

Bioneers: not just a

Bioneers: Not Just A Field Trip in October

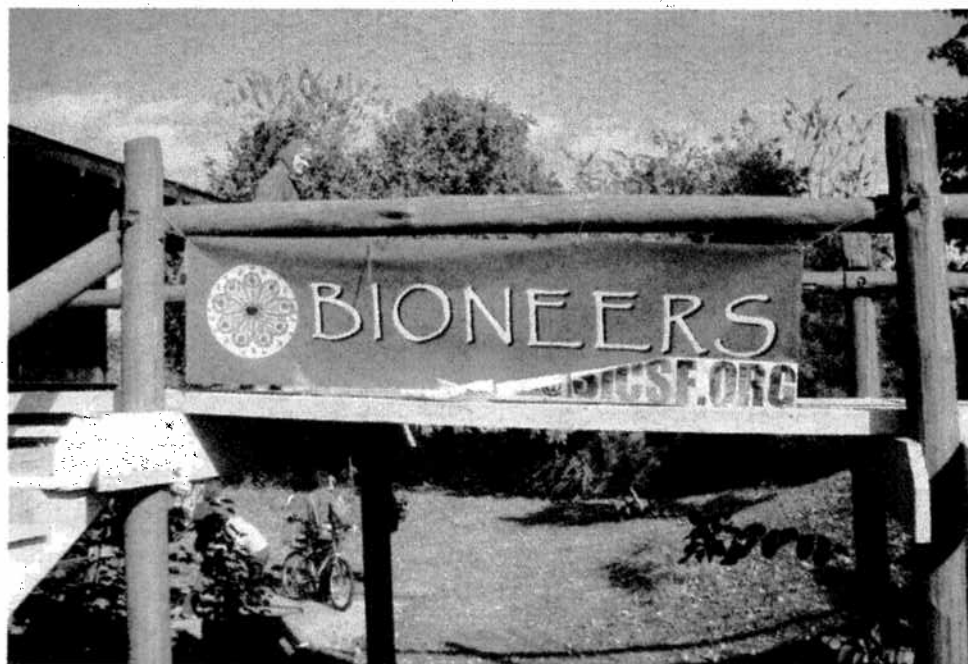
This past weekend, 26 residents of Galesburg took off to Carbondale, Ill. For what you ask? Well, it depends on which of the twenty-six you ask. Twenty-five were Knox College students from different parts of the world and with different academic foci and career goals. The other was me, a thirty-something idealist that refuses to accept the normalcy of environmental poisoning, social and political injustice, and never-ending war.

We headed south to be exposed to and engage in a Bioneers Conference. Bioneers, aka The Collective Heritage Institute, an environmental organization founded in 1990, holds a conference every October. This conference, currently held in Marin County in Northern California, is a "gathering of scientific and social innovators who have demonstrated visionary and practical models for restoring the Earth and communities." Five years ago, Bioneers began to spread its message far and wide by establishing and supporting satellite sites throughout North America. At these satellite sites, attendees, such as our Knox contingent for the past five years, are able to watch plenary speeches taking place at the main conference (via satellite) and able to connect with people engaged in environmental and social work regionally during scheduled topical breakout sessions.

The Bioneers network is vast and growing. It is estimated that about 12,000 people throughout the United States participated in this year's Bioneers in one form or another. The incredible wisdom and vibrant and contagious energy shared by the plenary speakers (which included environmental writers and journalists such as, Paul Hawken, Amy Goodman, Sofia Quintero, Carl Anthony, Rachel Naomi Remen, and Michael Pollan, as well environmental and social activists and educators such as, Lois Gibbs, Sarah Crowell, Tzeporah Berman, Thomas Linzey, and Maria Elena Durazo) and a handful of performing artists cannot be captured properly by words (at least not by me). Let it be said though that the Bioneers conference is truly inspiring and uplifting and definitely something from which we could all gain.

Here are reflections from some of the Knox College students who attended this year's Bioneers event. May their enthusiasm and hope be as contagious as the greed and despair that seems to permeate our culture today.

I finally got the chance to go to Bioneers this year (while a senior) although I've wanted to since I was a freshman. I regret not having gone in the past due to conflicting activities and know that I must have missed an amazing collection of speakers and presentations over the past three years. I thoroughly enjoyed the speakers at this conference and found three of the speakers especially engaging. The first of these was Clayton Thomas Muller's hard-hitting speech about environmental and social injustice caused by the extraction of unsustainable fossil fuel from lands sacred to Native Americans. The speaker was very passionate and intense and his enthusiasm was infectious. He was immediately followed by an extremely thought-provoking speech by Thomas Linzey on self-governance and community involvement to fight injustice. The third speaker moved me the most. Amy Goodman, whose television news show — Democracy Now — I had seen numerous times, spoke eloquently about



A sign outside the lunch facility. According to Bioneers, "It's all alive; it's all intelligent; it's all connected; it's all relative."

