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WOULD YOU LIKE TO RIDE IN MY BEAUTIFUL BALLOON?

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The Louisville connection

story by Peter Schwartzman
photos by Po Chan

Each October for the past eight years, Knox College has had a contingent of students attend the annual Bioneers conference. This year more students than ever wanted to go to this annual environmental conference and I, with the help of Creal Zearing, a senior from Princeton, Ill., tried my best to meet their desires. By far the most expensive element of each trip is transportation. In past years we've been to Carbondale, Ill., Bloomington, Ind., Grinnell, Iowa, and Traverse City, Mich. Yet, this year, the closest location hosting a Bioneers conference that fit our college's academic schedule was Louisville, Kentucky. With funding support from several top Knox College administrators, last Thursday and Friday over 60 students loaded a chartered bus and headed to the Bluegrass state. Six to seven hours after departure, we all landed in the Jefferson Memorial Forest (about ten miles south of Louisville) and began to pitch tents and unroll sleeping bags, despite temperatures in the low forties and intermittent rain. The fall forest air was so refreshing it made up for any cold or dampness.

After about a five to six hour sleep (less for those that partook in the environs a bit much), we awoke and hiked about 2,000 feet down to the bus which was prepared to take us to the University of Louisville. Upon arrival at its Planetarium, we listened to plenary speakers and participated in breakout sessions on a variety of subjects—most with a local edge/bent. After 12 to 14 hours of enlightening engagement we headed back to our tents (or our hotel beds on the final evening) for rest and relaxation.

Perhaps the best way to get an idea of what the conference was about and what it meant to attendees is to hear from the students themselves. Thankfully, despite understandably being exhausted after a long trip and being behind on their studies, these members of our Knox contingent found time to share some reflections:

I especially enjoyed the Bioneers speakers



Two Knox students contemplate the entire Bioneers experience at the Rauch Auditorium, University of Louisville

who had interdisciplinary experience. Since I am interested in both the environment and art, Lily Yeh and Albert Gorman who addressed environmental issues in their art interested me greatly. Lily Yeh's use of art to transform how people experienced terrible situations such as genocide was extremely inspiring. It was also great to learn about Louisville and the surrounding area through local speakers. I now am much more informed on the controversy of Appalachian mountain top removal. Overall the experience was really enjoyable. Emily Young (Rock Island, Ill.)

As part of a local construction firm committed to building long lasting, energy efficient homes, my trip to the Bioneers conference, at the invitation of Knox College, once again reminded me of the challenge of our generation to make drastic changes over a very short period of time. A positive, informative and re-energizing experience. Join in. Richard Stephenson, Trillium Dell

Timberworks (Knoxville, Ill.)

I gained a new understanding about many different issues, such as healthcare, mountaintop removal and global climate change. I heard talks and attended workshops on new ideas, such as sustainability in faith communities, that helped me to connect environmental issues with my own daily life. Some of the speakers were informational, educating me about issues of policy and science that I might not have learned on my own. My favorite speakers, however, were the grassroots community organizers and artists that are working to educate and inspire using their own creative talents. The works of Destiny Arts and the group from Chicago (LVEJO) opened my eyes to what young people are doing to make a difference.

Also, even though the camping aspect was difficult, cold and uncomfortable for many, I really appreciated the opportunity to bond with my fellow students through

working together to complete tasks (setting up a tent in the dark, starting a fire, etc.). What a great way to meet other students with similar passions and to connect on a lasting level!

Thanks to Bioneers, I now have increased confidence in my ability to discuss and debate issues of the environment and sustainability, and I look forward to learning more about many of the subjects that were introduced at the conference. Kaitlyn Duling (Paxton, Ill.)

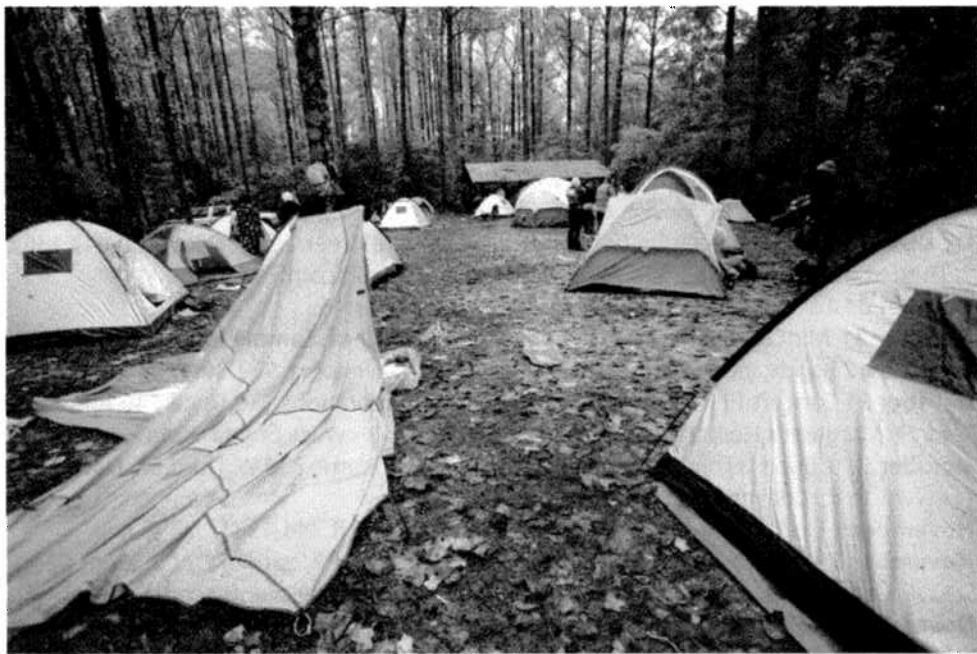
What an experience. Seeing people speak on subjects they are passionate about is a beautiful thing and it's something that needs to be done more often. One of the many things I took away from this conference is that I must not be afraid to open up to others about my passions. Brett (Iowa)

