Celebrating The Island's Community Spirit

"Martha's Vineyard, a small place with a strong sense of community," says Walter Cronkite in the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's video trailer. "People help each other out. They care for the elderly. Help with each other's kids. They raise a barn and help raise the community spirit."

When I first came to the Vineyard 30 years ago, I was looking for this kind of community spirit. I had arrived with a simple notion - to travel to a place I'd never been, and walk on a beach to reflect on what was next in my life.

The journey began with my meeting kindred spirits at events like Emily's List, hosted by Jill Iscol, and featuring Rosabeth Moss Kanter and other women of stature and purpose. It was an honor to sit next to the Wampanoag sisters and leaders like Berta Welch, Adrian Ignacio, and Carla Cuch at the Barnbusters' fundraiser that reunited James Taylor and Carly Simon. A chance meeting at the outdoor Tisbury Amphitheatre led to a special friendship with Lucy Durr Hackney, who deepened my understanding of and appreciation for the civil rights movement.

On my long walks on Lucy Vincent Beach, I reflected on these inspiring interactions. They gave me the courage to deeply ask – what's next for me? Then one day I came upon a large stone on the water's edge. It had an image etched in it that looked like the tree of life. I began a daily ritual of sitting quietly with it. Out of respect, I shared it with the Wampanoag Tribe and received their permission to keep it.

For weeks, I sat with this stone – and ended up extending my 3-week rental to 3 months. It was a surreal time in our country, with Newt Gingrich's Contract on America. Over the years, I'd had the privilege of learning from and working with great leaders. I knew we could do better. Out of frustration, a volcano erupted inside me. I spontaneously started writing about those who had led us out of other difficult times: Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Marion Wright Edelman – and emerging leaders, like the founders of City Year.

This journey led me to sign up for The Chilmark Writing Workshop. What a gift to spend a week with Nancy Aronie, who gave us the courage to find our own inner voices. Once I had embraced this writing adventure and set a goal of writing 100 stories, I invited friends and colleagues to nominate people whose stories would inspire others. I'm forever grateful to Lucy for connecting me with Trude Lash in Menemsha, who shared her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt.

For the first Stone Soup gathering we invited Vineyard legends like Solviva's Ana Edey, Pam and Nat Benjamin, Zelda Gamson, and John Abrams of the South Mountain Company, as well as Jim Feiner Real Estate and Deb Moore from the citizen campaign that developed the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank. They were each working on projects to preserve, protect and plan for the Vineyard's future. They thought there could be 100 stories just from the Vineyard – the one they choose was the Barnbusters – the community-built barn that is now the MV Ag Hall.

The collection of stories expanded beyond the Vineyard. They all celebrated the spirt of community – and the foundations of our democracy, from volunteerism to civic engagement, from examples of corporate social responsibility to the founding of non-profit organizations like the Peace Corps, City Year, Youth Build, and Christmas in April. In search of a quiet place to finish the book, Lucy introduced me to the Guggenheim's tiny beach cottage in Vineyard Haven. It was a blessing to connect with Davis and learn of his new film, *The Inconvenient Truth*.

Stone Soup for the World: Life-Changing Stories of Heroes

Lou and Ralph Davidson hosted our first book event in 1998 at their Vineyard Haven home where everyone from "Writers Row" was invited to take home a "magic stone." The next evening, on Rose Styron's lawn, Olga Hirshhorn shared her stone with her dinner partner President Clinton. Soon after he surprised us by accepting our invitation to join Congressman John Lewis and Charles Ogletree for our community event at Oak Bluff's Union Tabernacle honoring the 35th Anniversary of Dr. King's I Have a Dream speech. The next day, Walter Cronkite took the Clintons and the Kennedys sailing on his *Wyntje*. Soon after, to my astonishment, I received a call from a familiar voice that said, "Ms. Larned, this is Walter Cronkite."

It was an honor to work with Mr. Cronkite to produce a trailer for a proposed TV series featuring the stories in *Stone Soup for the World* to inspire people to be educated about important issues so they could vote for those who would make wise decisions that would affect their future. His message still rings true today: "Creating an educated constituency in America is the most critical issue of our time."

