

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Mountain climbers for humanity

Six Knox College students and I recently had the opportunity to go to Northern Michigan and attend the 2002 Bioneers Conference; Bioneers is an organization consisting of pioneers and visionaries who search for and study practical solutions to our most pressing environmental and social crises. Northwestern Michigan College served as our destination for the Great Lakes site of the parent conference taking place in San Rafael, Calif. (Our location, which was one of four other satellite locations in North America, drew more than 200 attendees and the larger conference had over 3,000 participants.) After driving eight-and-one-half hours and sleeping a pittance, we spent two consecutive morning sessions in workshops with regional environmental personalities and afternoons watching environmental heroes from all corners of the globe present live speeches from the feed in California.

Sitting through 16 talks (some more than an hour long) over the course of two full weekend days isn't usually one's idea of a great time. However, in this case the time we spent conferencing was incredibly inspiring and fulfilling. Two talks really stood out, so much so that I would like to introduce you to two unsung heroes — ones that are unfortunately as foreign to most of you (as they were to me) as life on distant planets. In a moment of reflection, when you are done being introduced to Aqeela and Bogaletch, please consider why their names haven't crossed your bandwidth before.

The two people that I will tell you about aren't your stereotypical environmentalists; and whether they are "environmentalists" at all, I will leave to the reader. First, they are both "people of color." And while there obviously millions of "people of color" worldwide involved in environmental work, the "mainstream" environmental movement in the United States is dominated by middle and upper class people of European descent. Second, their names themselves are not typical "American" ones — Aqeela and Bogaletch. Thus, if you had come across them you would more than likely remember the occasion. Third, the focus of their contributions don't concern typical "environmental" missions — such as saving trees, enhancing water quality, or preventing global warming. Rather, their greatest interest is on bettering and saving human lives in a very immediate and direct way. And finally, the two heroes that you will soon learn about had beginnings that make them about as unlikely to make it to a Midwestern newsstand as anyone could be. Their stories are eye-opening, heart-wrenching, and extremely inspiring.

[Curtains raise.] Aqeela Sherrills, whose talk was entitled, "Creating and Sustaining Peace in Urban War Zones," began his life as the youngest of ten children growing up in a poor family in Watts (a section of Los Angeles that was notorious for gangs, drugs, and violence). Having witnessed many people, including 13 of his friends, die at the hands of gang wars, Aqeela had a revelation. He realized that his community was headed down a path of continued violence and hopelessness unless something major was done. Aqeela decided that removing fear in the neighborhoods of Watts was a critical first step in the process of enabling kids to think beyond the drugs and violence that surrounded them each and every day. Unbelievably at the age of only 19, having spent just a little time at Cal-State Northridge University on an athletic scholarship, Aqeela convinced himself that he would help bring the Crips and the

Bloods (two well-entrenched gangs of South Central L.A.) to peace.

Astutely, Aqeela recognized that this incredible task couldn't be performed by the police or by outsiders — no matter the sincerity of their intentions. So he decided to embark on a community-based effort to bring people together. He, and others, went to the streets chanting slogans of nonviolence and unity. "Unity" parties began to break out in many of the housing projects in Watts.

Football Hall of Famer Jim Brown opened his house to groups of individuals from rival gangs. As a result of Aqeela's initiative and effort, a major truce was signed in 1992 between the Crips and the Bloods, a pact which still stands today. Gang-related homicides have dropped nearly 50 percent since that time. This is an astounding accomplishment when one considers that "between 1983 and 1998, there were more killings among youth in Greater Los Angeles than in the Israeli-Palestinian and Northern Ireland conflicts combined," according to Aqeela.

But Aqeela didn't rest on these laurels. Since the historical truce signing, he has helped found several organizations working towards the improvement of inner city environments and educational and economic opportunities for its people. One such organization the Center for the Advancement of Nonviolence, founded in 2000, states that its mission is to "heal, empower and revitalize lives and communities through the practice of nonviolence as a way of life. To create a sustainable society that honors the dignity and worth of every human being through education, inspiration, and cooperative action" <www.nonviolenceworks.com/snv/about.htm>. Another organization, with which Aqeela works closely, is Amer-i-can <www.amer-i-can.org>, founded in 1988 by Jim Brown. It sponsors a 15-chapter Life Management Skills educational program that "is designed to empower individuals to take charge of their lives and achieve their full potential. The objective of the program is to cause one to examine their past conditioned behavior patterns and to systematically apply proven methods to overcome behavior that negatively influenced their lives." One of the organization's central tenets professes, "It is never too late to attain a full, meaningful life."

Clearly, there are a lot of positive things coming from communities that have often been marred with despair, violence and crime, and Aqeela has been at the center of much of it. For this he deserves our respect, admiration, and, most importantly, our support. Consistent with Aqeela's desire to have a broad spectrum of supporting agents, at the close of his speech at Bioneers, he invited all of us to visit Watts on our next trip to Los Angeles so that we could meet the leaders of this community and to derive awareness and inspiration from their arduous and continued efforts to resolve major problems in their local environment.

Inconceivably, Bogaletch Gebre's life story may top Aqeela's. Bogaletch, whose talk was entitled, "Empowering Women and Communities in Ethiopia," began with very humble beginnings in a small village in rural Ethiopia. Despite being the first girl from her village to be educated beyond the fourth grade, she became the first Ethiopian woman to join the science faculty at Addis Ababa (the capital city), and later came to the U.S. as a Fulbright scholar. Since then, Ms. Gebre has returned to her native Ethiopia and has begun to transform her society in absolutely amazing ways.

