

# Helio gram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

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## Supporting Bridge Builders:

# Connecting Communities of Color with White Communities

By Nicole Pearson

*A note from Christina: My friend Nicole is an artist and activist with a deep commitment to transforming her community by combining political activism, relationship-building, and art. She inspires me with her belief that systemic and political change can and should be fun. She has the gift to connect people personally to social justice issues. Nicole grew up in a culturally aware African American family in Anchorage, Alaska – a predominantly Native Alaskan and European American town. This gives her the ability to gracefully navigate in European American culture, African American culture, and other communities of color. Because of this, Nicole is a bridge builder between white activist communities and communities of color.*

*A few months ago, I watched Nicole struggle with this role as she made a decision to leave her job at a high-profile social change organization where she was one of the few people of color on a predominantly white staff. I asked Nicole to share some of her feelings about her experience, and to offer tips for European Americans who want to support the bridge builders in their organizations and communities.*

## A promising start

In 2002 I began a new job with hope, energy and enthusiasm. I was organizing national retreats of social change activists from many walks of life and backgrounds. I believed that bringing these people together to share solutions and vision was helping to create a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world. I put much of my energy into expanding the pool of people at the table to include youth, artists,

heliotrope 1. A flower that turns to face the sun. 2. An instrument for making long-term observations. 3. A purple that is bluer and stronger than cobalt violet.

people of color, and people with diverse definitions of what we mean by “social change.”

## Frustrating barriers to change

After a year I hit a wall. I was exhausted and frustrated. All of my energy was spent maintaining my connection and hopefulness to this organization with very little support in return. While I knew that my work was highly valued, I began to realize that my ability to build bridges between different communities was actually letting my white colleagues off the hook. As long as I was taking care of this, they did not have to.

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## Connecting Communities of Color with White Communities

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I was expending a lot of emotional and mental energy to make the workplace (predominantly white, middle class, suburban) feel safe enough for me (Black, of slim financial means, urban). I was spending a lot of time downplaying my differences to ensure that a lot of well-meaning white people did not feel uncomfortable or guilty. I am different – not only because I am a Black woman, but because I am a young woman, an artist, an unconventional woman. While I felt appreciated, I also felt slightly exoticized. Constantly a fish out of water.

Seeing a teaching opportunity, the three people of color on staff did approach organizational leadership about issues of race and class. We made many attempts to have discussions around issues of diversity, but were routinely told it had already been done or that we could go ahead and do this work – but with no support from other staff. My hope and enthusiasm sank.

### A growing sense of isolation and frustration

To compound my sense of isolation, the organization was located a ferry-ride away - literally on an island. Spending three hours a day to commute from the Central District to an all-white community in order to increase “diversity” began to feel like a stretch. Despite my attempts to gently point this out, the organization made no effort to examine how its location in an isolated and privileged community was affecting its ability to develop relationships with other diverse communities in Puget Sound. I was working to organize diverse retreats nationally, but was isolated from local communities of color due to geographic and cultural barriers. I could no longer justify this to myself, or my local colleagues of color, and made the painful decision to leave my job.

### Bridge building is only the first step

Hiring bridge builders is only the first step for social change organizations and human service agencies if they are serious about developing relationships with diverse communities and organizations. This means that we all must spend some time examining our own

ambivalence around working with people from different cultures – whether they be ethnic, organizational, or life-style oriented – and make a commitment to do this work despite the difficulties. Logistically, culturally, financially – moving out of our comfort zone is a struggle that cannot be undertaken by one or two “outreach” staff or staff of color. It must be embraced by every individual in an organization.

### “Crossing” the bridge: lessons learned

We are all fumbling along as we work to undo centuries of institutionalized racism. We need to support our bridge builders, and understand that they cannot take this on by themselves. Below I offer a few suggestions for supporting bridge-builders of color who work in predominantly white organizations. It is my hope that we can continue to add to this list.

- Recognize that people of color working in predominantly white organizations will feel isolated. Make efforts and take risks to ensure that

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## HELIOTROPE



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they are not the only ones who are aware of this isolation or working to decrease it.

