COMMUNITY LIVING as Social Activism in Camphill

By Kam Bellamy

In my younger days I fancied myself to be quite the social activist. I traveled to Washington DC to see the Clothesline Project and march against violence against women. In New York I spoke out at a Take Back the Night rally and walked topless through the streets of the City shouting, "Wherever we go, however we dress, no means no and yes means yes!" to show that even half-dressed, I had rights to my body. I visited the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in England—an inspiring group whose work to this day influences my approach to life and to activism. I marched in protests opposing the World Bank, and in general was up for any "good fight" that came my way.

At a certain age, I became tired of fighting. Fresh out of college I took a job at an anti-hunger organization. I loved my job, but the weight of being "anti-hunger" in my work life, while fighting the military-industrial complex and violence against women in my free time, became more than I could stomach. I decided I wanted to work for something. As someone who was trying to create a more peaceful world, I realized I needed to stop fighting—to stop thinking about what I didn't want in the world, and to start creating what I did want.

While studying Race and Gender Studies in college I read Riane Eisler's book *The Chalice and the Blade*, in which she talks about "gylanic" societies—social systems based on the equality of women and men. I loved her book, and she articulated a lot of what I already knew in my heart: that societies did not need to be based on a culture of domination, and that humans could build (and in some situations already had built) cultures based on a model of partnership. I wanted to be part of such a culture, and express my activist self by modeling with others that a partnership-based society could exist. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines activism as "the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change." Did I need to "vigorously campaign" or "protest" in order to bring about political or social change? Did I need to "fight" for nonviolence to create a culture of respect? I hoped not.

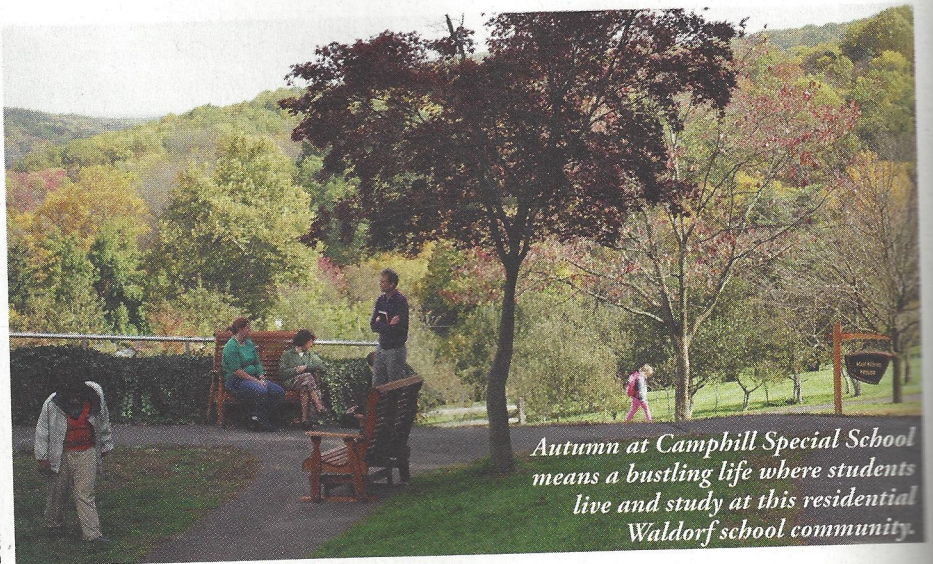
In 1994 while backpacking through England, I walked into a beautiful, seemingly idyllic valley in a remote area of North Yorkshire and came upon a Camphill community called Botton Village. In Botton Village, people of all abilities lived side by side, each contributing what they could to the community, and in turn having their needs met by the community. Individuals living in Camphill work out of anthroposophy, and believe that "in a community of human beings working together, the well-being of the community will be the greater, the less the individual claims for him/herself the proceeds of the work s/he has done." We turn the proceeds of our work over to our fellow-workers, and in turn our needs are satisfied by the work done by others.

Three years after first walking in to Botton Village, I returned to stay, initially thinking I would live there for one to three years, to learn about and experience community life. Though I have moved from community to community, 20 years on I am still living in Camphill. (There are more than 120 Camphill communities throughout the world—most in Europe and the US and Canada, but some also in Southern Africa, India, Russia, and Vietnam.)

To me, community living is the highest form of social activism. Sharing resources, sharing burdens, expanding the concept of family beyond those who are related by blood: these are revolutionary concepts—not to be taken lightly. We can fight against certain political figures or certain economic, military, environmental, or human rights issues. But until we can find an alter-

At Triform Camphill Community (Hudson, NY) individuals of all abilities make lasting friendships built around trust and respect

Ben Kulo



Autumn at Camphill Special School means a bustling life where students live and study at this residential Waldorf school community.

native to the culture of domination, we will not succeed in addressing any of these things. Community living, to me, offers a real alternative to this culture.

Being a member of a Camphill community means making a commitment to ensuring that the needs of all your fellow community members are met. It also means establishing trust with others in your community that they will work to meet your needs. In Audre Lorde's 1979 address titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she states that when we "learn how to take our differences and make them strengths" then true equality can be achieved. This is what we strive to do in Camphill. Valuing the wholeness at the core of each individual, we focus on what each individual brings to our community, whether it be a warm smile and a cheeky sense of humor, an ability to grow vegetables, or a keen knack for accounting—every individual's contribution is valued. When we know that others are dependent upon each of us to give to the best of our ability, a strong work ethic is cultivated.

Choosing to live in community made the personal political in my life in a very real way. Excusing myself from participating in the culture of domination allowed the very living of my life to be an expression of activism.

