

THE DELTA PACE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

PRESCHOOL (1977-79)

As told by Sandra Conant Strachan, May 2019

The Delta Pace Human Development Project (Mississippi) was launched in January 1977 with the usual community consult. Pace was a town in the Delta of 600 people, 60% black, 29% white & 1% other. I have no idea who was included in the “other.” It was a virtual ghost town due to the shifts in agriculture and employment options in the area, and many of the residents were the ‘flotsam’ of that sea change.

One of the items to emerge from the planning was a need for a preschool for children 18-24 months. There was a Head Start program in town and an elementary school. Sometime in late 1977 or the first half of 1978, we began the process of authorizing this preschool, receiving licensing and approval from the State Legislature and others. We hired a director, Olivia Leggette, mayor of a small neighboring community, and chose three teachers from the community (Lelia Ann, Dolores and Puddin) as well as a cook (Thelma). The licensing and approval process was onerous and frustrating, but we finally succeeded, thanks to Olivia and Barbara Smith, wife of the local principal. The Pace Preschool was housed in the abandoned, renovated post office. The work of getting it ready was almost entirely done by Mark Harvey, a young volunteer in the project.

In addition to community toddlers, the 15-20 children included my daughter Alison (18 months) and Ali Roper (approximately the same age). The state required one teacher per every five children and fifty square feet of outdoor space per child. We had a lovely one room space with an adjacent outside play area thanks to Mark and a fully-furnished kitchen thanks to Barbara (who could sell ice to an Eskimo.)

Among the tough sells of the process was the one to the community. Everyone was suspicious of the white folks who had invaded their town. The local white residents called us “Cof Workers” – a name from the Civil Rights movement of the 60s which stood for “Colored Folks.”

The preschool started slow, and without the help of the community teachers, it wouldn't have been possible. They assuaged the fears of parents and invited eligible children, so we gradually reached our small complement of wee ones. However, we were still battling ‘ancient prejudices.’ The first rainy day we had, I received a call from Lelia Ann asking if the teachers had to come to work. I said “Of course! It's just rain.” The only two children at school that day were Ali and Alison. People don't work in the fields when it's raining. We learned over time, and we also began to change images.

I want to mention one thing before closing. One of my big insights was the extraordinary replicability of the curriculum. We faithfully followed the four elements, but based the curricular activities on the local environment, our limited finances, etc. The letter B was based

on Beans from the soybean fields, making bean art, eating beans; the trips included walking around Pace pointing out where things used to be. We couldn't afford a van nor did we have insurance to transport the children. Yet we saw the same wonderful evolution in knowledge and self-confidence in our little coterie, as well as in the teachers themselves. There were exceptions among both children and staff as well as many frustrations, but the mere existence of this resource was evidence of positive change.