Educators Go From Gown to Town to Poverty

By B. Robert Anderson

The big delivery truck eased slowly against the dock as two temporary workers from the local employment agency prepared to unload the shipment of paper and supplies. One was a "regular" at such day-labor jobs; the other was Richard E. Bjork, president of Stockton State College in southern New Jersey, beginning his first full day of "poverty."

Standing to one side, the truck driver and the receiving clerk watched as the other two men labored. "There was a feeling of hostility between them and us," Mr. Bjork said, "as if there were a war between the poor and the existing social order."

In another section of Camden, N.J., Richard Pesqueira, dean of students at Stockton, was waiting in line to sell a pint of his blood. "I asked a couple of men on the street and they all told me this was the best deal in town. The regulars get $6, but I only received $5. Since this was the first time I sold my blood, I don't know if they took advantage of me or not."

Kenneth D. Tompkins, chairman of general studies at Stockton was not as productive as his two colleagues. "I didn't find myself thinking up any bright ideas on how to make money. I just wasn't imaginative."

The three men were in the early stages of an immersion program, devised by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, under the direction of Robert C. Holmes, to examine first-hand such questions as: What are the problems of the poor, the ill-informed, the less educated? How does society treat these citizens? What changes could be effected to cope better with poverty? To seek answers businessmen, clergy, administrators and, in this case, educators, dress in old clothes, grow beards, and pass for poor people. Each is given $3 and told to make his way in a strange community for 48 hours.

Richard Bjork
"Walking to our destination was an experience in itself. We're so accustomed to traveling by car."

Richard Pesqueira
"When it became clear we were going to be on our own — we became a little nervous."

Kenneth Tompkins
"Time just weighs so heavily — the day takes so long to go by — it's endless."

For the participants from Stockton State College, the experience has already had far-reaching and profound effects. The new college is scheduled to open in September with an initial enrollment of 400 freshmen and 600 juniors. Growth is anticipated at approximately 1,000 students each year to a total of 7,500.

The life style of the three administrators now includes a broader base of experience, which has led to significant revisions in planning for the future of the college. For one thing, Mr. Tompkins hopes to make the immersion program available to students. "My contact with students," he said, "shows that they do not really understand these community problems. Since Stockton is committed to community involvement we hope to offer this kind of exposure to the undergraduates."

Because Stockton is a public institution many students will enroll under the Educational Opportunity Fund, a financial aid program. "It's vitally important," Mr. Bjork said, "that we should not permit these students to pass through Stockton without being affected by college life. All our concepts and scheduling will take this into account. We have the opportunity to reach people in a very positive sense."

To further reinforce this concept, recruiters from the college have devoted extra time and effort to seeking students in disadvantaged areas of the state. Close contact with counseling personnel in the high schools has sought to find students who might benefit from learning in an institution sensitive to their backgrounds and aspirations.

In a more immediate sense, Mr. Bjork explained, "As a direct result of immersion we held a one-day retreat during which we gathered a variety of people from what are referred to as culturally and educationally deprived situations. These people were asked to offer critical comments on our total program for

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making policy decisions and college governance. What we are saying is that we want all points of view incorporated in our planning stages."

Mr. Pesqueira has developed a fresh outlook in hiring staff people who will have to deal with students. "I ask myself how these applicants might react to immersion. This gives me some idea of how they will be able to relate to the students."

The practical knowledge President Bjork gained while helping unload a truck has led to a decision to hire a black security chief. Security problems on the college campus have grown both in dimension and scope in the past decade, and this realization has sharpened the need for the head of this department to better understand the feelings and desires of the students, particularly in view of the college's commitment to the black community.

Such changes reflect the threefold purpose of the immersion program: (1) to educate participants in the problems of the poor; (2) to sensitize participants so that they might experience the feelings of those situations which are considered "normal," and (3) to motivate participants to make changes in their own organizations and institutions.

Mr. Holmes explained, "The program is meant to influence the participants, not the agencies with which they come in contact." There is a basic assumption that experience will generate empathy from which will emerge action.

On a Sunday evening Mr. Holmes met the three men at the Doorz Open, a way-station for troubled young people, for last-minute advice. At 9 p.m. the Stockton administrators left to seek a place to sleep that night. President Bjork roamed the streets searching for a haven, finally spent part of the night on a bus, and then slept at the bus terminal. Mr. Tompkins and Dean Pesqueira tried the police station and were directed to "a church about 18 blocks away," where they were told they could get help. Ultimately, they returned to the Doorz Open where they slept on the floor.

Early the next morning, Mr. Bjork was successful in getting a day's work on the truck. "My fellow helper had to take a $2 advance and it was interesting to note that he was well known to the employment manager. Still, when he went to lunch, he put 50 cents in the music machine, and he later insisted we wait till the music was over."

Money took on new meaning as Mr. Pesqueira noted when he stopped at a diner and spent 68 cents for breakfast. "It bothered me because I realized money was on my mind constantly. Naturally, I left no tip. I also noticed that as long as I stayed in the near-ghetto, I was somebody. When I went into the business area people looked right through me."

Mr. Tompkins walked the streets, stopping to sit on the curbs and talk to other men. "I was fearful. Even though I grew up in a poor home, we always had one another, and the community was small. Here I had the feeling that people were laughing at me."

The second morning Mr. Tompkins tried the employment agencies, buoyed by the news that Mr. Bjork had earned $18 the day before. "We got one offer of work in Philadelphia for $1.75 an hour. However, when you considered the distance and the time involved, no one would take the job – not even me."

Mr. Tompkins admits to an emotional sensitization. "I tried panhandling. For the most part it represented a series of defeats as people looked the other way. But I could see how you could put together a life of sorts. But what happens when you get sick?"

To add further depth to the immersion program the participants visited local agencies: Mr. Bjork a children's home, Mr. Tompkins a welfare agency, and Mr. Pesqueira the Salvation Army. From this combination of experiences and visitations emerged a montage of impressions:

"The agencies we generally think of as helping the poor live in a 9 to 5 world. Poverty is a 24 hour-a-day thing."

"The police seemed concerned not about us, but about the image they presented."

"It's an unequal world – in this instance based on outward appearances."

"Time moves so slowly."

"People never really saw me as a person."

"My ideas were not changed, but they were challenged – especially about people and how they use money."

"Over and over you must answer basic questions. Where to sleep? To eat? Where to go to the bathroom?"

These reactions, fairly typical of the more than 100 persons who have gone through immersion since the program started in 1968, have laid the groundwork for changes which will have lasting effects.

There is little doubt that New Jersey's immersion program has had an impact on its participants. Actual, gut-level experience, searching for a place to spend the night when you are penniless, can shatter many images. Translating these impressions, reactions and sentiments into realistic programs is one mission of higher education.

In the opening paragraph of Stockton's prospectus, President Bjork wrote, "The courageous, thoughtful reach for new paths to freedom is rare, perhaps because a new reach demands a great deal of both individuals and institutions."

This new reach can lead through circuitous paths – including 48 hours of poverty. □