At Bioneers 2002, Boge, a shorthand

name that she often goes by, told of her experience back home with a common medical procedure known as female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM). This operation, which is carried out on girls as young as six-years-old, involves the partial or full removal of the clitoris. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is the obvious inability of the victims to have orgasms later in life. Yet, as adverse as this alone might be, the additional physical and psychological costs paid by its victims make this an unspeakable crime against humanity. Unfortunately, it has gone unvoiced and ignored for much too long. Not only does FGM produce tremendous scar tissue, which makes for greater risk of infection and easier transmission of HIV (teenage girls in Ethiopia are nearly twice as likely to contract HIV as teenage boys), but it also, to use Boge's words, "takes away a mind."

Boge, a victim of FGM, who exhibited tremendous courage to talk to us about this very personal of matters, now understands how greatly the paternalistic dictates that support the practice of FGM take away a woman's ability to "think for herself." She says that traditionally men in her village gather underneath large trees and make decisions for all. Women aren't allowed nor expected to participate in these important discourses. According to opponents of FGM, the surgical procedure sends a forceful message to girls: "you have no power, you are to follow the ways of your male elders from henceforth."

Apparently, several cultures in the world still perform this operation as part of customary practice, rather than religious principles or edicts. Though FGMs are performed in all parts of the globe, including the United States, they tend to be most common in a few African nations including Ethiopia and Kenya. Horrifyingly, it is estimated that 6,000 girls a day (or over 2.1 million a year) undergo this extremely debilitating of operations.

Boge began to understand the dehumanizing effects of FGM when she had an argument with a friend while doing collegiate study in Israel. Boge initially found herself defending the practice. Up to that point in her life she had learned that FGM was a sacred custom and one that should be protected. She saw her friend's criticisms as an attack on her culture. Afterwards, however, when given some time to ponder this matter further, Boge began to understand how damaging FGM had been to the women of her homeland. She convinced herself that something had to be done. Given how difficult it must have been to confront her community about something that is taken as sacred to its culture, and given the prescribed inferior status of women in her society, Boge's willingness to take on this challenge makes her an extraordinarily brave person. For most it would be extremely easy to resign oneself to the conclusion (one I hear quite often as related to other environmental problems) — "it is just the way it is, there isn't much we can do." But for Boge, this response was just not going to satisfy nor deter her. She was determined to make positive change for her people.

In 1985 she founded the Parents International Ethiopia as a means to bring reproductive health issues as well as gender inequalities to the forefront of her country's concerns. Not more than two years later, after garnering sufficient funds from the international community, Boge was able to build the Kembatta Women's Self-Help Center. This Center, located in the Southern areas of Ethiopia where Boge was brought up, has as its specific goals the "elimination of harmful traditional practices

such as female genital mutilation and bridal abduction." The Center serves as a place (not unlike the large trees used by the male leaders) for women to gather and discuss issues that are important to them — including, reproductive health, vocational training and the restoration of damaged ecologies (the later two included for the empowerment and sustainability that comes from skilled labor and a healthy environment.)

There is no question that Boge's heroic efforts have paid off. At Bioneers, she showed clips that illustrated the tremendous influence she has had already. One clip showed a recent wedding in her hometown which drew hundreds of guests. It was the first wedding where the husband and wife agreed that FGM was neither desirable nor acceptable. One could clearly see how momentous an occasion this was — a society was facing its problem collectively and head-on; so much for the "primitiveness of non-Western societies. A second clip exhibited the grounds of the Self-Help Center and the projects that have commenced since its founding. The women videoed clearly exuded self-confidence from their newfound sense of self-determination. Boge's presentation left us all crying with joyous fervor. There is so much in the world to look down upon, it was great to see that some of us are not sitting idly and just carping. We can all certainly gain from Boge's sacrifice and dedication.

Aqeela and Bogaletch taught me many things. But among the two most important are the following two lessons that I ask you to consider as this essay concludes: (1) Anyone can make a positive difference in the world, no matter how far it seem one is from the "tree" of power; and, (2) If these two heroes are lurking in our hidden midsts, who else might there be that we haven't found and what might they have to teach us? Let the search begin today.

Note: Another advocate for environmental justice, Dr. Robert Bullard, will be speaking at Knox College at 7pm, Wednesday, November 13th, in Kresge Recital Hall. Dr. Bullard is not only the author of four highly-acclaimed books (Confronting Environmental Racism, Dumping in Dixie, Residential Apartheid, and Unequal Protection) and numerous articles, he is also speaker that will command an audience's attention with his wisdom and passion. This talk is free to the public.

Websites of interest:

Bioneers: <www.bioneers.org>

Center for the Advancement of Nonviolence: <www.nonviolenceworks.com/snv/about.htm>

Amer-I-Can: <www.amer-i-can.org>

Kembatta Women's Self-Help Center: <www.fourliterations.org/Kembatta.htm>

Peter Schwartzman, a resident of Galesburg since 1998, is chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Knox College. He is a research climatologist with peer-reviewed publications in the area of climate change and human population growth and he is currently writing two environmental books focused on bringing environmental understanding to a wider audience. He encourages responses to his writings.