Thanks to Len Morris' generosity and Galen Films production, and Jim Parr and his studio, we premiered *In Celebration of Heroes* at a community-wide event held at the MVCMA Tabernacle in July 2000. During that school year, we'd worked with Deb Hammet's 5th grade class to tabulate all of the local nominated heroes – youth, adults, business and seasonal residents – from the Vineyard community and featured them in the *Martha's Vineyard Times*. Marty Nadler emceed the event and introduced Mr. Cronkite who said, "As I ran through the names of those who have been nominated as Vineyard Heroes, I recognize those neighbors of ours who are the salt of the earth, who make our Vineyard the very special place that it is. By their examples, they pass along inspiration to all of us. Their sacrifice of time and labor to help their neighbors challenges us to respond in kind. This is stone soup's magic. The secret to their greatness is the secret of Stone Soup." He introduced the video by saying, "It's the hope of all those dedicated to the lofty ideals of *Stone Soup for the World* that we can teach the world to raise up and praise those up to now un-sung heroes in our midst, but heroes we see every day helping our community."

The Evolution: Seeds planted across the country

At the Celebration of Heroes event, a summer guest from Baltimore was inspired to bring the Vineyard spirit and what he called the "Stone Soup model" to his community. A businessman from Cincinnati who'd read the book called to ask us to bring the Stone Soup model to his community after the race riots in 1999. Each time we held one of our leadership trainings, we invited people featured in the book to join us. Oakland Fire Captain Ray Gatchalian always joined for our island community events as well as our leadership training for Vineyard teachers at the West Tisbury School. And when he asked us to work with him in Oakland, it led to a three-year project with local schools, culminating with a Celebration of Heroes event with then-Mayor Jerry Brown.

In 2002, after 9/11, we held a Celebration of Heroes event in New York City, where Mr. Cronkite presented Dr. Muhammad Yunus with the Institute's Gandhi Award. He announced the Institute's Pledge "…encouraging people to lend a hand to the good guys and a build bridge between the haves and have nots. This indeed could be our version of putting a man on the moon," he said. "Imagine if we set a goal, even as Kennedy set the goal of putting a man on the moon. Let us say we give ourselves the same target -- in this decade."

The next year, at the Alliance for the New Humanity conference in San Juan, Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias asked me to go to Vieques, Puerto Rico to see if we could help with the rebuilding process of that island after 68 years of occupation by the US Navy. When I arrived there, the mayor of Vieques was touched to see actor Edward James Olmos' name on the cover of the Spanish version of the book, *Pan Y Vino Para El Camino*. He'd been cellmates with Olmos after joining in the island's civil disobedience that had led to their freedom. He then asked us help develop the island's youth so they could become its future leaders.

In response, our team led by Nane Alejandrez, launched the Institute's first Youth Leadership Summit. This emerged into a powerful four-year bilingual demonstration project using our educational tools to train Vieques youth to be leaders of their island community. By 2007, the youth leaders -- now college alumni envisioned their island's future by creating a 2020 Sustainable Plan and were granted 100 acres to develop into a green community.

In 2010 these Vieques youth leaders traveled to Martha's Vineyard for eight of the Institute's 19 Summits. They believed in the power of Dr. King's command: "Each One Teach One," and they humbly carried on his legacy.

They inspired Vineyard youth and those from Nantucket, Virgin Gorda, the British Virgin Islands, Hawaii, the Philippines – to envision their dreams for their lives, their islands and our world. Following each Summit, we held year-round programs to anchor their dreams with real-world projects to develop as leaders. We're grateful to Bob and Sarah Nixon, Julie Flanders, Lynn Lilienthal, Don Berwick and to Rebecca Conroy for inviting generous hosts to provide lodging our Summit faculty and all the restaurants that fed us.

