

KONNAROCK TRAINING SCHOOL

Konnarock, Virginia

1937



FIGURE 1 (Private files of LaVerne Kiser)

PREFACE

In the mountains of Appalachia, there is a delicate white blossom found in early spring. Sanguinaria canadensis, described in the Fieldbook of American Wildflowers as “a most beautiful but fragile flower,” is more commonly known as bloodroot. If you pick the tiny individual flower and separate it from its interdependent root system, its stem will bleed. There is something about Appalachian soil that enters the souls of the people as well, something that connects them to the mountains and bleeds when that connection is broken....

Novelist Alice Walker once said that it was impossible for her to tell her own story without telling her mother’s story. That is how I began my own research--with my mother’s story, and the stories of others who were part of the Konnarock Training School (KTS) experience. I undertook this oral history research to in some way understand the effects of the school on the lives of these individuals and their communities, to search for the bloodroot that connects their lives to that remarkable place in a secluded valley of the Appalachian Mountains. I hope I have accomplished that goal, but more than that, what I have done is find the bloodroot that connects me to my own heritage. I sought my roots, not in order to plant myself in the past and relive the life of my foremothers, but in order to gain nourishment to live my own life more abundantly (Hochman, 1994). Alice Walker (1996) also wrote, “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see--or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (p.997). My study of Konnarock Training School has enabled me to open that sealed letter from my mother and her sisters.

Beyond the general historic interest the reconstruction of experience at a now defunct institution might have, it is my own personal investment in the project that made it a study worth pursuing. My relationship with KTS began before I was born. My mother is a 1948 graduate of Konnarock Training School who has told me stories of the school my entire life. One of her sisters was also a graduate of the school. I make no pretense that I am totally “objective” in the scientific definition of the word. What I

choose to research and the methodology I pursue cannot be separated from the person I am (Hill, Bond, Mulvey & Treenzio, 2000; Moch & Gates, 2000).

Wolcott (1995) says that as researchers we begin our studies with what lies not in our participants, but in ourselves. Foremost, my research has been an outgrowth of who I was and who I have become. Qualitative researchers reject the concept that researchers can be completely objective and neutral as they generate data (Mason, 1996). At the heart of narrative inquiry is the researcher's "personal relationship to subject matter" (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994, p. xi), and the choice of "an area of inquiry about which he or she feels some passion" (Seidman, 1998, p. 23). As a feminist researcher, I embrace the subjective and personal in this research story (Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield, 2000; Harding, 1987). My own epistemological, religious, and personal beliefs have influenced not only the questions I have chosen, but also how I have approached my work, which resources and experts I have valued, and how I have used data (Daly, 1994). In a letter to the editors of *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000), Maggie Humm wrote, "I looked inside myself to see how bits of theory, odd empirical data, ideas from differing disciplines could tell my research story" (qtd. p. xv, Cosslett et al.). This is also what I have done. For many reasons, the collection of oral histories of Konnarock Training School alumnae and faculty is the research problem that looks inside me to link together many parts of who I am: educator, feminist, Lutheran, my mother's daughter, child of Appalachia, narrative researcher, lover of story, student. It is as though I did not choose this topic; it chose me.

In July 2001, I attended a KTS reunion with my mother and recorded my impressions in my journal:

Rose Cox was in charge of the meeting. Bent with age and bone disease, her voice was so soft that even the quiet and attentive audience had difficulty hearing her. She introduced two ministers, both married to former KTS students. The first spoke briefly of the "Good shepherd" who was always with us and who had guided the church to establish KTS, guided its faculty, staff, and students, and whose presence continued to work through all those who had attended KTS and

continued to make the gospel known. The second spoke of how Martin Luther had been influenced by the book of Romans to understand that we are justified by faith and how Luther's work led to the formation of the Lutheran Church which in turn established KTS, whose spirit of love and faith is witnessed daily in the lives of those who were gathered in the room.

This was not an ordinary school reunion. This place, this school had truly made a difference in the lives of its students. Graduates, former students, and teachers were asked to stand and identify themselves and the years they attended. There were about thirty-five to forty present. Time and again those who were part of the story of KTS said, "It was the happiest time of my life.—I thank God for the time I spent at KTS.—It made such a difference in my life.—I wouldn't trade my years at KTS for anything."

What is happening here? Why are these people saying these things? It isn't nostalgia for lost youth nor simply fond memories. There is something else, something ineffable that binds these women in their 60s and 70s and 80s to the school.

Rose asked everyone to stand and, for those who knew the words, to sing the Konnarock alma mater, a song I had never heard before. Claire came to the piano and lovingly spread yellowed and tattered sheets of music. Mary came to lead the singing. The piano was out of tune and most of the singers off key. The pitch was too high for the aging voices, but in the song, I felt the strong bond and the love among these people. "Come, and learn, and see. I am here to bless the children. Suffer them to come to me." They sang, and unexplainably, tears filled my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. What is the power of this experience?

