An interview with Professor Jon Showstack - ex Summerhillian

In 2010 Jon Showstack, an ex Summerhillian, made a substantial donation to the Trust. Jon is 64 years old and lives with his wife Ellen in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA. He has two adult daughters.

He is a retired Professor of Medicine and Health Policy after almost 40 years at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). He currently does independent consulting as well as continuing research at UCSF.

When asked what led to him attending Summerhill and what motivated him to make a donation to the Trust, here’s what he said....

"It's a great irony of my life that I've spend most of it in a university. Academia as a career was about the furthest thing from my mind when I was a teenager. Similar to many others, adolescence was a very turbulent time for me. The basic cause of the turbulence is still not entirely clear to me, other than the “normal” teenage angst, confusion, and surging hormones. I had no problem learning (from books, newspapers, etc.), but I was allergic to high school; I basically didn’t attend high school and to this day do not have a high school diploma (or a reunion to attend!)."

Fortunately, my parents were understanding and supportive. My father was a psychiatrist who had very progressive ideas about childrearing. In the early 1960s, a friend of the family recommended Neill's recently published “Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing.” The book was startling on many levels, not the least of which was the similarity of Neill’s description of Summerhill with the “democracy” of our household. My father corresponded with Neill, and I ended-up spending the 1962-63 academic year at Summerhill.
One of the key elements of Neill’s philosophy is that children will only learn at the appropriate time and place, which might be defined as a “readiness” to learn. This was true for me in spades. My adolescent head was already too full of – who knows what – to be able to participate in, let alone concentrate on, a structured school program. I was much more interested in photography and in the world around me. I read voraciously, but could not countenance the slow structured pace of classrooms, lectures, and weekly assignments. To this day, I learn much better from reading than from lectures, and am still very visually oriented - perhaps explaining, in part, my expertise in graphic display of complex data, a great boon to my academic career.

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I point out these possible reasons that high school and I were a bad mix because I think they illustrate a probably common, but often unrecognized, set of issues faced by many children and adolescents; that is, their internal needs (cognitive, emotional, etc.) and their external circumstances (social, language, economic, etc.) simply do not match the linear requirements of structured schooling.

Not only is it important to recognise, but also to allow and promote, the idea that failure at school does not necessarily equate with an inability or reluctance to learn. Suffice it to say that Neill had it right – our education systems will never be successful until they are (un)structured to allow and address the differing needs, cognitive styles, emotional age and health, and abilities of individual children.

My financial contribution to Summerhill is a way of supporting Neill’s philosophy and of helping to sustain a place where children can be children; where adolescence is seen as a “normal” (if often unattractive) passage; and, most importantly, where the needs, abilities, desires, and circumstances of persons (whatever their age) are recognised, respected, and addressed.

I urge others to support Neill’s ideas through a contribution to the A. S. Neill Summerhill Trust and/or through other activities that help make our educational systems more responsive to children of all ages.”