On the first day of each Summit, we organized Sustainability Tours so young people could see beyond the beaches to discover how people were working on innovative, forwarding-thinking projects that were helping to build a sustainable island. We'd travel around the island – up to the Wampanoag Community Center in Aquinnah, to West Tisbury's Dot's Boutique, to Island Grown Schools at the high school, and to see Vineyard Haven's solar panels in Cronig Market's parking lot. Each year we'd end the Sustainability Tour with a hands-on experience. One year they joined with Oak Bluffs Shellfish Constable Dave Grunden in planting one million oysters to clean the island's waters. They were inspired by Vineyard leaders like Noli Taylor, Island Grown Initiative, Emma Green-Beach, the MV Shellfish Group, Sidney Morris, The Farm Institute and Barnbuster leader Andrew Woodruff who encouraged these youth to explore how they too could work together to preserve and protect their island communities. During the off-season, Summit youth delegates explored career opportunities with island professionals, healthcare workers, authors like Rose Styron and Geraldine Brooks, filmmakers like Liz and Ken Witham, and business leaders like Pat Gregory who mentored these young people for our annual Job Shadow Day. They developed Sustainability-in-Action Projects like working with the Martha's Vineyard Commission to include youth voices in The Island Plan. Emma HallBillsback proudly presented the 2020 Vision for Martha's Vineyard at the 2011 Cronkite Awards at the Old Whaling Church in Edgartown. Many islanders nurtured our youth in the Martha's Vineyard Youth Leadership Initiative: Rebecca Rabeni, Grace Burton Sundman, Gia Rae Winsryg-Ulmer, Maura Valley, Saundra Hart Johnson, Elise Quebec, Marika Viragh, and Taynara Goncalves, with support from Claire Ganz, Pamela Ray, Dan Sharkowitz, Kevin McGrath, Gretchen Tucker Underwood, as well as our webmaster, Robin Sherman Harper.

It was at the 2015 Summit on Martha's Vineyard that 15-year-old Vineyarder Chris Aring Sharkovitz was inspired by Gandhi's grandson Arun to be a "techie" for good. He challenged us to use technology to bring our educational tools and training to the world. He believed technology would help us to realize our goal of "Each One Teach One" effectively and efficiently. To launch his idea, Chris envisioned an innovative hack-a-thon - "Design-a-Thon" – a 24-hour event with New England college students. We were honored that Valerie Mosley offered her legendary home - the Overton House, called the "Summer White House of the civil rights movement."

To test out his design, Chris then invited business and education leaders to another "Design-A-Thon" in Newport, RI. Held in conjunction with the 2019 Summit, he led a group of techies to build a platform that would empower young people to pursue sustainability-oriented careers so they could help to protect and preserve their communities. Over the years, he championed the development of the Institute's education platform and tested it with young people from Martha's Vineyard and New England communities like New Bedford, Fall River, Holyoke, Newport, and Providence. Chris's story is one of the 100 stories in our most recent book, *Stone Soup for a Sustainable World: Life-Changing Stories of Young Heroes.* Just before he passed in 2023, Chris inspired youth at our last Summit saying, "It's important to think deeply about your life. Wherever you are – to think deeply about it and to put the work in to think about how your life might look in 5 years. Your life will change, the world changes, circumstances change. It's good to step back and reevaluate. Maybe I need to make some adjustments and changes to my plans. Take time to think about what makes you happy. And what do you really want to do."

In closing Chris said reflectively the Institute's online Platform, "It's crazy looking over the last 7 years that we have been working on it -- it's now a fully-fledged online curriculum – and to be part of it all these years. If we teach younger kids how to be leaders and create change in the world, they can create a generation of change and new ideas that can better our world." While Chris and many others aren't with us now, we are carrying on their legacy by taking the Platform he envisioned to other communities like California and countries like Portugal—where local youth are now exploring how it can empower them to become leaders of a more sustainable world.

On this occasion of our 30th anniversary, we are grateful to all those who have supported our efforts over the years. We're especially grateful to everyone who is nurturing the island's community spirit – and to all those who continue to protect and preserve this very special place, Martha's Vineyard.