

# Memories of Jan Woodhouse

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I can't honestly remember when or where I first met Jan. What I do know is that she began to take classes toward a doctorate in adult and continuing education at NIU in 1996. It must have been during the next two years that I first met her as I was chair of the adult and continuing education program at that time and usually met all new incoming doctoral students during their application process. But I really became acquainted with Jan starting in the fall semester of 1998 when she was finally admitted to the doctoral program and enrolled in a series of courses I offered in teaching adults English as a second language. Although Jan was not really interested in pursuing a vocation in this area, she knew this was an important area of the program and was interested in expanding her knowledge of adult learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As I began to work with Jan in 1998 in the first of five graduate level classes I quickly observed that Jan fit the description of the classic lifelong learner. She was curious about the world. And she was eager to engage with faculty and other students about what they were interested in. Likewise, she was not shy to share with others her interest in education. It wasn't long before she and I were having extended conversations about our shared interests. We grew up in similar environments, small rural Midwestern communities. We both came of age during the 1960s and were both greatly influenced by the social movements of that decade, the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. The influence of adult education came later through the writings of Paolo Freire internationally, and Myles Horton, in North America. What drove Jan to this field were the concepts of participatory education and civil society, and how people acting on the local level can be empowered through education to impact policy that can improve our environment and civic culture for future generations.

From our many conversations, one phrase comes quickly to mind: place-based pedagogy. Jan's first passion was the environment, and the importance and relevance of where we work and live to our identity. She had a deep and abiding love for Mother Earth and was deeply concerned for its future. She fought hard to convince others about the need to learn more about sustainability in adult education. To that end, in 1999, when I sent out a call for students to help organize the annual adult education student retreat, Jan was the first to offer her assistance, and in the process made sure that we incorporated sustainability as a theme in our planning. When I sent out a call for students to help organize the 2002 Midwest Research to Practice Conference in Adult and Community Education, Jan quickly offered her assistance and effectively lobbied to identify sustainability as a program theme. Soon after, she worked hard to convince members of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education to think of sustainability as a curricular theme in their programs. So, of course, it made sense that Jan would identify a problem associated with her interest in the environment and sustainability that would drive her dissertation research.

Jan was someone who believed that she could positively impact the world, if even in a small way. And she sought out people who shared her optimism. I'm sure it came through in her teaching. It certainly came through in her research. When we started to talk about her research inter-

ests and how a dissertation problem could be identified, I really struggled with her to keep it simple and manageable. Jan thought globally. She wanted to explore some aspect of sustainability and adult education on a global scale. The document which drove Jan's interest in the role of the environment in education was Agenda 21, a report published in 1992 by the United Nations and based on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro that same year.

Based on Jan's understanding of Agenda 21, she traveled to international meetings to talk with leaders on the subject. The first of these meetings was in Scotland in 2002. The second international meeting took her to Greece in 2003. As a result of her attendance at these meetings and discussions with participants from all over the world, Jan started to talk about comparing community-based initiatives in three different countries. It wasn't long before it became evident that restrictions imposed on such international travel and questions of personal safety for Americans traveling abroad coming on the heels of September 11, 2001, convinced Jan to restrict her travel and dissertation research to the United States.

What made Jan's eventual research plan possible was her discovery that there were communities in the United States where local citizens were taking steps toward cultural and environmental sustainability in part inspired by the blueprint suggested by Agenda 21. She discovered these citizens in Waterloo, Iowa; in Racine, Wisconsin; and in Champaign, Illinois, not far from the family farm where she grew up. Once these communities were discovered, Jan spent weeks and months interviewing participants in these projects and gathering documents which would occupy her for hours on end. She would come back from her visits to these communities, filled with excitement and energy, and overwhelmed by a mountain of data.

It was all I could do to keep her moving toward the end, which is not unusual for the type of qualitative study Jan was pursuing. She had hours of recorded interviews that needed to be transcribed and analyzed, along with reams of documentation from the three communities that became the foci of her research. It must have been in 2008 that she met with her dissertation committee with the bulk of her data gathered and analyzed. Soon after that I noticed her energy beginning to wane. She confided in me that she was undergoing tests for a recurrence of the cancer that had struck her more than several decades before. In the summer of 2010 Jan was hospitalized for the last time. By that time, she had nearly completed the final draft of her dissertation. I visited her in her hospital room in late June of 2010 and was able to tell her that she would receive her doctorate. She died several days later.

I consider myself very fortunate to have had this extended relationship as co-learner with Jan at NIU. She taught me much about the meaning of life, the concept of sustainability, and the energy that comes from conducting research on a topic of great interest and import. Although Jan didn't survive to see her dissertation in final form, she could take some comfort in knowing that during her brief time on Mother Earth, she had impacted a number of people, not only locally, but also globally. To this end, I hope this issue of *Thresholds* will create an interest by many more to pick up Jan's dissertation and continue to learn from her for many years to come.