

PARENT INTERNET FORUM: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

By: [Lisa Sinsheimer](#), Parent Liaison
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Great Barrington, Massachusetts

Two years ago, a new parent suggested that we start an Internet Forum to provide support and help for parents at our therapeutic boarding school, the John Dewey Academy (JDA). After overcoming initial concerns about confidentiality, the possible negative impact on live communication, and whether or not an online Forum might deteriorate into a destructive tool for disaffected parents or alumni, the Forum was set up on a trial basis.

Two years later, the Forum has evolved into an important tool for parents and alumni. It has changed the landscape of the school, but the primary purpose of helping parents help their kids get through the JDA program successfully has not changed.

Initially, we limited Forum membership to current parents; we debated the other rules of membership as we went along. We decided to exclude staff in order to allow

parents to have freer discussions. Although staff can post information for the benefit of parents, they do not have access to any Forum postings.

We learned quickly that in order for the Forum to be relevant, EVERY PARENT had to join. If, for example, we wanted to use it for communication between staff and parents, every family had to have access to the information. The Parent Liaison relentlessly nagged each and every parent (and incoming parent) to join and to log on frequently.

Almost immediately, we ran into several membership issues. What happens to a parent's membership when a student leaves the school prematurely? Should alumni be invited to join? Who decides if a member has abused the privilege and should be barred? Although we decided some of these issues by polling the membership, we soon understood that the Forum also needed administrators.

What role do Forum Administrators play? They monitor the Board, supply material, and function as gatekeepers by preventing disgruntled former students or hackers from gaining access. Although many members use the Forum purely for administrative purposes (i.e., accessing the school Calendar, Address List, or local resources), another

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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.

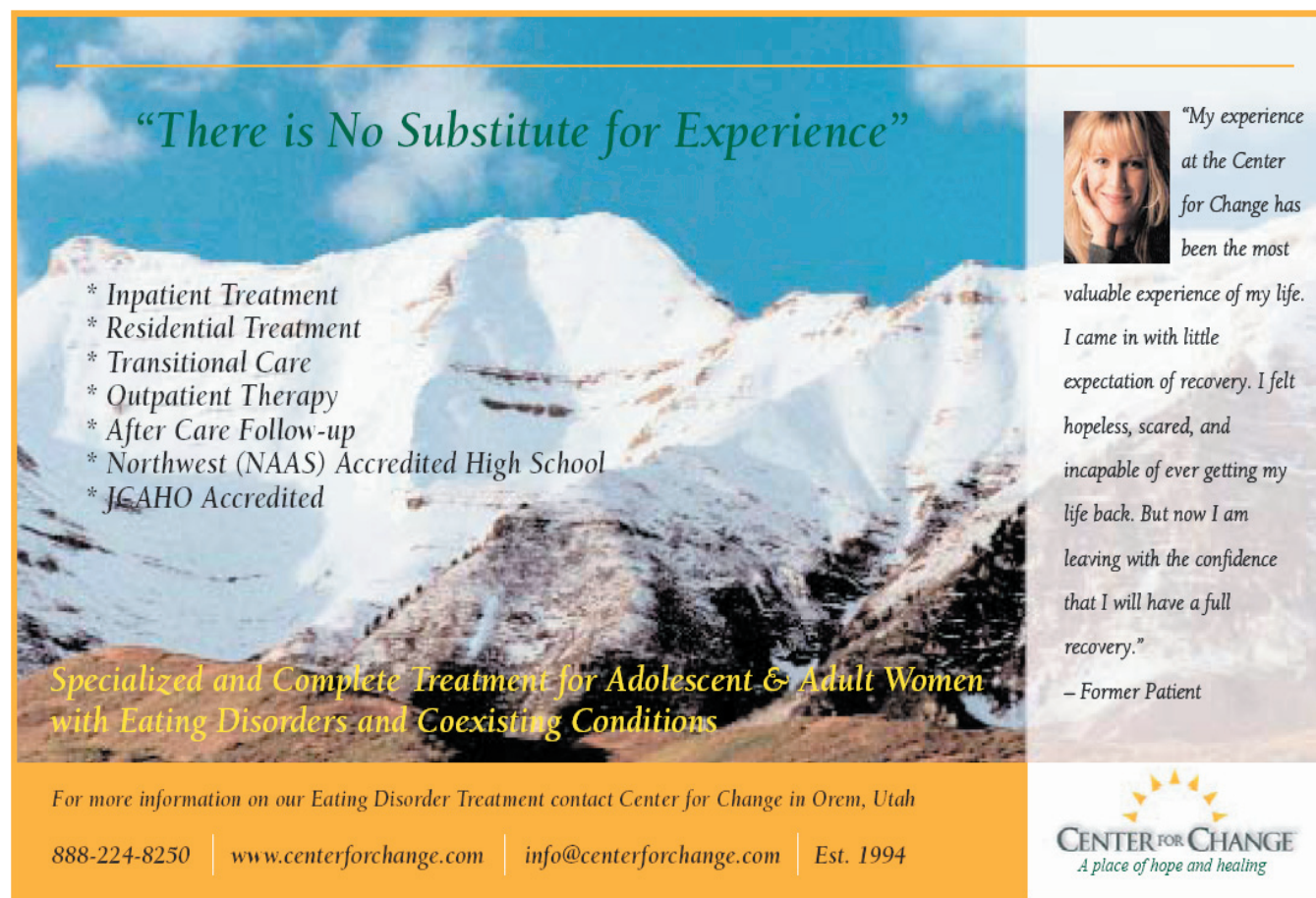
Second, for almost a half century, Bratter has worked exclusively with bright, unconvinced and self-destructive adolescents. After receiving his Ed.D. degree from Columbia University Teachers College, with a dissertation titled “Confrontation: A Group Psychotherapeutic Treatment Model for Alienated, 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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