- Make a commitment to increase your organizational visibility at local events involving communities of color. This means that white people in your organization are present and committed to outreach – rather than relying on a few bridge builders.
- Recognize that the non-profit culture of scarcity (in resources, salaries, benefits) combined with long work hours is unappealing to people who may have grown up with scarcity. It is easier to accept low wages and long work hours when you have a middle-class safety net. This may be the reason that non-profits and other social change organizations struggle to hire and retain people of color. Because a disproportionate number of us grew up poor, once we go to college and acquire the skills for a professional career, we are less likely to want to work for \$20,000 a year when we can get an entry-level job in the private sector for \$50,000 a year. For someone who grew up in financial comfort, starting a career at a lower salary may seem almost virtuous.
- Be mindful of the physical location of your organization's office. Are you asking people of color to leave their community to spend their workday in a predominantly white community? Are there ways to allow for flex-time, or to accommodate bridge builders to work from their homes in their own communities some of the time? Effective bridge building work is done in the communities you are reaching out to. **H**

*Nicole Pearson is a theater artist and activist. She spends her days working with middle school students, female inmates and other marginalized communities to develop creative tools to tell their stories and to broaden the understanding of social change and engagement.*

Heliotrope has made a commitment to build our cultural competence and share ideas and information that we think would be helpful to others who have the same goal. We thank Nicole for sharing her story about what it feels like to be a person of color inside of a predominantly white organization.

## We Support the Seattle Families and Education Levy

For Seattle voters, or anyone eligible to vote in Seattle, we encourage you to strongly consider supporting the renewal of the City of Seattle Families and Education Levy. This will be the second renewal of this levy, which provides a great deal of support to help children and youth to improve their academic success and overall healthy development. We have seen the incredible importance of Family Support Workers in helping families so children can focus on learning. We have also seen how after-school activities make a huge difference for students who would otherwise have no safe and healthy place to be when school is out. The levy will be on the September ballot. You can get more information by going to [www.cityofseattle.net/neighborhoods/education/](http://www.cityofseattle.net/neighborhoods/education/).

“Never underestimate the importance of what we are doing here, never hesitate to tell the truth, and never, ever give in – or give up.”

—Bella Savitsky Abzug

## A New Resource For Strengths-Based Work

Most of us have heard of the DSM-IV TR. It is a manual used by counselors and psychologists to classify and diagnose human “pathologies” and mental illnesses. In fact, if you have ever used your health insurance to pay for counseling services, you probably have been assigned a DSM diagnosis!

We are thrilled to announce a groundbreaking new resource to balance the deficit-based approach currently present in psychological diagnosis. Martin Seligman (former American Psychological Association President and author of *Authentic Happiness* (see Spring 2003 *Heliogram*, volume 5, number 1) and Christopher Peterson have written a research-based manual to assist with classification of human strengths. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2004, \$75.00) is hot off the press and will be reviewed in the next issue of the *Heliogram*. For more information in the meantime, go to <http://www.authentichappiness.org>



# A Year of Learning and Loving

By Nancy Ashley

As last spring's issue of *Heliogram* was being prepared, my husband Fred and I (who have no parenting experience) were awarded custody of a 13-year-old girl and an 11-year-old boy – a sister and brother removed from their home by order of the juvenile court. I had been a Big Sister mentor to the girl for two and a half years at that time. They lived with us for five months before moving to a wonderful foster home this fall. We became new parents and empty nesters in a fast and intense time period. We still see the kids a couple of times a week, and plan to do so for a very long time. Fred and I are both different people because of this experience.

## So many teachers, so much to learn

My learning was immeasurable, sometimes very painful, sometimes profound. My primary teachers were the kids; others were my friends, colleagues, neighbors, and professional helpers. I learned that kids really are resilient, and that developmental assets work in real life. I learned the sounds of anguish in a young girl crying for hours over her lost family, of a giggling young boy, the notes of a first violin lesson, of neighbors splashing in our (!) plastic swimming pool, the rare sound of silence, and of my own anger and frustration in trying to advocate for the kids in the child welfare system. The parents I know have been supportive and amused by most of my experiences; yet often shocked at learning what actually happens in the child welfare system.

My initial goal when the kids moved in was to do the best we could and to avoid having them go to a strange home right after leaving their own. After three weeks, I realized we had fallen madly in love with them. As all people who love kids know, that makes things both harder and easier.

## Living on the other side

I have been humbled by living on the other side of a human services system. My usual role in policy and planning didn't begin to prepare me as a consumer. I practiced law for ten years and served as a guardian ad litem (advocate for abused and neglected children) for almost as long. I had a clear picture into the workings

of Child Protective Services (CPS) and juvenile court. Yet I was stunned by how it felt to be at the mercy of this system.

