

Interview with Kelly Ferris ('97)



Kelly Ferris, M.Ed., daughter of longtime Highland Hall teacher, Laura Ferris, currently lives in Seattle, WA and works as a behavior analyst specializing in children with autism.

Interview by Jacqui Dres, June 2009

Tell us about the work that you're currently involved in.

I'm currently spending my time professionally in two different ways. Three-quarters of my time I'm involved in a private practice where I'm a partner with a new organization called the Organization for Research and Learning. Our primary mission is to serve children with autism and their families delivering behavior analytic services. The other portion of my time I will be director of an inclusive preschool program called Families for Effective Autism Treatment (FEAT), of Washington.

How did you become interested in the area of autism?

In my sophomore year at UC Santa Cruz, I responded to an ad for a summer job doing outdoor activities with a nine year old boy with learning disabilities. The mother was homeschooling her two twins who were both on the autism spectrum. It was an interesting experience walking into their home because there wasn't any area that wasn't dedicated resource-wise to the children and their education. I was impressed. This was dedication far beyond what I had ever seen--and I had seen a lot of dedicated teachers having grown up with two of them. For me, it was an immediate match and so I spent the entire summer with the boy teaching him to ride a bike and play basketball. In the fall they offered me a teaching position as his shadow aide at school. In the meantime I was still attending college full time, so I worked with him for two and a half years during the rest of my undergraduate studies.

What was your undergraduate degree?

It was actually Neurobiology. Originally I was headed in a pre-med direction. Then, as I started the aide position, I became interested in behavior analysis. I decided to pursue a graduate degree in special education and completed coursework toward certification as a Behavior Analyst. My medical background has been very helpful. When I am reading research and literature there are a lot of biomedical treatments out there for children with autism, and I feel I'm a better consumer because of that background.

Where did you pursue your graduate studies?

I did my graduate studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. The aide position I held in Santa Cruz was supervised by two different firms in Seattle. Both agencies offered me positions in Seattle in the field of autism while I was attending grad school.

Tell me about the organization you formed.

About two years ago, I formed a partnership with one of my former colleagues. We work primarily with children with autism and their families in their homes. For children with a developmental disability it's really important that services integrate the family. As the student gains new skills the people around them have to learn to treat them as a different person as they gain capabilities. We

also work with the families and help them see different ways of interacting with their children.

Because our work is done within the home we try to tread as lightly as possible, but sometimes our students receive up to 25 hours a week of intervention. So that's a lot of extra people coming through someone's home. Siblings are trying to understand why you're coming 4 or 5 times a week for their brother or sister, and you end up building a relationship with everyone in the family.

Can you recall anything different about your Waldorf education as you went on to college?

Absolutely. My first English class in college I remember that I had read nine out of the ten books in my ninth and tenth grade classes at Highland Hall. I thought, "Wow, I've already read stuff from college." Also, the writing requirement in college did not feel so overwhelming to me after having written so many main lesson books. When papers were assigned it was not so daunting to me. Also, the teachers at Highland Hall required so many outside resources I was already prepped for researching in different ways and writing up my opinions and ideas. The biggest adjustment was mainly the size of the classes where you had hundreds of people attending a lecture. It seemed a little impersonal to me. I tended to be the person going to speak with the professor during office hours because otherwise it would have felt too impersonal.

Are there any aspects of your Waldorf education that have carried forward and helped you in your present work?

Yes. Primarily the closeness and ease of relationship building. It may be a part of who I am, but my whole educational experience has been close relationships with people. I call people up for their birthday that I've known since I was four years old. And I think it's a foreign experience for most people to have ties with people from such a young age who are not family members. Also, I think that because of my education at Highland Hall I have a true respect for all kinds of people. When I look at my class of 13 that I graduated with, I think each one of them would have represented a different clique in public school and the odds are that we probably wouldn't have interacted or known one another. You would have the sports crew, the nerds, the preppy people, the hipsters, and all of that. I feel privileged to have been close with people who approach life in such different ways. And I would have missed out on those opportunities if I had been just a part of the same group of people like me. In my work I'm dealing with all sorts of families. The Seattle area is a pretty diverse place, and autism crosses all racial and cultural lines. So, if I'm going to be a good provider then I have to be able to understand and to be interested in all sorts of different people. So I feel that my background and confidence in relationship building makes me better at my job.

Is there any message that you would say to the current graduates of Highland Hall?

It's a pretty privileged experience getting an education at Highland Hall. And with that privilege there comes a responsibility of awareness. Being a part of Waldorf education is a unique opportunity and so I'd tell them to remember this, and to give back and share.

More information about the Organization for Research and Learning can be found at www.O4RL.com.