The Original “OX” logos by Jim Houghton
Last Thought on Dr. Dave

Dr. David Lehman. The man has worn many hats: educator, administrator, musician, minister. As the principal of the New Junior High Program, the Alternative Community High School and finally ACS, Dr. Dave was the figurehead of and chief spokesman for alternative education in the Ithaca area. Both directly and indirectly he has been a powerful force to many students and parents alike. I have occasionally joked that Dr. Dave was like a benevolent Fidel Castro to ACS, in that because of his dogged endurance and devotion to the cause, he has seemed an indispensable element, almost as if within this one man’s body is housed the soul of an entire institution. Dr. Dave, standing beside the Blue Ox (as illustrated by cartoonist and ACHS alumnus Jim Houghton), symbolized the school itself.

To say that Dr. Dave Lehman had an influence on me is a gross understatement. His has been a powerful force that, sixteen years after my graduation from the Alternative Community School, continues to reverberate in my life on a number of levels. He is partially responsible for my choice of college, my choice of career, and for the existence of my spiritual life.

Some of my favorite ACS events were the campfire sing-alongs that were held during fall retreats and all-school camping trips. Dave and other faculty, staff and students would pull out their guitars and songbooks would be passed around. One of the treats for me after I started playing myself, was the fact that Dave would bring out three or so of his own guitars, and let me trying out each one. That’s when I learned of Dave’s past in rock and roll bands during the fifties and sixties. Dave also graced the opening of ACS’s Hard Back Café with a solo performance. Along with his own compositions, Dave played “Thank You,” by Led Zeppelin. That was simply unbelievably cool for a high school principal. And there was another time Dave asked me to perform with him for an all school meeting, and he even came over to my house to rehearse. To this day, one of my favorite songs to sing is one by Dave Lehman, “Do You Ever,” which I hope to someday include on an album.
On one of those fall retreats, besides singing and playing, Dr. Dave and I chatted about what I would do after high school. I really didn’t have a clue, but he suggested checking out one or more of the schools in the area of Amherst, Massachusetts, including a small alternative college called Hampshire. That’s what I did, and that’s where I went.

After ACS had swelled in size to the point where the traditional all-school camping trips became unmanageable, the school community decided to have a “trips week,” when a number of smaller group trips to different places were executed. During my sophomore and junior years I went on Dave’s trip (along with my alumnus brother Matt Lyons) to the Akwesasne Indian Reservation along the St Lawrence River. There, besides doing more singing and playing, we learned first hand of the environmental and political issues facing the Mohawk people of that area. We also learned a little about Mohawk culture and history.

Native American religion played a key role in Dr. Dave’s teachings. In his ceremonial addresses for promotions and graduations, Dr. Dave would don the robes and colors of his alma mater, and expound upon the significance of the four seasons, the four directions, and so on, and he would lead us in prayer to the Great Spirit, with the grace and honesty of the reformed Baptist minister he is. In this way, and in his “World Religions” class, I was introduced to a kind of spirituality that has helped this cynical young ex-atheist deal with the insanity of today’s world. As a matter of fact, I still have a book of Native American Myths and Legends given to me by Dave upon my graduation, from which I enjoy reading passages to my young daughter Luciana.

Through speeches, through song, through the political struggle to keep the school open and through tireless effort to make it the best school he could, Dr. Dave Lehman has improved the lives of hundreds if not thousands of individuals. And through these things, he laid some of the stones of the foundation of my life.

Jeremy Lyons, musician,

New Orleans
Playing Music at the 2002 Reunion
Fond memory of Dave:

Since graduating in 1981, I've realized that Americans are generally pretty uncomfortable with democracy. My fellow citizens, alas, did not go to a school run by student/staff democracy. It has made a lot of difference in my life, and I know it was the extraordinary patience of Dave and the staff which made it possible.

Dave was never a personal hero to me: he was a bit aloof, and I needed people to engage with (people like Linda and Sanford / IvI). But we all knew that it was his sure hand at the rudder which kept the school on course, and it wouldn't have been there without him. So I want to say Thanks, Dave! Good luck with the next phase of your life -- may you be as outrageously successful.

-Ness Blackbird, (née Ness Mountain, née David Cohen)
At Stewart Park for the 2002 Reunion
Enduring memories

I figured that I could wriggle my way out of contributing something for this album. However, after reading what others had submitted, I felt compelled to relate a couple of special memories that I have about Dr. Dave for posterity’s sake. It all started in 1980, I was only 10 years old, and I started attending ACS after a thoroughly depressing existence in traditional public education. Suddenly, I felt at home. Even liberated!

Here was a place with classrooms that went outside the walls where we learned about nature by experiencing nature. Democratic participation in all activities taught us effective communication and consensus-building skills, (and established life-long friendships). Independent studies allowed my mind to soar in pursuit of any subject I desired. Finally, a deep respect for indigenous cultures, not only from the immediate region we lived in, but around the globe, ultimately encouraged me to explore traditions and cultures beyond America’s borders.

It is in relation to the last matter that I have a story to relate. In 1981, I took a class on Native American Spirituality and Religion taught Dave. We read a variety of books on the subject, among them Black Elk Speaks, Seven Arrows, and God is Red. While we did many of the typical things one would do in a classroom: watched movies, had “show and tell” time, and discussed the books we read, we were especially fortunate to have as a guest speaker, a Medicine Man named Tim. Tim invited us to participate in a purification ritual, a traditional sweat lodge, out on Dave’s land.

“Traditional” meant that we had to follow certain rules throughout the experience. First of all, we had to fast the entire day before. After arriving at Dave’s that morning, we had to build a fire to heat the stones that had been carefully selected so they wouldn’t burst. Once they were red hot, we placed them in a hole in the ground inside a wikkiup made of bent saplings and covered with blankets. Then we stripped down, crammed inside, and proceeded to SWEAT! Tim splashed water on the to rocks to create great, billowing clouds of steam. We made many prayers and chants accompanied by drums and rattles. We smudged ourselves with sage and smoked kinnikinnick from a sacred pipe. Then when it seemed like you couldn’t stand it any more, you had a quick break, jumped outside, splashed water over each other…and that was only round one! We repeated this for a traditional four rounds. As each round came, more hot rocks were added, more water was poured on them, and more steam billowed. The during the last round, Tim brought out a special eagle feather fan, and fanned the boiling hot steam all over us. Looking back on it, I think “Wow! We actually did that! …and I even got credit for it! “

Since then, I’ve been a participant in other sweat lodges, but none has ever compared my initial experience. Thanks Dave!

-Jake Benson ’87
Group Photo from the 2002 Reunion
Special thanks to the following individuals, whose contributions helped make this album possible:

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Jeremy Lyons

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Jake Benson