

CARETAKERS OF THE ENVIRONMENT: TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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I was very worried about our world. Why? Because, *In 1986*, I was writing about toxic substances, nuclear energy, feeding the hungry and other global environmental threats. The problems were so big, how could anyone solve them?

I found some answers when I was invited to go out to lunch.

Edward Radatz, a biology teacher at Oak Park and River Forest High School (in a Chicago suburb), who edited my work for *Current Energy and Ecology magazine*, invited me to meet Arjen Wals, a masters degree candidate from the Netherlands who was an intern in his classroom. “I think we can get something going,” Ed said. “Sure,” I replied. I thought it would be fun, but I never suspected that anything important would happen.

As Ed, Arjen and I sipped hot tea and ate tacos, we chatted about a range of environment problems. By the time dessert came, we agreed that young people – no matter where they lived, what their career choice or lifestyle was – needed to understand that they were caretakers of the environment. (I said “caretakers” because I thought that was what Dr. Noel Brown, director of the United Nations Environment program, had said during a recent interview. Later, I looked at my notes and saw that Dr. Brown had said “shareholders of the environment.”) Although “caretakers of the environment” was a misquote, we kept the name because it described our mission.

At lunch that day, Caretakers of the Environment International (CEI), an environmental education network, was born. The three of us decided we would involve high school students and teachers because we did not know of any environmental organization that had involved teenagers in environmental work. When we looked at high school courses in ecology, we were shocked to learn that most of them were designed for youth who failed traditional science courses and students who were not very interested in science. We had no funding and no network, but that didn’t discourage us at all.

During spring break, Ed went to Amsterdam to meet Arjen’s parents. Arjen’s father, Harry Wals, was Director of Parks and Gardens in the Hague,

Netherlands. Arjen's mother, Joke Wals, was linked with a European environmental network that was about to shut down.

In early summer, Ed, two students and I traveled to the Netherlands to attend the last conference of that European environmental network. We asked the teachers and youth to join us as members of CEI. Joke Wals agreed to establish CEI in the Netherlands and Harry Wals offered to host the first conference in the Hague.

I had never met a government official or a corporate leader when we started CEI; I had no clue as to how we could gain their support. But Ed, the students and I returned to the United States with big plans.

"We have to make people aware of what we are doing," explained Ed. So when we returned to the U.S., we incorporated Caretakers of the Environment International/USA (CEI), adopted a mission statement with goals and objectives, and obtained a ruling that the corporation was tax-exempt under the United States Internal Revenue Code.

Our next step was to gain the support of science and environmental educators, as well as government and business leaders. How? By having students explain who we were and what we wanted to accomplish. Ed knew that these leaders listened to children because they probably had children of their own; and because being nice to children was always good for public relations.

During those early meetings, I saw that teenagers were not easily impressed by authority, so they often ask questions that I would never dare to ask. I also learned that teenagers were very persuasive. Their idealism and energy were hard to resist.

The mission of CEI – to prepare youth with the skills and knowledge to become environmental leaders – began with fundraising for travel to overseas conferences. Ed encouraged his students to raise funds with bake sales and other activities and by approaching businesses, family and friends. The students had to explain why being a Caretaker was valuable, what projects they were working on, and what happened during a Caretakers conference. That was how they gained skills for environmental leadership and educated the people around them.

We decided to follow the United Nations idea: "Think globally and act locally," by asking youth to set up exhibits and report on their community projects at our international meetings. This encouraged students and teachers to build friendships despite political barriers.

In 1987, 120 teachers and students from 15 countries arrived at a campsite on the shore of the North Sea. It was July, but nights were cold in our unheated tents and caravans. The conference theme was The Sea: Pollution or Protection, so our days were busy with biking across the polders, traveling to an island where seals were dying because of pollution from the industries of the

Rhine River valley. We also visited the town farm that Harry Wals had established to renovate a slum where crime was rampant. It was a surprise to see parents and children feed and pet the horses, cows, rabbits and other animals and chat with neighbors. (I later found out that Harry Wals' town farm in the Hague was the first of more than 200 town farms in European cities.)

Each evening, we gathered outdoors to chat. One night, a Spanish delegate led us in song and invited all of us to the 1988 conference in Spain.

Through the years, teachers who participated in the tours and discussions with their students often decided to host the next conference. That was the way Caretakers found friends around the world.

In 1989, at the CEI conference in Oak Park, Illinois, our theme was "Technology and the Environment". We visited a water purification company and a waste management company as well as the lakefront and the Indiana Dunes National Park.

It was a time when Americans were building bomb shelters because the Soviet Union and the US had nuclear missiles aimed at one another. However, a friend of Ed's, Barbara Rinnan, who started the Midwest Center for U.S. – USSR Relations, arranged for two Russian teachers and four of their students to attend our meeting.

At our 1993 meeting in Canada, we had an evening in which delegates from each country performed a song, or skit, or told a story. This celebration of cultures became a Caretakers tradition. Later, a student composed a Caretakers song. Along with field trips and discussions, cultural celebrations were powerful ways to promote international friendships and solve global environmental problems.

For more than 30 years, CEI has held conferences in places such as Austria, Hungary, England, Russia, Peru, Israel, Indonesia and South Africa; and reached youth in more than 100 countries. The work of CEI was honored at a United Nations Youth Meeting and the Global Assembly of Women and the Environment.

Today, I continue to hear bad news about climate change, terrorism, and pollution that threatens our planet. But I am optimistic when I think about Caretakers of the Environment International. I smile when I ask myself:

"How can the world resist these idealistic and energetic youth?"

And, "Isn't it amazing what can happen when three people meet for lunch?"

(The End)