

Emergency Pedagogy in Los Angeles

— Christine Burke

It is 5 o'clock on a Saturday and an unusual group is gathering. Movement specialists, a movement therapist, medical professionals, artists, a few MFAs, art therapists, and a speech artist/communication studies professor have gathered. Almost all have been or are practicing teachers. The uncommon thing is that this is a team of Emergency Pedagogues which has gathered to meet with the Waldorf school communities devastated by the fires that raged through southern California, displacing nearly 200,000 people—families, children, community members. This team of 24 came from across the world to use emergency skills as teachers to meet and help these brothers and sisters to process the traumas the fires and their aftermath have caused.

This Los Angeles Fires Intervention team split in two over the week of February 9, 2025 to brave

the winding freeways each morning and meet the children, teachers, and parents from two schools that burned to the ground—Pasadena Waldorf School and Westside Waldorf School—with the evidence-based Emergency Pedagogy sessions. These sessions were filled with arts and movement, song and artistic speech. In the afternoons we met the public at large in both downtown Los Angeles at the Natural History Museum, and in Pasadena at the Rudolf Steiner Community Center.

One part of the sessions included trauma-informed, art-based, quiet activities, such as watercolor painting with simple colors, storytelling, dynamic drawing, free drawing, handwork, string games, and clay/plasticine molding. The other part of the sessions included trauma-informed activities to foster social movement, self-care, and connection, including rhythmic hand



Photo courtesy of Christine Burke

games, artistic speech, balance games, eurythmy, and therapeutic educational games of trust. The sessions were structured so that the Emergency Pedagogues could meet the children where they were in the trauma. The training includes learning to work with flexibility and knowing the signs and symptoms that can arise after a crisis has occurred.

What is Emergency Pedagogy? It is the inspiration of Bernd Ruf, founder and director of the international organization Emergency Pedagogy Without Borders and the Parzifal Center in Karlsruhe, Germany. Ruf, a long-time Waldorf teacher, founded the Parzifal Center in Karlsruhe in the 1990's for what were then called "wayward" children. He soon discovered that these children were almost entirely children who had been traumatized from a variety of events that they not had able to process. The healing education offered to these children became the basis for the sessions that Ruf developed for EPWB when, after a meeting with the war in Lebanon in 2006, he was able to first experience how the methods used on the long-time traumatized children could positively activate healing forces in people—especially children, but also adults—that could prevent the onset of post-traumatic disorders and diseases.

Bernd Ruf has been training teams of Emergency teachers all over the world since 2006 and has activated teams in almost all major crisis situations, both in natural disasters and man-made disasters, across the globe. Ruf joined us on this crisis intervention in Los Angeles and was able to continue training some of the team as well as speak to parents and teachers

about how to work with exercises to further help the healing process where needed. Emergency Pedagogy Without Borders: USA is in the process of forming a non-profit, with teams in California, Michigan and New Hampshire, and growing.

Dr. Ida Oberman, founder of the first trauma-informed, urban, community school in the USA (in Oakland, CA), brought and trained her whole staff in Emergency Pedagogy in 2012, and co-led the first EPWB crisis intervention during the Camp Fires in Northern California. Here in Los Angeles, we began training teachers in December of last year.

The World Central Kitchen supported this effort by providing hot lunches and dinners for the children and families along with local partnering restaurants: Bravo Toast, Little Fatty, Xuntos, Lola's Mexican, Flaming Grain. Thanks to these incredibly generous restaurants and food trucks and World Central Kitchen for all they do for people in disaster zones. ♦

For more information about or to support future crisis interventions by Emergency Pedagogy Without Borders: USA, email Christine Burke at epwb.usa.calif@gmail.com.

Christine M. Burke, a trained Waldorf Teacher, works and/or teaches as a Creative Speech Artist/ Logodynamics Practitioner, Emergency Pedagogue, Communication Studies Professor, and entrepreneur. Christine lives and is active in her local community of Ventura, California and serves Anthroposophy on a variety of North American councils and boards.