The following year, at the July 2002 reunion, there were more than seventy people present. It was more than forty years ago, in June 1959, that the last graduates, seven students, received their diplomas from KTS. For all these years, those who had an

interest in the school gathered the first Saturday in July. Certainly, it is not unusual for people to return to their high school reunions, but these attendees were from graduating classes covering four decades at an institution that no longer exists. In fact, some of those at the reunion did not attend the Southwest Virginia school. Spouses, children, and grandchildren of alumnae are drawn to the reunions as well and welcomed as though they are part of the family. The KTS enterprise was never large; at most there were about forty boarding students and sixty local day students enrolled. In addition, KTS operated for only thirty-five years, not a great length of time as far as institutions go. What drew these people to a reunion after all this time? What made this school distinctive among schools?

Although the roots of this inquiry were personal, additional compelling reasons cultivated the process and brought it to harvest. The unique nature and history of Konnarock Training School make its story worthy of preservation. The United Lutheran Church in America founded the school in 1924 with the purpose of improving the quality of daily life, nurturing spiritual growth, and educating students and the community (Gay, 1998). First on a farm that belonged to Theodore Roosevelt's sister and later in its own building, the school provided a home for teachers and a yearly enrollment of thirty-five to forty girls. Fulfilling its mission in Southwest Virginia until 1959, Konnarock Training School recruited faculty from throughout the United States and at least one teacher from Europe. These individuals left their homes and lived in the Virginia mountains for a minimum of nine months, and not only taught academic classes, but also engaged in extensive outreach into the surrounding communities. Another unique aspect of the KTS story is the cooperation that existed among church, public schools systems, and government agencies during its existence.

One goal for my research has been to reconstruct something of the students' experiences and to understand the significance of the education that was provided by this institution. I wanted to know how and why the school was able to so deeply affect its students and the surrounding community. What were the educators doing that worked? Even though the experiences of the students at Konnarock Training School was situated in a particular time and context, something of what was accomplished or not

accomplished there might help expand the understanding of an effective school, might add to the discussion of valid educational practices.

An additional value of this research at this moment is the work that is underway to find a way to restore the historic KTS building. It is my hope that telling the story of KTS will be an impetus to that restoration. Presently owned by the United States Forest Services, Konnarock Training School was named to the National Register of Historic Places on June 5, 1997. Area residents and former students are involved in negotiations and funding efforts to restore the building and to use the facilities again for some type of educational activity, thus renewing at least part of the original mission of Konnarock Training School. I have already shared some of my research with individuals who have the resources and the connections to bring about this work and hope to do all I can to see that the building is again a vital part of the community and that its history is not forgotten.

Ensuring the history is not forgotten means that I sought out the individual experiences of those involved with the school through oral history interviews. Oral history's inclusion of the perspectives of "ordinary" men and women and its collaborative nature appeal to many investigators. I am one such investigator. The work I present here is a result of my relationships with eight women who shared their lives, memories, and friendships with me. With their stories, we have together tried to reconstruct a compelling picture of one moment in time, a time when a school existed in the mountains of Appalachia in the small valley of Konnarock, Virginia. The story is not meant to be representative of all schools, just as the narrators'¹ individual stories are not meant to put them in categories of the typical. This is a story like no other, yet it may be that, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest, "As one moves closer to the unique characteristics of a person or a place, one discovers the universal"(p. 14). By gaining specific, detailed knowledge of particular circumstances, we are able to apply that knowledge to

¹ Throughout the study, I have frequently chosen the terms *narrators* or *participants* when I refer to the women who shared their stories with me. These words are more reflective of a collaborative relationship and avoid the detachment of traditional scientific terms such as *subjects* or *informants* (Kirsch, 1999; Reinharz, 1992).

fresh experiences we might encounter (Merriam, 1998). The work of Konnarock Training School was short-lived and was in a narrow setting, but there are wide-ranging areas of discussion applicable to that work. The stories of women from Konnarock Training School are all different, but they are one story—how this institution touched each woman and made it possible for her to learn, to develop a talent, to find spiritual peace, to lead, to nurture the potential of others, to build relationship and community, to become herself.

There are five chapters in the story I tell. The next pages in chapter 1 concern the process I went through to collect data and write about KTS. Chapter 2 reviews the history of Konnarock Training School and its associated ministries. In chapter 3, I introduce the narrators through portraits comprised of their own words from oral history interviews. Themes I found in the research data are discussed in chapter 4; chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the work. There are also several appendixes, including a discussion of feminist theology and documents concerning both this study and the work of KTS.



FIGURE 2: KTS BUILDING, JANUARY 2003