

SCHOOL LIFE 350 students attend conference on social, environmental reform

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They met last summer at a folk story show, and met again at an office of left-wing activists. He is an environmental crusader; she a radical social reformer.

Both are Rhode Island high school students.

And since last September, Michael Eisenberg, a senior at Wheeler School in Providence; and Tara Melish, a senior at South Kingstown High, have co-founded RI HOPE, Rhode Island High Schools Organized to Protect the Earth.

"We believe that healing the earth must be done by two different approaches: environmental awareness and social action," they wrote in a printed credo.

They wanted to build a coalition of students throughout the state. So Eisenberg, who lives in Providence, invited his peers in northern Rhode Island to join. Melish, who lives in Peace Dale, invited students from southern Rhode Island.

And when they held their first annual conference last weekend at South Kingstown High School, 350 attended, from as far north as Woonsocket and as far south as Narragansett.

"I think Tara and I work well together," Eisenberg said, "because we have different backgrounds and points of view. She focuses on social issues, while I focus on environmental issues. Furthermore, she comes from a public school, and I a private school. They're two different kinds of bureaucracies, and we have to be able to work effectively with both."

Planning wasn't easy. They had to negotiate with South Kingstown High for use of the building over the weekend, hire janitors, arrange for school chaperones, cater the meals, get donations from local businesses, and book speakers and lecturers.

Eisenberg and Melish got 12 students to form a "core group" and help out. Four of them were seniors, three juniors, two sophomores, and three freshmen. Eisenberg hopes that next year, when he and Melish are out of town in college, younger core group members will take their places.

The opening speaker for the conference was Trudy Coxe, former executive director of Save the Bay and now director of the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Association. She told the crowd her "Ten Commandments" of social activism, including, "Be proud," "Be a pest," "Know the press," and "Learn to love to raise money."

Then the conference recessed for a four-hour party. Some students went into the gym for a dance, others watched movies in the library and band room, and the rest went into the cafeteria for games and conversation.

By one in the morning the lights went off. All 350 attendants tucked into sleeping bags laid out on the gymnasium floor.

"The potential power we collectively symbolize here is amazing," Melish said.

Next day, from morning until mid-afternoon, students joined workshop sessions on a variety of environmental and social issues.

Animal rights activists came in to condemn those who hunt for fur or perform cruel experiments on living things. Representatives from the Peace for Cuba appeal urged students to lobby for the removal of travel restrictions and economic sanctions on Cuba.

Other local experts led workshops on gay and lesbian youth, racism, and homelessness, as well as stratospheric ozone, recycling, and the virtues of vegetarianism, to name a few.

The closing speaker was Alec Guettel, who helped found the largest student-run organization in the country, the Student Environmental Action Coalition. (7,600 high school and college students attended SEAC's most recent conference.)

Guettel had on a leather jacket and stylishly worn-out jeans. He spoke in pubilect, the lingo of teenagers. Attendants had no trouble relating to the fellow, although he was several years their senior.

Using analogies to liven up statistics, he even drew some laughs. Here's how he explained that 25 percent of the world's population consume 75 percent of its resources:

"Imagine that you're wandering around lost in the desert with your three brothers and sisters . . . You have four apples to split between the four of you. But instead of dividing them up evenly, you eat three apples and make your brothers and sisters split the last one. They go on, nearly starving, while you eat so much that you have to throw up and pollute all the land around you. That is the world today. That's what I mean by inequality."

With a few words from Melish on the need to act, the conference adjourned.

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