What concerned me is that we had one of the better situations – the best caseworkers, psychological evaluator, attorney for the kids, and guardian ad litem. Because of my training and experience, flexible work schedule, and financial resources, I navigated better than most. Yet I often spent four hours a day calling therapists, waiting for court hearings, trying to get information, working with the person trying to schedule visitation, filling out forms that nobody else had time to do, or calling one of my professional resources to try to find out what was really going on.

The “little” frustrations were showing up for a court hearing that had been rescheduled but no one told us, getting paperwork that was so incomprehensible that I began recycling it without even reading it, and learning that the person who was supposed to be supervising the visitation between the kids and their dad was not adequately alert.

One of the toughest things for me to deal with was that both of the kids' therapists wrote letters to the court at the request of CPS that were, in my opinion, contrary to the emotional needs of the kids. Each worked at a different agency. Both lost track of the fact that although the state is their funder, the kids are their clients. I was equally distraught another day after a disagreement with the caseworker, which ended with her suggesting that she might come and take the kids away.

A scary practice in the child welfare system is making fast decisions with life-long consequences with little involvement from anyone who knows the children. “Insiders” move in little groups, catching each other between multiple cases in one court session, talking shorthand about what to do. (Yes, I used to be one of those insiders, and am appalled at what I did not understand.) One day therapeutic foster care was necessary, the next it was not. We needed to do a psychological evaluation to guide treatment for the kids, then we didn't. Often the best way to get something done was to get around the rules.

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## What I hope to contribute from this experience

I plan to try much harder to imagine the consumer side of any project in which I am involved. While I thought I was reasonably understanding and empathetic, I did not deeply know the struggles of someone on the other side of the fence.

I have joined the board of the University Family YMCA. Of all of the organizations that helped us, this branch and many other YMCA staff stood on their heads to help the kids. The YMCA was the one place I knew I could call and get help without hassle. I was amazed at how far out of their way the staff would go to find a solution. Both kids attended the YMCA Sand Point day camp last summer and had an incredible time – the staff were caring, great role models, fun, creative and good communicators with

us. There were lots of outdoor activities, and *never* a TV or video in sight. I hope to serve as well as they have served us.

I want to dig deeper into what I've learned to try to identify and advocate for changes to improve the child welfare system. I realize I'm the thousandth person with this desire in the last ten years. Maybe it takes a thousand and one. I don't know what form this will take, but it's constantly on my mind. We can do better.

## Thanks and a challenge

I want to thank the many incredible people who were kind and resourceful and generous in helping us and the kids. I want to challenge each of you who works in human services systems, if you have not done so already, to try to "walk a mile" in the shoes of people in the programs you run, fund or plan for. **H**

## Big Changes for Christina

A surprising thing happened to me in my mid-thirties. I acknowledged a deeply buried dream and ended up in graduate school. In October 2003 I started a Master's program in clinical psychology at Antioch University Seattle with a focus on adolescent psychology and multicultural practice.

I blame Nancy! How many people can say that they have an employer and mentor who encourages them to explore their strengths, even if it means eventually quitting their job? My work at Heliotrope, and contact with so many amazing clients, played a major role in my decision to go back to school – and to eventually join many of you as I move from the policy and planning to the direct service side of social change work.

Heliotrope has involved me directly with human services fields, offering me a deeper understanding of how bias, oppression and inequity affect policy and systemic dynamics, and how these factors affect individual children, teens and adults. My career in the nonprofit and public sectors has instilled in me a deep awareness of the ways in which well-meaning, smart people can become

ineffective because of unresolved emotional issues or dysfunctional communication dynamics. I knew I was "in trouble" when I realized that I am often highly engaged by the point in change processes or meetings when people become most emotional and uncomfortable. Things often get uncomfortable when people begin telling the truth. That is when I want to dive in and hear more.

It was my experience with Powerful Voices that really pushed me to where I had to acknowledge the joy I receive from working with adolescents. I am awed by their brilliance, their resilience, and their insight and I believe that I am at a place in my life where I can be an advocate who truly listens to them without judgment or an agenda outside of their well-being. I remember those adults who listened to me when I was fourteen. I still feel their impact on my life.

