

## **KEEPING THE ALOHA SPIRIT ALIVE**

By Barnes Boffey

At the end of each summer, we receive many notes from parents, whose common theme is "Our son/daughter has become a different person, pleasant to have around, confident, centered. How do you do it?" In answer to that question, Posie and the Directors have conceived a series of articles for the Ohana Newsletter describing the secret to our success. The following kick-off article by Barnes Boffey details the philosophical bedrock of our work with children, and in the Fall issue we will feature anecdotal stories of this philosophy in action. Future articles will focus on different aspects of the sustaining philosophy that supports our work, throughout the year, in all of our programs.

The challenge of replicating what seems to be both indefinable and intangible is an awesome one, but that is the task we all faced in 1968 when The Aloha Foundation was born. Since 1905, the Gulick Family had owned and run the camps, and certainly no one disagreed that there was a truly magical quality about a summer on Lake Morey or Lake Fairlee. The core of the Aloha experience was so unique that many wondered if the Aloha spirit might not wither or die during the years of transition.

By every standard imaginable, the Aloha spirit has not suffered. In fact, it has grown stronger and more thoroughly integrated into what are now five major programs (Aloha, Hive, Lanakila, Hulbert and Horizons). In the Gulick years, the essential elements and psychological base of the Aloha experience were more dependent on individual family members, but today the psychology of how we work with people is shared across camp lines and integrated in everything we do. Just as there is a set of activities which define our programs, there is also a psychology which defines how we perceive the world. These ideas are consistently and clearly articulated year after year, giving us both a common vocabulary and a common set of assumptions with which to develop program, work with people, and make decisions.

When The Foundation purchased the camps from the Gulicks, we had to find ways to understand the "indefinable intangible" so that we could keep it alive in years to come. Was it just being nice to kids? Was it just our focus on simplicity as a way of developing the inner child? Was it the extra attention from ample staff or the non-competitive atmosphere? Was it just the fact that in an organization run by women the processes were more nurturing and child-focused? Was it the spiritual base that could be traced back to the Gulicks' having been missionaries in Hawaii? The answer is both "Yes" and "No." All these were contributing factors in the development of the Aloha worldview, but there were other factors as well which generations to come would clarify and expand.

When new campers and counselors come to the Aloha camps, they almost always walk away stronger, happier, more responsible and more loving. In Carol Hulbert's words, they are "finer people." We get these results year after year because, for significant amounts of time, members of the Aloha community are thoroughly immersed in an environment where those around them perceive the world in ways quite different from those pervading our society. At most schools in the "outside world," for example, when there is a problem with behavior that does not conform

to a standard, the primary method of dealing with that misbehavior is to employ “power”: change your behavior or else. Imposing consequences is generally the first line of action, and the prevailing belief is that we need to stop the behavior by “getting tough” and showing the “offenders” that we will “not put up with it.”

Within the Aloha family, our primary response is to love people through their difficulties. We believe that love is the most powerful tool available. With that belief, we ask people whether their behaviors are helping them become the people *they* want to be - people who can feel caring and proud of how they have behaved. We rely on internal rather than external evaluation as the strongest motivator, and our work with children and adults is often geared toward holding up a mirror rather than an accusatory finger. In the context of trust, genuine concern and compassion, the person “misbehaving” almost always answers, “no, that behavior isn’t working, and it’s not the person I want to be.” Then they can begin to create the many “yeses” that will bring success in the summer.

There are other paradigms at the core of the Aloha spirit: a strong emphasis on trust vs. mistrust, process vs. product, simplicity vs. complexity, and motivation by encouragement vs. directives. But none is more important to maintaining and enhancing the Aloha spirit than our basic beliefs about why people do what they do, and therefore how to help people take responsibility for their lives.

One of the major shifts that a camper or counselor makes in an Aloha program is to become less a victim of the circumstances of their lives and more a creator of themselves as a fine person within those circumstances. The Aloha environment consciously rejects victimizing others or ourselves, and supports learning to be responsible for how we act, think and feel. This concept is at the heart of the Aloha psychology, a set of ideas which inform our thinking and decision-making about everything from working with homesickness, to program development, to after-taps counselor behavior.

