

CORRESPONDENCE

WHITE LION STREET FREE SCHOOL

From Nigel Wright:

I was fascinated to read Jenny Aster's May 2008 article about White Lion Street Free School (WLSFS). In her article Jenny paints a somewhat rosier view of the school than I did in my book (*Free School: The White Lion Experiment*, published by Lib Ed in 1989).

I'm really pleased Jenny has written this article. There has been very little feedback to my book, but I think all the issues it raised are still worth discussing. The underlying principles of libertarian education are as relevant today as they were 30 years ago.

I don't disagree with anything Jenny says. Clearly WLSFS provided just what she needed at that time. And I remember a lot of other kids for whom WLSFS was the right place at that moment in their lives. The trouble is, I think this was a minority. I do think the greater number of kids didn't really have their needs met by the Free School. And many of those kids were very needy indeed.

I think Jenny hits the nail on the head when she says that, if a Free School were to be started today, it would benefit from insights into mental well-being which weren't in such wide circulation in the 1970s. (Although Carl Rogers' *Freedom to Learn* had been out since 1969.) A lot of people connected with Free Schools at that time, including some at White Lion, shared a view that all psychology is some kind of trick devised by the ruling classes the better to enslave us. Well, of course, psychology is used a lot for exactly that purpose. But there's a whole range of therapy and counselling which can offer help to

people in non-manipulative ways. Nothing like that was offered to White Lion kids. I'm sure it would be in 2008.

I hold to my judgement that WLSFS failed the kids who didn't get their needs met. Moreover, these kids were quite often disruptive and significantly diminished the value which other kids were getting out of the free school experience. Things could have been done to make it otherwise That's all.

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From Jenny Aster

It was great to read Nigel Wright's response to my article, particularly as it was on the whole a positive one. The one thing I would not agree with Nigel about is the minority benefiting from the school. I think that any child who is given the right to freely express themselves and explore and develop their inner potential is being equipped with the most fundamental and crucial skills a human being could be exposed to. The academic learning and curriculum is secondary to this I believe, as this confidence and enjoying what you do brings about excellence to begin with.

I am currently trying to track down others who attended the White Lion Street Free School during my time there and after. I have found two more people now who attended the school - Karen, who is now a dentist, and her brother John who runs his own business in the building trade.

My sister Tina, who also attended the school, reminded me that all who attended the school were and remain survivors. I wholeheartedly agree. Tina went to the school when it was at York Way but she said she felt the White Lion Street was a nicer site and more purpose-built for the school, whereas York Way was not a good building for the school and didn't have the same feel to it.

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