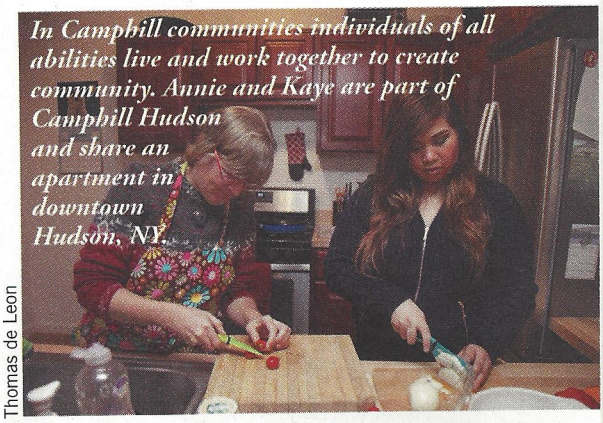
I love that in Camphill communities people of all abilities are given voice. People with "special needs" live side-by-side with people "without" special needs, and work together, celebrate together, and by and large self-govern, practicing consensus decision-making.

Today, CMS (the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services) is pushing to remove people with special needs from intentional community settings. Such settings, they say, are "isolating" and "restrictive." For me, as a person labeled "non-disabled," I can only say that community living offered a freedom from the isolation many experience in the modern world—the isolation of needing to be dependent solely on one's own resources for survival, and the isolation of not knowing who would care if I had what I needed or not. Community living also gave me freedom—I was not restricted to doing only the work that could produce money for the survival of my family. I was allowed and encouraged to do work that was meaningful, whether it was caring for my daughter, cooking lunch, working in the vegetable garden, or managing the accounts for the community. My work, and the work of all in the community, regardless of "capability," was meaningful and valued.

Going forward, we must be careful that this tightening of regulations does not have the effect of restricting the freedom of and consequently isolating people with disabilities in the name of inclusion. All of us, regardless of ability, need to be able to express our ideals and lead full, active, and whole lives by choosing to live in community. To restrict those who have been labeled "disabled" from so doing is unconscionable.

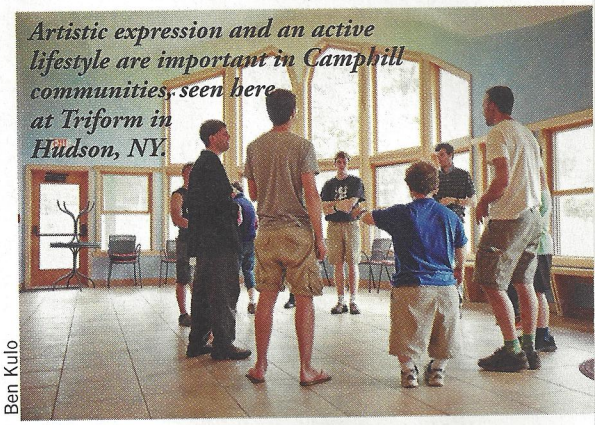
I may need to return to "vigorous campaigning."

Kam Bellamy is a longtime Camphill coworker and currently serves as the Executive Director at Camphill Hudson.



In Camphill communities individuals of all abilities live and work together to create community. Annie and Kaye are part of Camphill Hudson and share an apartment in downtown Hudson, NY.

Thomas de Leon



Artistic expression and an active lifestyle are important in Camphill communities, seen here at Triform in Hudson, NY.

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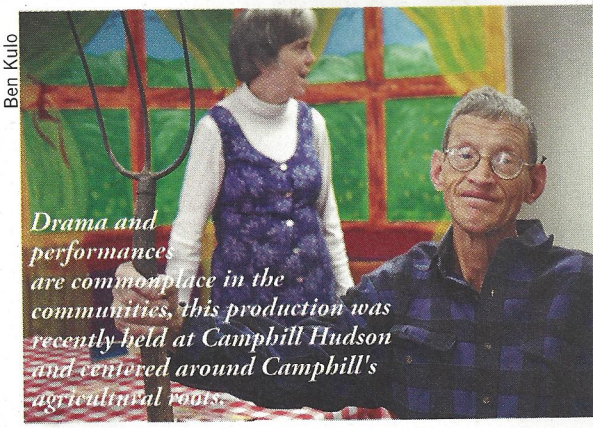

Drama and performances are commonplace in the communities, this production was recently held at Camphill Hudson and centered around Camphill's agricultural roots.

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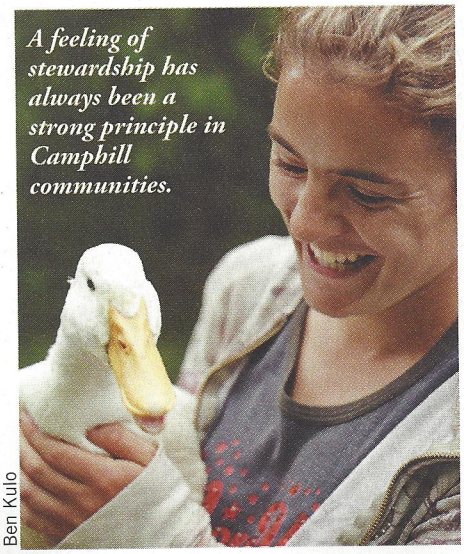

A feeling of stewardship has always been a strong principle in Camphill communities.

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The candle workshop at Camphill Village Copake (Copake, NY) creates a wide variety of 100% beeswax candles for use by the community and for sale to the public through retail stores and catalogs.