

Reaching Out

Joan Almon, Chair

International work has been part of our Association's work from its beginning. The Kindergarten Association was founded by a group of 23 kindergarten teachers in the summer of 1983, and our first major task was to help 50 North American kindergarten teachers attend the Dornach kindergarten conference at Easter 1984. The international movement got into our blood, and it's been there ever since.

As the worldwide kindergarten movement has grown (there are now about 1300 kindergartens in 50 countries), the need for activity and support from all the member countries has also grown. Germany still provides the bulk of financial support with incredible generosity year after year, but other countries, including our own, are beginning to take on more responsibility. This year we approached the kindergartens and schools more directly for membership dues, and are very grateful for the result. We also want to thank all of the individuals who have contributed to the International Fund.

A total of 175 kindergartens joined the Association this year, and of this number, 55 paid their full international dues. An additional 24 made donations. This was a large increase from previous years, but still leaves room for further growth next year. This is the time of year when budgets are being formed, so do ask your finance committee to include funds for the international work in your school's budget. Requested international dues are \$75 per year.

This year the combined dues and donations for international work total about \$7200 to date, well up from the \$3000 we previously collected. These funds are used to support the work of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association which strengthens kindergartens and training seminars around the world, especially in third world countries. I recently traveled to Thailand and the Philippines under the auspices of the International Association and met with wonderful teachers.

In Thailand, Porn Panosot, a doctor who trained to become a Waldorf teacher at Sunbridge, has founded a kindergarten and will soon open a first grade. He and I gave talks at a Bangkok University sharing insights about fairy tales and the story curriculum of grades one to six. We also performed a marionette play. This was my third trip to Thailand and the Philippines and we've established a good working relationship over the years.

In Manila, the kindergarten was still in session (April and May are summer vacation months in that part of the world), and I was able to do a marionette show for the children, which is always a joy. They are so open after a play, and I had delightful conversations with several of the older ones who were getting ready for first grade. I was also able to peer into mouths and do informal assessments for first grade readiness. It was also wonderful to see a play of St. Francis very ably performed by the first and second graders.

Also in Manila, 30 teachers and future teachers gathered to learn about the Waldorf kindergarten during a one week course. I was able to co-teach with Thea Kaesbach, a friend and kindergarten eurythmist from England, and it was wonderful to work together with her. The course participants were very open to learning about the Waldorf kindergarten and their eurythmy was outstanding.

A high point of the trip for me was a special meeting in Manila of the local Waldorf teachers with representatives of the International Association to plan an English language kindergarten training that could serve southeast Asia. This would be a wonderful step forward in that part of the world where interest in Waldorf is growing rapidly but where teachers lack the funds to travel to the west for training.

It is our hope that the International Association will be able to find the funds to underwrite such a program for at least three years. Our dues make such trainings possible.

Our Association also played an active role this year in raising funds for a wonderful building project in the Philippi township outside Cape Town. The kindergarten there meets in a little wooden hut about the size of a caboose. Forty to fifty children come to this kindergarten. I've had a chance to visit the kindergarten and also to meet with the township committee that helps the kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher is a warm and lovely woman who is being trained at the Centre for Creative Education, a Waldorf training that works with dozens of township teachers. The Centre has raised money for creating a straw bale building in Philippi that would house the kindergarten and a seminar room for the Waldorf courses for the township kindergarten teachers. Most of the building was completed when the work had to stop for a lack of \$12,000. I spoke of this project at the east coast kindergarten conference where \$1700 was collected in the baskets. Then I took the message to the west coast teachers' conference in Sacramento where an anonymous donor placed over \$2000 in new \$100 bills into the bag. You can imagine my shock that night when I counted up the money. Private donations were also made and a check for \$6500 was sent to the project. Now we are hoping they will find the balance and that the building will soon be completed.

The Centre for Creative Education has another need and that is for an experienced kindergarten teacher to spend a year (or part of a year) in Cape Town to help with the kindergarten training. Ann Scharfman heads up the kindergarten training along with Nomangezi Mzamo, whom many teachers met in Wilton in 1996. Aim is in great need of an additional colleague for the next school year. If you are interested, you may contact me or write directly to the Centre's director, Peter van Alphen, at McGregor House, 4 Victoria Rd., Plumstead 7800, Cape Town, South Africa. Tel. 27-21-797 6802 or FAX 27-21-797 7095.

For me, personally, it has been a wonderful experience to travel to Asian countries as well as to South Africa, Russia, and other countries to offer courses and to meet as many children and teachers as I can. I wish I could take you all with me, so that you could experience the hunger for Waldorf education around the world, especially in countries which remain poor and troubled. The children and adults recognize it as a form of nourishment for the soul and spirit, as well as the body, and they treasure it even more than we in the west are apt to do. If ever you feel discouraged or burned out, hop on a plane and visit the teachers of South Africa, South America or eastern Europe. They and their children will fill you with a new enthusiasm for life.