Photo: E. Fernwick

the importance of independent media and was very outspoken about the current link between the mainstream media and the government.

The conference provided me with a lot of food for thought and I know that the things I learnt from it will translate into action in the near future as I plan my career in environmental studies.

— Z. de Vitre (Mumbai, India)

At the beginning of the first round of plenaries, Nina Simons, co-founder of Bioneers, made an interesting speech. Her speech was on grief and how people don't tend to grieve in the right way. In other words, people tend to fill their grief with other objects rather than to confront their grief head-on. This spring, I lost my grandmother to an ugly battle with old age. My first response was, "Can I get a venti Starbucks and go shoe shopping?" On the day that I found out I had something in my ear — what did I do? — I went shoe shopping. Now I have a pair of "therapy shoes" that I will probably never get rid of due to the sentimental value of them.

Nina's words struck such a chord with me because she made clear that there is meaning and significance in "feeling the pain." During some of Bioneer plenary sessions, such as Sofia Quintero's, I grieved for my grandmother. I was damn close to sobbing; my body was shaking as I was writing my grief out on paper. I was writing how upset I was that I didn't get to feel the depth of my grandmother's death on the day of the funeral. On the day of the funeral, I signed off on a three year lawsuit. During the plenaries, I wrote about how upset I feel for being so shortchanged about signing off on the lawsuit and how I couldn't just jump for joy and revel in what had taken me so long to realize. I didn't celebrate then, but today, I grieved. And starting today, I have made a vow that even if I don't cry, I am going to grieve. Even if it is through journaling, playing my instrument, or going out for a run, I am going to grieve, because it is all right to feel.

— A student (Chicago, IL)

When I first heard about the Bioneers conference, I imagined walks through the woods every day and speeches about deforestation and decreasing salmon populations. I thought of being in an environment for one whole weekend

where we would live minimally and fight consumerism. To some extent I had envisioned our trip accurately — we did all of those things. But the focus of the conference was not that we were bad people for having bought into industry and ignored the world around us. The amazing group of men and women who spoke at the conference gave us inspiration rather than a slap on the hand. We heard from empowered citizens who were devoting their lives to current generations, future generations, community, and equality. We learned how they were breaking down stereotypes, overcoming the obstacles set by political and industrial corruption, and unlocking doors for thought, development, and justice. There wasn't a single speaker who spoke from above their audience: they were all just one of us, giving us their stories, research, and brainstorming so that we could each return to our homes and simply be aware of our surroundings.

— A. Boris (Portland, OR)

"A cynic is [someone] who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing."
—Oscar Wilde

What surprised me about Bioneers was that, despite having been exposed before to most of the topics, I found the speeches eye-opening and inspiring. They rang true in a way that made me seriously reconsider my outlook on environmental activism. For instance, I used to think that it doesn't matter what we do; wars come and go, governments rise and fall, people are born and they die. This is the natural state of things and we must accept that what we do won't matter in the long run. It is inconsequential because there will always be opposing forces that prevent us from achieving long-lasting, positive global change.

Bioneers made me realize that I was missing the point completely. People matter at an individual level. We can say something that can empower a person and turn their life around. Anybody who has felt that cannot dismiss it as insignificant. Truth, a healthy Earth, peace, these are things to fight for not because we might win (we might not) but because they *matter*.

— A. Gutmann-Gonzalez (Chile)

What would compel someone to drive over five hours in a fifteen passenger van crammed tightly with exactly 15 people and their 'stuff,' knowing that when they

arrive at their destination they would have to sleep in unheated cabins on nights hovering around 30 degrees? Bioneers. As a first-term Bioneer and not knowing what to expect, I never imagined that Knox College would represent the majority of people at this conference. Students at schools closer, or even on the same campus where the conference was held, did not take the time to educate themselves on issues that affect every single person's life on this planet. I am so honored, proud and overjoyed that I am in the company of other students at Knox whom care about our one and only planet and the issues that are making it worse...and, more importantly, better.

— E. Fenwick (Manhattan, KS)

This year was my first trip to Bioneers and I can easily say that it could not have been better. Every aspect of the conference was exciting and refreshing: from the five hour drive down to Carbondale (it's nice to get off the Knox campus once and a while!), to listening to some of the most interesting and passionate people in the environmental field, to waking up early and going on a hike. Each speaker was great, but I must admit that two of these speakers were particularly enthralling. They were Amy Goodman and Paul Hawken. They both brought new intelligence, ideas, beliefs, and passion with them at a level I rarely see. It was an amazing experience simply hearing all of these brilliant people speak about what they find most important in this world.

