-addict-run therapeutic communities which utilized confrontation and positive peer pressure to force change," Bratter explained. "Empowerment creates change because kids feel vested in the Dewey community. They have high expectations for growth and reject stupid, sadistic and self-destructive behavior. John Dewey is stressful because the expectations for growth and improvement continue to escalate. But the rewards are great. The next chapter for all Dewey graduates is college which permanently seals their past. No one asks me what kind of kid I was because they assume that since I attended Columbia University, not only was I bright, but also a good little boy. Both are myths! But no one cares any more because that is ancient history."

I first met Tom Bratter in the early 1990s, and at that time, he truly was John Dewey Academy. His direct influence was evident in every aspect of the school. Since then, he has taught the staff his philosophy and turned many of his functions at the school over to them. Bratter's involvement is still very evident, but more as a founder than an administrator. He is taking steps to ensure John Dewey Academy has a solid foundation with or without his direct involvement in the future.

For an example of the confrontation style of John Dewey Academy, see the article *The Interview* at www.strugglingteens.com/archives/1994/6/news06.html and the *Student's Response* at www.strugglingteens.com/archives/1994/8/oe07.html.

Opinion is ultimately determined
by feelings, and not by intellect.

~Thomas A. Edison



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