

We the People, Inc.— Teenagers Serving Their Community

Kathy Litwack

Editor's Note: During "Volunteer Venture," Ohio's state volunteerism conference held this year in Akron in May, participants were treated to an evening of entertainment by a special group of young people performing under the name "We the People." WTP had been invited to perform not only because of its bouncy show, but also because WTP members are all volunteers on behalf of many community service projects. THE JOURNAL OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION asked the group to write an article, sharing WTP's history and present structure with our readers. Their submission follows. It should broaden some concepts about the role of teenagers not only in volunteer service, but also in decision making.

This article also introduces a new, periodic feature of THE JOURNAL OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION: a forum for volunteers themselves to present ideas to those leading volunteer efforts.

We The People, Inc. is a musical and community action group of young adults from the Kent-Stow area of Northeastern Ohio. Our performances and our community action projects are our "raison d'être," so to speak, but the backbone of the group is the variety of people who have come together to share the ideals and beliefs of We The People. The members of the group are dedicated, hard-working and united to spread

the messages of brotherhood, positive involvement, peace and love.

I have yet to find any other organization that even comes close to We The People's levels of acceptance and tolerance and honesty. It is indeed a unique group.

HISTORY

The history of We The People (WTP) begins in the early spring of 1968. The Kent Kiwanis contacted the local high school, Kent Roosevelt High, and offered to sponsor sending a group of students to see an "Up With People" show in Cleveland. "Up With People" is a national movement whose original purpose was to express concern and hope for this country and its citizens through songs, and to inspire the formation of local casts all over the country. Ms. Leslie Hudak, a teacher at Roosevelt, volunteered to take a group of students up to Cleveland for the performance. After seeing "Up With People" perform, the Kent students who attended decided to start their own group with Ms. Hudak as the advisor.

In May, 1968, "Sing-Out Kent" was officially organized. The members began learning the songs and choreography of "Up with People." After a year or so, however, the members of Sing-Out Kent found that some of the "Up With People" songs, although musically entertaining, did not communicate the personal concerns which the group felt. They

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wanted their audiences to think about specific problems which faced the world. Part of this was solved by singing songs written by professionals. The other means was to look to their own members for new, original songs which would satisfactorily express the sentiments of the group. Members of Sing-Out Kent began writing songs on topics such as ecology, brotherhood, positive involvement, drugs, mental retardation, friendship/family life, peace and the treatment of the elderly. These songs conveyed a more personal and direct message to their audiences.

In the winter of 1971, "Up With People" notified all local Sing-Outs like Sing-Out Kent that they could no longer continue their affiliation and support of the local Sing-Outs due to financial difficulties. The members of Sing-Out Kent decided to discontinue their association with "Up With People" totally. This whole change involved a new name for the group which is now "We The People."

WTP is a non-profit interfaith organization. There are currently approximately 50 members in the group. The requirements for joining are that a person be fourteen or out of the eighth grade. People of any race, religion or background are eligible to join. A person does not have to be able to sing or dance, just believe in the ideals of WTP. These ideals are reflected in our songs and community projects.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Our community projects range from visiting the elderly to devoting time to our communities to working with children. Over the years we have been involved as volunteers in many different types of projects, such as painting the Summit County (Ohio) Home for the Blind, collecting food baskets at Thanksgiving, holding benefit shows for various organizations like the American Cancer Society, the Big Brothers/Sisters program and the MERCY (Mental Retardation Concerns You) Committee, as well as

singing at the Special Olympics.

One of our major projects began in 1970 and it is known as our Children's Summer Project (CSP). This project is in its thirteenth year this summer and is one of our most successful. A chairperson is elected early in the year and coordinates CSP. Approximately 10-15 children from the Portage County (Ohio) area schools are selected to participate in this project. Every Wednesday during the summer, the children are paired up with a WTP member and are taken to various places such as a zoo, an amusement park, a bowling alley, and swimming. The day lasts from 9:30 to 3:00 and there is no charge to the child or his/her family. WTP provides food and transportation and a chance for unique relationships to develop.

