



TIDINGS

Newsletter of the Penikese Island School

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Tilt-A-Whirl Keeping your treatment bearings

By TOBY T. LINEAWEAVER, Executive Director

Summer fairs may come and go, but some things never change. As usual, there it was, smack in the middle of the carnival maelstrom: the Tilt-a-Whirl, creaking away with its usual shrieking load of passengers. Despite our trepidation (is that a loose bolt I see?), we bought our tickets, stepped aboard, and were quickly overtaken by the ride's familiar giddy and slightly nauseating sensations.

Working with psychologically traumatized kids can be just as disorienting but, alas, not always as much fun. Whether therapist sitting down for a conventional 50-minute hour or island staff trying to get through a day of school, chopping wood and keeping house, the same person working with the same student can come away with wildly differing sensations on different days. Some have described the experience like sitting on a swivel chair with the boy spinning you around and around until you forget which end is up.

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Sunset Party Raises Fun and Funds Kudos to co-chairs Pennie Hare and Meg Lilly

With 400 guests and a beach sunset theme this lively party was the best display of Penikese support to date. An estimated \$35,000.00 was raised. Between our gracious Penzance hosts, our dedicated event chairs, committee, staff, sponsors, guests, and graduates there are just so many people to thank. Although you were all listed in our party program we want to say again that we are grateful to each and every one of you. You are all proof of how powerful a small group of people can be when they work together.



Having a fun day and doing what the boy enjoys most? Whirl! You are the greatest ever, a paragon of humanity. Set a limit, say “no” for any reasonable reason? Whirl! You are worse than nothing and any number of unprintable names and kinds of people. Getting pitted against other staff, can’t keep facts straight about what happened to whom and when, feeling like the bad guy? Whirl! Whirl!

The very best of us sometimes walk away from days on the job feeling confused and angry, woefully inept, and ready for a career change to something simpler – dishwashing, weaving baskets, it hardly matters. Somehow, though, we manage to pick ourselves off the mat and return for another day, armed with some important clinical reminders with which to keep our bearings.

People who have been exposed to trauma tend to see the world and other people through a shattered perspective, and as a result, you aren’t always perceived as an integrated person of various attributes. Instead, on any given day or hour, they might recognize only the black (I hate you!) or the white (my hero!) of you, and nothing in between.

Being relegated or narrowed down to something you are decidedly not can feel acutely uncomfortable, even manipulative and abusive, but it is vital to remember that the spinning chair is not so much about you. It reflects what is going on inside the boy, his reactions to stress and anxiety, and the jumbled lens through which he sees and navigates his social-emotional world: losses and betrayal in relationships, powerlessness to overcome circumstances, turbulent emotions, confusing thoughts, a vulnerable self to be protected at all costs... now there’s a carnival ride for you!

But you are still you, a genuine, fallible and somewhat normal human, and the best thing you can do for the boy – clinically or otherwise – is to hang in there with as much determination and compassion as possible. Keeping your wits and bearings, even as the Tilt-a-Whirl tips you upside down yet again, will be the very thing that, over time, helps him begin to find his own bearings: a new experience of consistency, an inkling of trust, and glimmering sense that not every relationship has to blow up right away. The challenge, really, is as much yours as his to stay on the ride.

A Compassionate Letter from a Grateful Family: The highlight of a student’s graduation

Dear Penikese,

Know that you are a unique group of individuals. Each of whom has a gift so readily offered to fragile minds entrusted in your care. Know that those gifts given and shared with our family have made a difference. A difference that has the potential to affect many others that you may never know.

Know that you are appreciated for all that you have done and all that you are.

We will always keep you in our hearts with kind thoughts and wishes for your happiness.

Thanks! — John’s Family

From time to time we will get requests from our island staff for items that they need but we may not have the budget for. At the same time donors will ask us what we need and graciously help us fulfill these requests. If you, or anyone you know, are able to donate or help us to obtain these items please contact Patty Peal, 508-548-7276 x 207 or ppeal@penikese.org

Fall 2006 Wish List

- 4 axes
- 4 mauls
- 2 16’ aluminum ladders
- 2 24’ aluminum ladders
- 1 16” chain saw with extra chain
- 12” disk; 48” belt sander
- 2 new lawn mowers

(All items should be new or barely used to ensure that we remain within the State safety codes.)

Please join me in thanking the Hingham Lumber Company and the Martha’s Vineyard Rotary for their donations of time, materials and cash to re-roof our woodshop on the island. We would not be able to fulfill that important wish without them.