The Aloha psychology can be described as an internal control psychology, in contrast to the external control psychology which underlies most thinking about human behavior in our major societal institutions: school, family, marriage, corrections and management. The first major belief in these institutions is that we do what we do because of how we feel. (“I felt depressed so I’m sitting here doing nothing!” or “I felt angry and that’s why I yelled at him.”) The second major belief is that I feel the way I do because some person, place or thing makes me feel that way. (“My mother *made* me angry,” or “My *friends* make me feel stupid.”) Given these two beliefs, we create a society of people who have a “victim” mentality in everything they do. (“It’s not my fault, she called me names and made me angry” and “If you would just stop being so uptight I wouldn’t be upset... then I could relax.”) We believe that others cause our feelings of both happiness and sadness, and we therefore spend our efforts in trying to control the behavior of others so we can feel the way we want to. (“If I can just get her to start cleaning her room, then I wouldn’t be so upset all the time.”)

This external control psychology is what destroys relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, and managers and employees. The major

motivational question you would hear in a camp based on external control psychology would be “How are we going to *make* these kids .....?”

The Aloha psychology is internal. The belief here is that what goes on around me is simply information, information about which I can choose to feel one way or another. If someone calls me a name, I can choose to feel angry, sad, sorry for that person’s lack of understanding, grateful I am not them, or any of a number of other emotions. Internal control psychology tells us that our pain in the world comes not from the circumstances of our lives, but from the way we deal with those circumstances.

Please do not infer that gaining skill in “choosing” our feelings and thoughts is an easy process; it takes time, energy, and good role models. When we work with children we understand that moving in this direction is a developmental process, just like all other growth in childhood. The most important thing is to give children experience with this way of thinking in their early years so they may approach their lives with new assumptions. We can help them learn to face life with new questions. When we are having difficulty, the question moves away from “What is making me feel bad?”, advancing to “How do I feel in this situation?”, and eventually to “How would I like to be feeling?” As the question changes, the responsibility shifts, and we can now work on changing how we deal with the information the world is sending us rather than being a victim.

One small example of this distinction is the questions we ask children when they are homesick. In an external control model, one would ask, “Why are you homesick?” and “What’s making you feel homesick?” In an internal control model we would frame our discussion with questions like, “Do you want to be homesick?”, “Can you imagine being happy even though you are not with your mom?”, “Do you want to be enjoying camp rather than feeling sad all the time?”

The internal questioning is based on the assumption that your feelings are coming from the inside out, not from the outside in, and that is a crucial piece of the Aloha psychology. We treat human beings as if they have a greater control over their feelings than they ever believed possible, and we help them learn to exercise those choices in as many areas as possible. Without this knowledge, the healthy and loving relationships that provide an atmosphere where children can risk, trust, grow and succeed would not be possible.

With a belief in external control, our lives become a series of relationships in which we either manipulate or are manipulated, and a deep spiritual trust becomes almost impossible. We can use hard manipulation (anger, yelling, threats or coercion) or soft manipulation (kindness, praise, rewards or guilt), but in either case the basic process is manipulative. Internal control frees us from manipulation. Learning that we have choices about how we feel, regardless of the behavior of others, allows us to be in honest and loving relationships based on true responsibility, self-discipline and love as something we create rather than just wait for from others. This is the gift of the Aloha spirit.

### **Lanakila Counselor Training to the Rescue!**

Jason Knowles (Lanakila counselor '97-'99) is training to be a London policeman. In his apprenticeship he was sent to an apartment building to interview a man about his stolen car. When the elevator door opened, he was met by an elderly man swinging a baseball bat and yelling profanities. Jason was so shocked he was a bit immobilized. Having NO ideas as a trainee how to handle the situation, he announced his intentions as a policeman and what he came to do, and then asked, "What do you want to happen? Will hitting me with the baseball bat help you retrieve your stolen car? Let's try to work this out together, I'm on your side." The man eventually was calmed and Jason left shaken but feeling successful. Returning to his supervisors and classmates he found that the event was a set up and he got the highest grade in the class! Jason says once he began the line of questioning he had learned and used at Lanakila, it was simple. This episode is testament that once learned, the process becomes second nature and can work at any time and in any scenario.