Our community involvement grew when, in 1971, we began monthly visits to the Kentway Retirement Center in Kent. At first, everyone played cards and games and sang occasionally. Now we sing at Kentway every other month and join the residents after each show for refreshments and socializing. In 1981, we began singing at the newly-opened Tower 43 Retirement Center, also located in Kent. We alternate between the two centers and find that the elderly are among our most accepting audiences.

In November 1974, we began our most ambitious undertaking. We began publishing a children's magazine called Smiling Faces. This magazine is written and assembled by the members of the group. It is sent out during the school year to over 1500 children in Portage County and is free of charge. These children are home-bound, learning disabled or mentally retarded. Smiling Faces includes puzzles, games, crafts, jokes and a personal greeting from "Smiley." It is another of our most successful projects.

We make ourselves available to the community at all times and recently helped plant flowers and do

weeding at the city parks for the city Environmental Council. Many of the individual members recycle cans, newspapers and plastic at the Kent Recycling Center. And every year, the group goes holiday carolling to shut-ins, friends and neighbors.

Our shows are also a way we express our beliefs. With most of our songs being original music written by past and present members of the group, we are able to share our concerns with many varied audiences. We sing at churches, festivals, dinners, nursing homes, camps, schools, etc. Our costumes are made by each member and are either yellow or red. Each girl chooses one of these colors for her dress and wears black shoes. The boys have either a yellow or red shirt and black pants. Our costumes change periodically and are chosen by a group vote.

When we are contacted to do a show, we discuss it at our weekly Sunday night practices. As Public Relations Chairperson, I am responsible for organizing the show details. A simple majority vote is taken to determine whether or not we will accept the show. We try to limit our shows to about one per week, but sometimes, especially in the summer, we have many more engagements.

In addition to our songs, we also use what we call "Speak-Outs" in these shows. Speak-Outs let us share our messages by talking to the audience and introducing the songs. They are also written by group members.

Every year (or nearly every year) we put on what we call our Big Show. In 1982, our Big Show was entitled "Pyramids" and was held on March 12 and 13. Months of planning goes into these productions and everyone's help is necessary to ensure a successful show. These shows are open to the public and give us a chance to share our new music, messages and choreography with our parents, friends, sponsors and supporters.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

We The People's officer structure is very simple yet highly effective. All of the officers are elected on a yearly basis, by the members, for a one-year term. The advisor is the only officer required to be over 21; all other officers can be any age. Any member can run for any office, depending on his or her individual interests.

The advisor oversees every aspect of the group with the assistance of four elected trustees who are adult non-members. Under the advisor are the three major offices: president, director and community action chairperson. These three people oversee all the eighteen other offices. Each office has a written description of the duties of that office and each person is expected to fulfill those duties.

At our Sunday night practices, we have a business meeting every week to vote on shows, make announcements, conduct business and discuss any problems. During the week on Tuesday evenings, we have our official business meetings. These are called Action Councils, at which all of the officers give reports about their offices, decisions are made regarding policies and recommendations are decided upon. The Action Councils meet at a different member's house each week and are the most effective way to get business details ironed out.

We also publish a monthly newsletter called "The People's Express" that goes to members, parents and sponsors to keep them informed of our activities.

Every July, the members of the group get together for their annual Retreat weekend. Since 1968, we have been going back to the same place: Camp Muskingum in Carrollton, Ohio. During that weekend, we elect our officers for the upcoming year, hold discussions on where the group has been and where it is going, get to know each other better, share our feelings about each other, and

strengthen our ties to We The People. Many members consider this weekend to be the highlight of the We The People year. The group elects a chairperson in May and that person oversees the planning of Retreat.

A unique aspect of our Retreat is the last activity held on Sunday afternoon. We call it our "Final Circle" and every member of the group is given a chance to share any feelings they may have about themselves, the other members, the group or anything at all. It is a very special time for everyone.