The Hardest Job of All

By PAM BRIGHTON, Clinical Specialist

We at Penikese get lots of attention for working with at risk kids, and hanging in with them in spite of the behaviors that cause others to back off and give up.

But what about parents?

Dear Sam:

It's really, really hard to describe to you how I'm feeling right now, but I want to make sure you know that Dad, your sister and I are aware of what's happening in court today. It's absolutely breaking my heart that your life has reached the point that it has. I've spent an awful lot of time today, thinking of all of the things that have gone on since I first laid eyes on you. I specifically remember one night during Christmas time, when you laid down on the couch beside me, with your head on my lap, and we just sat in the peace and quiet and looked at the Christmas tree with all of its decorations and lights. You told me you felt peaceful that night and I've always wondered, ever since, if you've ever felt that peace again. I wish there was something I could have done throughout the past 10 years that would have actually helped you work through your anger and rage, but everything I knew of didn't work. The different programs you've been in had all of the tools available to you, to help you work through your anger but, for whatever reason, you haven't worked on it. That's the reason why you're where you are today, right now, this very minute. The anger you're walking around with is destroying your life. You need to actually do something, rather than just talk about doing something, to help yourself, or your life will just continue to get worse.

I'm keeping you in my prayers, Sam, and I love you very, very much. — Mom

This letter was sent via email so that I could give it to her son who was coming off the island to go to court the next day. I read it and cried. Ten years ago I came to work at Penikese after working with mostly men in prison for many years. The prevailing thought in the mental health community was that, in the nature versus nurture debate, although nature was influential, nurture was key in effecting behavior. In other words, it was all about the parents, or lack thereof. That is easy to buy until you are a parent of a difficult child.

So often I sit at my desk and answer phone calls from parents desperate for help. The child is out at night, not going to school, getting into fights, thrown out of school, getting high, won't listen, won't work, hanging around with the wrong people, stealing, lying, uncommunicative, devious, abusive, dangerous, depressed, angry... The parent is concerned, angry, afraid, and most of all, feeling helpless to intervene. How can we keep our children safe when they keep using their increasing independence to make deleterious and often dangerous choices? It may take a village, but in American villages, most people turn their heads and don't interfere with other people's children.



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Some of the students who come to Penikese have long been in the custody of the state because of absent, inconsistent or abusive families. Others have been adopted, many have single Moms, and still others come from a two-parent, biological family with no history of significant trauma or disrupted attachments. Their behavior today comes from a confluence of factors, some genetic, some environmental, some a mystery.

Many of our parents have had to advocate for services for their sons, pushing the school systems and DSS, the courts, and any other buttons for help they can find until the boy ends up at Penikese. This is, unfortunately, a long haul, and too often in the process the parents get treated as though they are inadequate in some way, the reason for the boy's behavior. Bad behaving child = Bad parents, end of assessment.

One adoptive mother told me that at a team meeting at school for her son, she was told that she just needed to love her boy more and that would solve his behavioral problems. Parents of easy kids can sit back and attribute the path of their child to "good parenting". I wish it were that simple. No one sets out to be a bad parent; no one gets up in the morning thinking about how they can mess up their kid today. The parents we work with all seem to want the same for their sons. They want them to be happy, healthy, free from addictions, respectful of others and able to make their way in life on their own, without run-ins with the law.

At Penikese we have been fortunate to work with some wonderful parents. Since there isn't a phone

on the island for kids to call home, the phone contact is between parents and the mainland staff. We talk about how the boy is doing on the island, what behaviors we are seeing and look for input and advice from the parents. They point out warning signs, usual behaviors, things they have tried, and we can tell them what we are trying and how it might work at home. We become partners in the interest of the student, and we also become friends.

Over time we develop a shared understanding about just how difficult it can be to parent these boys when they are struggling through adolescence, pushing back at parents with a fury. We also share the vision of the boy when he is not struggling, when he is tranquil, having fun on an island, feeling safe enough to be himself. We at Penikese get lots of attention for working with at risk kids, and hanging in with them in spite of the behaviors that cause others to back off and give up. But what about parents? Who celebrates the dogged perseverance and enduring love that goes into parenting our students?

Recently one of our students went on a home pass and decided not to show up at his parents' home, to avoid a family trip. He was AWOL for a week before he returned to the island. Another student, who has had no stable parents or home, reacted with anger at the first student's behavior. When he was asked why the incident affected him so, he replied, "I don't know how you could do that to your parents. They've been there for you all through the (stuff) you've done." Although he didn't say so with words, he also was saying how much he would give to have parents like those. One day the first student will understand how lucky he really is, too. We understand and can see it now, and deeply appreciate those who keep hanging in time and again with the hardest job of all.

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