I think the best part about the conference was that it showed that dedication and

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Sixty-three students, one Knox professor, and a few local attendees convene for a closing photo from Bluegrass Bioneers 2009

BIONEERS, FROM PAGE 1

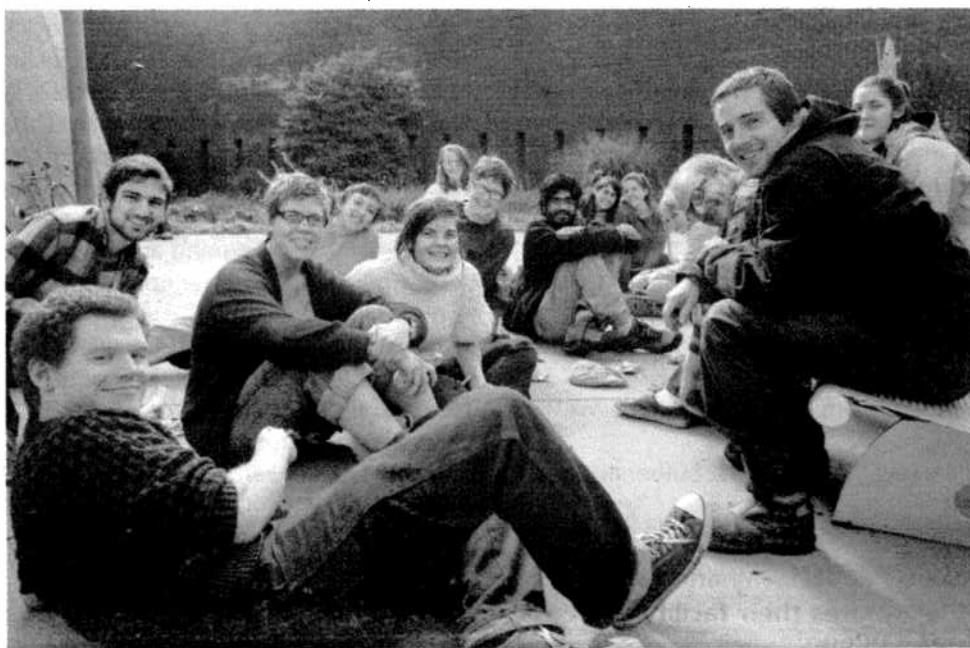
Knox students begin to decamp in the Jefferson Memorial Forest, Kentucky in preparation for a full day's worth of Bluegrass Bioneers 2009

creativity can produce some really incredible changes in the environment and in the communities where work is being done. I felt that the people who were showcased proved that anything is possible and we are capable of making the necessary changes in our lifestyles to change the destructive environmental path we are on.

I also came to realize that it is really difficult to make changes towards sustainability for the future when we are facing problems with infrastructure today. Should we fix highways when we know that automobiles are an environmentally destructive form of transportation? How can we afford not to fix highways when we depend on automobiles in our everyday lives? We have to find solutions that not only address the problems we are facing now, but that will also provide support for future improvements. This is especially hard because setting ourselves up to be more sustainable in the future may mean becoming more sustainable now. Obviously this is something I care about and value but there are many people who don't understand how important our relationship with the environment is and how broken it is. We have to find ways to meet our needs now without causing setbacks for the future of sustainability. It is a major challenge to do so and something that I think is very exciting. We need to look at these issues as new opportunities and ways to show how innovative we can be. More often than not we sell ourselves short by saying that something is too difficult, too expensive, or too unrealistic. I think if something is "too whatever" that just means we haven't taken the time to come up with a good enough



Inside Rauch Auditorium, University of Louisville, Knox students watch via satellite the Bioneers crowd in San Rafael, California (the location of the plenary speakers)