I'll be at Heliotrope for the next several years as I complete school and get established as a therapist. After that I hope that I will always find ways to work with Nancy– and with many of you. Thanks to all of you who have taught me and inspired me to follow this dream.

–Christina



## Book & Movie Reviews:

# Focus on Girls

## When She Was Bad She Was Wicked: Girls and Aggression

By Christina Malecka

Girls are less aggressive than boys, right? And aren't boys the major perpetrators of bullying? In her book, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Harcourt, Inc., New York, \$25.00), Rachel Simmons sets out to explode those myths and to shed light on what she calls an epidemic of girl-on-girl bullying and aggression.

**A complex topic.** My first reaction was to feel defensive about this book. I loved the girls I worked with at Powerful Voices and respect the strong women I know. I think they're fantastic. It is hard to admit that we can be mean to each other. I also recognize the importance of allowing each other to be whole, complex people with both wonderful and not-so-attractive qualities. Ultimately, I found this book valuable and resonant with my own experiences as a girl.

**Indirect aggression, devastating consequences.** Rachel Griffins embarked on her research out of respect for girls and women and concern for their emotional well being. According to Griffins, "There is a hidden culture of girls' aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive, and destructive. It is not marked by the direct physical and verbal behavior that is primarily the province of boys. *Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms.*" (emphasis my own)

Griffin interviewed hundreds of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 (the age when bullying peaks) representing various races, socioeconomic backgrounds and regions of the country as well as many adult women. Through a compelling narrative that includes direct voices from women and girls, she shares devastating stories of backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name calling and manipulation that can leave deep scars years after the bullying has stopped. In

almost all of the examples, girls attack within tightly knit friendship networks – often turning on each other or ganging up on one girl who was once part of a social circle. Girls are often stealthy with their cruelty – conveyed with a look, a whisper, body language or a note – and as a result it often continues underneath the radar of detection by parents or teachers.

Griffins' major compelling assertion— and one that rings true to me as a white, middle class woman – is that girls are taught that it is not OK to express aggression or negativity. Yet, it is part of the human experience to feel anger, jealousy, resentment and competition. This contradiction forces girls to find indirect ways to express their negative feelings. Instead of saying, "I'm mad at you, I don't like the way you treated me on the playground," a girl might circumvent the discomfort of confrontation by spreading rumors, finding allies to gang up on the object of her anger or snubbing that other girl. Griffins offers a complex analysis of the different forms of aggression used by girls, offers suggestions for parents whose children are being bullied, and advice for teachers and other adults who work with girls to spot and interrupt this behavior.

**Girls of color not fully represented.** I was disappointed by what I perceived as the marginalization of girls of color in the writing format. As Griffins notes, indirect aggression is most often perpetrated by white, middle class girls, who may grow up with more rigid ideas about femininity than many girls of color. According to Griffins, because some girls of color – especially African American girls – are raised to be wary of racism and to be strong and direct, they may be less likely to bully indirectly and more likely to speak their minds. The problem is that this information was contained toward the end of the book, leading me to feel like the book over-generalized the experiences of white, middle class girls to apply to all girls. I was also concerned with Griffins' assertion that girl bullying is an "epidemic" without citing any quantitative evidence that a large number of girls do, indeed, experience girl bullying. The book is powerful, but anecdotal.

Despite its shortcomings, *Odd Girl Out* can assist everyone interested in supporting girls and helping them learn healthy and less hurtful ways to address conflicts. **H**



## “13” ...Starring Holly Hunter, Evan Rachel Wood and Nikki Reed

By Christina Malecka

“13” tells Tracy’s (Evan Rachel Wood) story as she becomes friends with the more-sophisticated Evie (Nikki Reed) and is quickly transformed from Barbie-playing girl to young woman at-risk. Tracy struggles with drugs, sex, crime and the quest for popularity. We empathize with her mom (Hunter) as she realizes how far Tracy is in over her head. Each character is portrayed with empathy. Tracy is not a “bad” kid. Like her, we are seduced by the excitement of suddenly being “cool” and in-the-know. The film did a wonderful job showing not only the fear associated with drugs and sex – but also the intoxicating excitement of taking a risk, being part of the cool group, and being rebellious. Even when it gets us in over our head, it can feel worth it.