WTP is a non-profit organization that financially supports itself by donations. These donations partially come from community sponsors and patrons. Sponsors can be any business or individual who donates \$25.00 or more, on a yearly basis, to WTP. Patrons generally donate time or services to the group. Currently there are 35 sponsors and eight patrons. WTP also receives money through our shows. Being non-profit, we do not charge a fee to perform. We do accept donations, though, and usually receive \$25.00 from our audiences.

IMPORTANCE TO MEMBERS

WTP's uniqueness stems from the people who make up the group. We range in age from 14 to 35. We are high school students, college students, working adults. We all support WTP's ideals and beliefs. All of our projects and shows could not be accomplished if it were not for the dedication of the members. We have all learned to work together, grow together, learn together. WTP's openness and ultimate acceptance of people with varied backgrounds and personality are two of the many things that draw people to the group.

I have been a member for seven and a half years. Many of those years, I was only a part-time member since I was away at college. I always knew, however, that WTP and the people in it would be there whenever I returned. Holding the office of Public Relations over the past year

has been exciting, challenging, frustrating, rewarding and a learning experience. I am so grateful for the things I've learned from WTP: responsibility, leadership, cooperation, acceptance. WTP will always be a part of me and I will carry its ideals with me wherever I go.

Here are some other current members' feelings about WTP:

Dave Griffiths, 1981-82 Director:

I have been involved in WTP for over 3½ years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to learn about how it is to be truly responsible. I have held four offices in that time and have grown with each one. As I became more involved in the group, it became easier to give more of my time. I think it was because the more work and time I put into the group, the more I felt like I was accomplishing something; and I was doing it on an adult level. I was responsible for my actions. I had room to try new things, learning from my mistakes, develop my own creativity and learn my limitations. The level of personal development, positive comments and constructive criticism cannot be matched by any other organization that is honest with itself. Not everything is perfect by far, but at least we admit it.

Lauri Litwack, 1981-82 President:

Throughout my 7½ years in WTP, I've been involved in different capacities ranging from a general member to the choreography committee to president. The group has helped me to grow emotionally and my experiences have been invaluable. I've learned to deal with many types of people, organizational skills, responsibility and patience. The community projects we do are good for all of us to give us a sense of helping and caring for others. Because of our projects, we are continually learning and growing—giving of ourselves.

Jon Darrah, 1981-82 Speak-Outs

Chairperson: WTP is a very unique group, bound together by love and caring. I joined the group as a high school freshman and I'm now a senior. Throughout my time in WTP, it has helped me angle my thoughts toward school, I've been able to communicate better and I've developed a sense of understanding. WTP has helped me express myself, and has helped me learn more about myself. WTP helped me find me. When one joins WTP, it may not be forever, it rarely is. But one learns of himself and shares that with others. The cycle goes on forever.

Teri Evans, 1981-82 Assistant

Choreographer: WTP not only sings about important issues but does something about it. I have helped myself by helping others. I have become aware of changes in the world that I can make. The idealism of youth has found fertile soil in WTP and has grown into a productive use of that idealism. WTP has also shown me how to care about people on a more personal level. Other members can call each other "friends" and mean it. We have worked together, played together, cried together, shared our feelings, and made new friends. I feel good that I can share my talents with others, and others can share theirs with me.

As you can see, WTP members recognize the potential of the group. Each member learns and grows at his or her own rate. They are encouraged to express their opinions and contribute to the group's decisions.

WTP's future is, of course, unknown. Based on our fourteen year history, I feel that WTP will be around for a long, long time. It has had its good times and its bad, its up moments and its down, but it has survived all. Many people have passed through WTP and many more will.

One thing is for sure: no matter what happens to WTP, its impact on people's lives will never be forgotten. Each member will carry what they have learned and spread the message to other people.

One of the songs we perform is called "Building Together" and it says: "We can build together, one step at a time." WTP has been building for fourteen years and we hope to continue to work, learn, love, share, grow and build together for many years to come.