A group of Knox students and builder Richard Stephenson (front right) take a short break outside, during one of the few times that the Sun broke through the clouds

plan. We are capable of handling all of the problems we face with the environment. Moving towards sustainability is the only path that makes sense. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain. A. Paulsen (Sturgeon Bay, WI)

At Bioneers we heard about solar panels and electric cars, but more importantly, the speakers gave an important reminder of the importance behind the environmentalist movement. Environmentalism is not all about saving exotic plants and animals, but making the earth healthier for all the people and society more just. Everyone is hurt by bad environmental practices in some way or will be in the future if policies aren't changed. Environmentalism is taking care of the earth in order to take care of the people who live on it because it's harder to stop the harm to people once it has begun than before it has started. K.H. (Rochester, MN)

I attended Bioneers this year, for the first time. I went not knowing what to expect, and originally for the camping experience. However by attending I came back with a different outlook on the green movement. I learned about little things, like pesticides, that would not take a lot of effort to change on a small scale like Knox. After going on a dumpster dive (which was awesome—we found toilet seat covers) and seeing everything that could be recycled that was not, it made me wonder how much was being thrown away at Knox and how much that could be changed. The year 2020 is a long, but short ways off, yet after this weekend I honestly believe that reducing fossil fuel consumption by 80% can be a real possibility. Claudia Brooke (Ballwin, Missouri)

I feel that all of the time spent at the Louisville Bluegrass Bioneers conference couldn't have been better spent. I am a

senior now, and this past weekend was to be what I viewed as my last chance to go to a conference like this. With such a community as my fellow Knox students (and professor), I didn't want to pass this opportunity by because of all the work waiting for me to do—that work would still be waiting when the conference was over, but I didn't care. Bioneers was both incredibly fulfilling and enlightening, and will be an experience that remains with me. There was such a prevalence of stories that were told—personal stories, stories of other communities—stories of struggle, fighting, winning, and pride; stories of heartache, pain, and loss... and underlying each story was a prevailing hope, a hope for change. And I think that's what Bioneers is about. Bioneers offers us (as individuals, as members of communities) is a hope for change. And not only hope, but the means to do so, the knowledge of past experiences, past failures and successes. Bioneers gives us not only inspiration but a way to use it. Charlotte Leitzman (Minnesota)

(St. Louis, Missouri)

So there you have it, at least from some members of our group (most were likely too exhausted or too busy catching up with their work). I also learned so much at Bioneers 2009, I always do. But it is very hard to encapsulate all the thoughts, emotions, sensibilities running through me after such a moving experience. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the future is bright. Too many people are beginning to realize how serious things are and how important it is that we begin to do things (rather than complain about the problems). I am so inspired by the 63 Knox students that found time in their busy schedules to open (and share) their hearts and minds by attending this annual environmental conference. These students know what is going on. They feel it and they get it. It is time that we let new solutions manifest and materialize. Status-quo ones keep getting us deeper and deeper into trouble and, sadly, irreversible conditions become more and more prevalent. Joanna Macy, one of many amazing Bioneers speakers, emphasized the importance of individuals to focus on the "doing" rather than the results. I couldn't agree more. Ask yourself, "What are you doing today to make the world a better place?" If you aren't satisfied with the answer, then reach deep into yourself and find the energy to do something—perhaps something like, growing organic food, tutoring local children, converting concrete/built up zones into living habitats, learning to cook foods lower on the food chain, working on laws to stop urban sprawl or improve children's health. As it turns out, when you begin to "do," you will almost definitely make connections with other doers and become a part of the largest social movement ever found on planet Earth (as described by Bioneer Paul Hawken). Working with others to accomplish something of personal importance is one of the most uplifting and satisfying things one can do in life. And, as Annie Leonard made so clear, our hyper-consumeristic society is not happy and is inherently not capable of



Prof. Schwartzman, seated, watches Knox students burn off some steam while listening to Arnett Hollow (on stage) during an evening of relaxation after many hours of intense thought and engagement

I am very happy with my experience at Bioneers this past weekend. The number one reason I enjoyed it to the extent that I did was, more than anything, it gave me hope. It gave me hope that there are people who really do want what's best for the world as a whole instead of what's best for them as an individual. It gave me hope that people aren't just talking about these things, they are actually doing them. It gave me hope that even as one college student, I can make a difference. In just one weekend with the Bioneers community I found more people who inspired me than I ever could have imagined. I loved being surrounded by such a positive, hopeful, caring group of people; and I will be attending every Bioneers that I am able to in the future! Tory Kassabaum

satisfying what we need most—meaningful social relationships. So, perhaps the first step in improving our individual and collective well-being is to reject consuming things for the false sense of comfort they provide and, rather, look for opportunities to work collaboratively on beneficial projects and activities in your city/community.

After reading this you feel that you missed something special, consider going to Wisconsin in a few weeks. Just south of Madison, a group will be hosting a Bioneers Conference, which will include some of the same speakers that we witnessed in Louisville as well as a whole host of fresh regional speakers and performers. For more information, go to: <www.bioneerstow.org>.