Evie, the coolest girl in school, is a bully – but she is also a girl who has grown up very fast in a culture where sex sells. She feels powerful to be the “hottest girl in school” – often the only way that many girls feel they can attain power. Evie also has a desperate need to love and be loved. While she bullies Tracy, she loves Tracy, and Tracy’s mom. Evie wants Tracy’s loving, stable home. Mom Melanie is a recovering alcoholic, with a drug-addict boyfriend who still uses occasionally. She is a good mom, and person. Her struggles have made her more worldly, “hipper” to youth culture – but still shocked and heartbroken when she understands that her daughter is out of control.

The performances in this film are so real you think it’s a documentary. It is refreshing to see actual

teenagers playing themselves rather than employing young-looking 25-year-olds. It made it easier to identify my thirteen-year old self in the actors. Hunter nailed her role as the loving and “cool” mom that we all wish we had when we were younger.

The film was co-written by Nikki Reed (with Director Catherine Hardwicke), when she was thirteen. This stuff is real. Some adult reviewers said the film was shocking. We must listen and stop being easily shocked. When I went to read reviews by teens, an overwhelming majority said, “this is my life.” We cannot underestimate the level of sophistication of kids, and what they experiment with. Nor should we be shocked by belly-button piercings, punk rock culture or hip-hop culture. One criticism I have of this film is the depiction of hip-hop culture as a bad influence. Evie and Tracy (both white) were consistently shown in setting with Black boys, taking drugs, drinking, and being sexual. This felt racist.

What *is* shocking is that kids end up hurting themselves when they cannot tell us the truths about their lives, when they do not have adult guidance to help navigate a minefield of drugs, sex, self-injury, and violence. We need to understand kids, and help them to understand the pros and cons of the decisions they make – and know that they might still make risky decisions. At the end of this movie, when Melanie discovers how much trouble Tracy is in she puts her arms around her daughter and holds her. Tracy flails and screams—trying to get away—but Melanie holds on tight until her daughter feels safe. **H**

### Feedback from readers:

*“I’ve just finished reading the Heliogram. You are about Awesome Stuff! I too have based the bulk of my work for the last ten years on getting children’s voices heard. Our adult community misses so much by enclosing youth in schools...its really segregation. Ever onward!”*

Susan Quick,  
Cougar Ridge Elementary School

*“I love your newsletter. I may not read it in a timely fashion but I always save it and look forward to reading it. I enjoy learning more about the projects you are working on and I love the personal insight into the volunteer work that you guys are doing. I personally love Powerful Voices and was excited to see Christina is volunteering there.”*

Ceil Erickson, Director Community Grantmaking,  
The Seattle Foundation

# What Heliotrope is Working On

Christina and I continue to enjoy a variety of projects and challenges. We are staffing the *Opportunity Fund*, a collaborative group of private, corporate and public funders making strategic investments in high quality early childhood care and learning, after school programs, and youth development. The Fund's work on family, friend and neighbor caregiving is one of a few national models of how to begin to provide resources and support to informal caregivers who play a very important role in the development and school success of children.

Nancy is working on a project with Organizational Research Services for the *King County Community Services Division*, preparing a "guidebook" of the elements that result in programs that are successful at reducing recidivism of juvenile offenders. Based on rigorous research, the guidebook will provide local programs a research base for improving their programs, and alternatives to choosing "off the shelf" programs. The guidebook should be available by summer or fall.

Christina is heading up work for the Measurement, Evaluation and Advocacy Unit of the *Annie E. Casey Foundation*, preparing a series of topic papers to assist teams involved in comprehensive neighborhood transformation to use data effectively in their planning. Recent subjects have been about developing a theory of change, and using data to develop effective strategies.

Nancy is facilitating the *Council on Foundations'* strategic planning process. She is working with its Board and staff in gathering and analyzing data, and shaping a strategic framework.

Both of us are beginning work on a state plan for an effective system for quality after-school programs. We're happy to once again be working with *School's Out Washington* and several other partners.

Nancy continues to provide planning and facilitation support to *The Seattle Foundation*. She also recently completed work on gathering and analyzing data for a regional *domestic violence* plan.

We continue to enjoy the opportunity to bring ideas from a variety of projects into new endeavors, and to keep learning as we go. We are fortunate to have wonderful clients with whom to work. **H**

Don't forget to check  
out our web site:  
[www.heliotropeseattle.com](http://www.heliotropeseattle.com)

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