

October 25, 2006

Happy to be Here: Bridget Wingert

Graduate school is the first to offer degrees in restorative practices

At the eighth annual International Conference on Restorative Practices, where badges listed home countries like UK, Australia, Hungary and Norway, the leader wore a badge that said simply "Ted Wachtel, Pipersville."

Thirty years ago, Ted and Susan Wachtel were teachers in the Pennridge School District. Their involvement with at-risk students led to founding a group home.

In 1977 they started the Community Service Foundation, and later, Buxmont Academy. Today, the institutions include eight alternative schools, 16 group homes and cooperative programs with schools throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania.

The schools and group homes were built on a philosophy of restorative practices, a way of looking at education and the justice system to repair harm done to people and relationships. The focus is not on punishment but on fixing. The offender is asked "How are you going to make this offense right?" It turns around the old idea of suspension or other punishment and demands that a student participate in solving a problem.

Restorative practices took hold first in the group homes and working with youths in the justice system, then in Wachtel's privately operated schools and finally in public schools – the first at Palisades High School and Middle School, the second at Springfield Township High School in Montgomery County.

The process has worked. In four years, Palisades had reduced disciplinary referrals by 50 percent and Springfield had similar results. The schools provide a high level of control along with a high level of support for students.

Since the Wachtels' initiative the philosophy of restorative practice has taken



The International Institute for Restorative Practices has classes on an upper floor at a building in the City of Bethlehem's historic district.

hold worldwide. In 2000, Wachtel, who is also co-author of the "Toughlove" books, formed the International Institute for Restorative Practices. And on October 19, IIRP officially opened the world's first graduate degree-granting institution specializing in the social science of restorative practices.

The announcement was made at the international conference in Bethlehem, where the school is located – in a downtown building that houses one of the Buxmont Academy schools. In September IIRP opened classes leading to master's degrees in Restorative Practices and Education and Restorative Practices and Youth Counseling. The degree was authorized this year by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

At the conference, Joe Roy, who left Palisades to join Springfield as principal after his work with restorative practices, described a situation that called for attention. A group of eighth grade boys ganged up on a classmate – a half dozen pushing and shoving.

"They would have been suspended," Roy said, in the traditional system. Instead, the victim and offenders came together at a meeting with parents, principal and a counselor. Roy brought in a few senior boys, basketball players like

the eighth graders, to let the offenders know "we don't treat people that way." The idea was to show the bullying students that their behavior impacted the entire school.

The process had worked in Palisades, Roy said, as soon as teachers "started to pay attention to the affective side," they could see the change in attitude working in favor of learning.

Developing the schools and the international ties was a steady process managed by Wachtel and the educators associated with him. Getting to the point of founding the graduate school took some extra help.

Patrick McDonough, who is the school's vice president for academic affairs, was invited on board for his marketing expertise – he knew the higher education system. McDonough retired after 43 years working in tenured positions at seven universities, playing every role, professor, dean and president. He studied management processes, initially theater management, and knew the ins and outs of organizational development.

McDonough, a resident of Long Beach, Calif., is a senior fellow of the James McGrogor Burns Academy of Leadership of the University of Maryland, has spent four years helping IIRP in its quest to establish the graduate school and he will work with Middle States Association for accreditation. The application should be filed around Thanksgiving. He spends about a week a month on site in Bethlehem and its "back office" in Doylestown.

When he met Ted Wachtel, McDonough thought "This is divine madness. These people are nuts." Then he caught the fever and joined them.

Next year's international conference will be in Hungary, one of 16 countries allied with IIRP.