ACCOUNTABILITY

Revisiting Mel Wasserman

By: Larry Stednitz

The "Parent Choice" industry is looking for a home. Should programs be designed by and overseen by clinicians and monitored by government regulations? On one hand, there is pressure for programs to conform to societies' general acceptance of having clinically trained personnel operate programs for troubled youth. On the other hand, there are a vast number of programs that have been known to be effective with youth and their families without the traditional or accepted, identified agencies or professions. Most notable of course is the CEDU emotional growth model. When CEDU was at the top of the industry, they were operating eight programs and worked with over five hundred youth daily. Numerous other programs were developed from the CEDU model. It is well known that Mel Wasserman, Founder of CEDU, was not a clinician, nor was he particularly supportive of clinicians.

In virtually all programs, accountability is stressed whether the program has been derived from clinical principles, adventure therapy practice or a "mom and pop" program's way of looking at and developing character in their charges. This essay will look at one aspect of programming and accountability from the perspective of Mel Wasserman, a non-clinician.

Over the years, CEDU documented a great deal of their philosophy and this essay examines Mel's thinking on accountability. The following information was obtained primarily from a document that represented training on accountability that Mel conducted with the staff of Rocky Mountain Academy in December of 1990. The essay is also supplemented by other trainings given by Mel over the years.

First off, Mel felt it was important to let the students know that CEDU had something special to give and that they would not receive it unless they followed CEDU's values and agreements. In a sense, he created an aura and a system that would facilitate in students an interest and desire to belong.

Accountability is a cornerstone of CEDU's emotional growth curriculum. While relationships were deemed important by Mel, the focus on relationships should not be mistaken as a "fuzzy" approach. Boundaries need to be absolutely defined and in Mel Wasserman's language,



"rigid." This line of thinking supports the notion that many of our students have come from families who have had difficulty setting clear limits. When students sense that the boundaries are fuzzy, their anxiety increases. With clear boundaries their security increases. Mel Wasserman said, "We use 'values not bars,' and we as a staff do not have to be burdened with guilt when we set limits." His point of view was that most students are not "broken;" they need boundaries and values to live by.

Mel said, "Prisons are full of people who refuse to live within the boundaries (of society). 'No one can tell me what to do!' So actually, society ends up telling them what to do every single minute!" He added that adults/ staff are not doing students a favor by letting them slip and slide. If you do, you are doing the student a disservice for your own personal comfort, allowing the student to take steps toward his or her incarceration. Mel went on to say that staff and parents should never apologize for setting boundaries and that a parent or school should not wait until the students are on the verge of breaking the rules.

Mel would say, "I am in charge, you're not! This is my house and if you want to be in it you are going to live by my rules. They are not negotiable." His point of view was that being at CEDU was a privilege. He stated that every student who comes through the door should be told that being at CEDU was a privilege and that if the student cannot abide by CEDU's rules; they cannot be in "our home." Of course, Mel saw the audacity of saying this to students who did not want to be there in the first place!

It was Mel's belief that it was important to tell students what to do because if they were told what to do, they would feel more comfortable. He felt that reasoning with students increased their level of anxiety. It was his point of view that if you do not enforce boundaries, you actually take freedom away from the student. He said, "Raising healthy children is not a popularity contest." For example, CEDU imposed a relatively low dollar amount on Christmas gifts given by the parents to the students. He would say that parents who want to give excessively expensive gifts to their children at Christmas were trying to buy their child's acceptance at the price of the health of the child. He went on to say that "children cannot handle *acceptance/approval* buying by their parents." Mel often ran into parents who did not like the rules as well. He would tell parents who could not live within CEDU's boundaries, "If you cannot live

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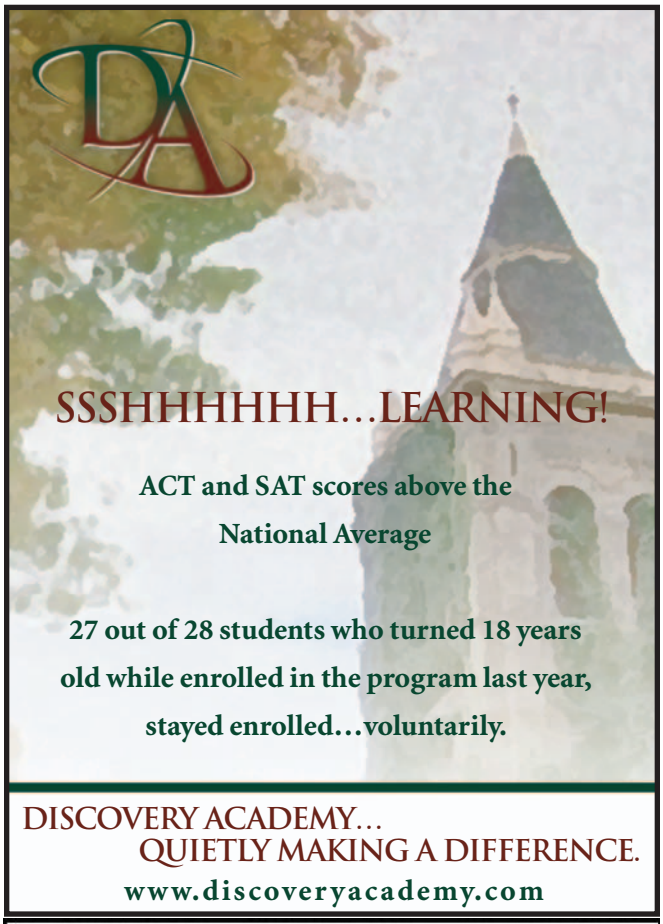
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within our agreements, where would you like us to send your child?"

Mel said that setting clear boundaries supports health. He stressed this point by saying, "Take away boundaries and bring in a sewer, a biker society. The magic is not in the building itself, it is in the setting of boundaries, a certain posture and a certain way we act inside them, and then we have something which facilitates what we are trying to do here." Out of the clarity established by the rules, or agreements as CEDU said, students can make choices, hopefully good choices. If a student feels safe in knowing the boundaries and consequences, he or she can make choices that will move him/her toward health. Boundaries are at the core of what Mel taught.

Mel believed that it was important to set boundaries clearly because the students would know that they were truly cared for. He would say, "It is important to set the limits and then put your arm around the student." It is through this process that meaningful relationships were developed. Mel consistently taught that the child should always be accepted, but not always the behavior. Once the students know the boundaries, life gets much easier for them.

We are raising a generation
that has a woefully small stock
of ideas, interests and emotions.
It must be amused
at all costs
but it has little skill
in amusing itself.
It pays some of its members
to do what the majority
can no longer do for themselves.
It is this inner poverty
that makes for the worst
kind of boredom.

~Frank J. McCracken