—J. Frank (Springfield, IL)

The last night that we spent out in the camp I went on a walk by myself through the dark woods in the crisp, cold night to a field where I had seen several does both nights before — in hopes that I might see them again. I was pleasantly surprised to find that when I got there, there were several more does, two fawns, and two bucks. As I walked through the gravel parking lot they heard me and all looked up and stared at me. I looked on, completely still until they continued grazing and I was able to sneak up beside some parked cars for better cover. I got within about twenty yards and stopped to watch them. After a few minutes, several does and the fawns bounded off into the woods leaving the two bucks and two does. The bucks neared, one large, muscular ten-pointer and one relatively small, scrawny four-pointer. They began to size each other up, sniffing and nudging each other, building tension as the does went on with their business, unnoticed. After about ten minutes of this the bucks got more aggressive and began to spar with their antlers, the larger clearly dominating. The does continued to graze, uninterested in the display. Out of the woods came a curious fawn to inspect what was happening. Between sporadic bouts between the stags, the fawn inched close to the pair and quickly withdrew once it got too heated. When the young buck knew that he was outmatched, he withdrew and walked off into the woods. The champion buck walked proudly behind and the others dispersed.

At first, I recognized the rarity of this occurrence and how fortunate I was to have witnessed it. Upon further reflection I realized the underlying metaphor in this situation, which fit perfectly with the conference. The fight between the bucks can represent the struggle between any two sides. Sometimes, like in this case, one side has the upper hand and the other sees that, realizes their shortcomings, and backs down. There are also those not directly

field trip in October



A pathway through the forest where we stayed. The lake is in the background.

Photo: J. Frank



Students eating locally-grown lunch and relaxing between plenary speakers.

Photo: E. Fernwick

involved in the struggle, who in some cases go on passively with their daily routine. The curious youth is represented by the fawn, seeing the struggle but withdrawing before they get hurt. This model is exactly what we should strive against in environmental activism, or any activism in that case. When we see that the other side is clearly stronger, we have to fight harder rather than give up like the young buck. Those that are not directly involved in the struggle must get involved, not graze passively like the does. And finally, possibly most importantly, the youth must get involved, not back away like the fawn when it gets tough. The youth are the future of not only the race or species but also the future of the fight. The youth need to become organized and active in order to ensure that justice is maintained in the future and that the future of the human race and world is preserved.
—Quinn Palar (Urbandale, IA)

This was my second year going to Bioneers. The reason I chose to go back, and the reason that I will probably choose to go back again is to refresh, renew, and deepen the convictions and desires I already have within me. As one speaker said, "We need to meet people where they are, but take them someplace better." I feel that Bioneers does that for me, and inspires me to do it in turn.

For those of us who are bleeding hearts, when we are not in a supportive atmosphere like Bioneers, it is easy to get bogged down with negativity and a feeling that no one else understands how we feel. Knowing so certainly that I am aware of these wrongs, but feeling powerless to change anything leads to a feeling of despair. Going to a conference like Bioneers helps turn passion into action. It is empowering to hear of past victories and to dream up a plan for the next ones.

Instead of "putting lipstick on a corpse," people at this conference want real change. They realize that exchanging long-term security for short-term gain is foolish, and that irresponsibility is not an excuse. By promoting the Golden Rule and a culture of gratitude, they promote the sacredness of life. One speaker quoted Oscar Wilde's words, people who "know the price of everything and the value of nothing" should not be the ones making major global decisions.

"Everything has a dream of itself," said one of the last speakers. This is true of every one of us. Going to Bioneers and allowing ourselves to acknowledge the depth of our passion is one way to foster that dream so it can be truer every day.

—L. Nowak (Bartlett, IL)

I hope these reflections have inspired you. Just remember this. Next year, about this time, Bioneers will be available to you as well. It will be beckoning you to come join — whether in California, Southern Illinois, Western or Southeastern Michigan, the Twin Cities, or at a dozen other locations. Don't resign yourself to cynicism or helplessness. Don't ignore the signs that our planet (and its people) are in need of love, compassion, and reflection. I assure you, you won't find a more caring, thoughtful, and hopeful group of people than you will find at a Bioneers conference. They/We are charting

the course toward sustainability, peace, and justice and they/we could use your wisdom, strength and heart as well. Hope to see you at Bioneers next year.

(For more information on Bioneers and future Bioneers events, please visit the website www.bioneers.org, call (1-877-BIONEER), or email: info@bioneers.org)