

Dear Diane:

The best way to give you the Midpeninsula Free University's history is to let you read on as I recall my own personal associations with it--or it. I returned to California after spending five years in New York City. I decided to forego expending my creative energies in the home and instead wished to ego-trip via the community. I had a vague yen to start a coffee shop. Eva, my next-door neighbor, turned me on to the "Free University"--a group of local residents and Stanford graduate students who held organizational meetings in an East Palo Alto theatre workshop. (East Palo Alto is our own--then Ghetto--now, Black Community.) I cautiously remained on the sidelines (I do that a lot) and felt things out. No one was president, leader, chairman, chief, but a few personalities stood out.

Eli--a Cuban refugee/Stanford grad student: prototype of a fiery revolutionary. I felt that if he wanted something to happen he would act. Whether or not his goal was accomplished, there would be plenty of waves. Ruth, Eli's consort, who became secretary of the Free U., broke out of her Catholic box to become a matress-on-the-floor wearer of old shawls and stringy hair. I don't know much about political ideologies--that is, I don't know if Anatole was a Trotskyite, Leninist-Marxist, Maoist or what--or are they interchangeable? He was an intellectual, however, and slovenly and shy and loveable.

These people are real, Diane, even the names. There was Ken: eloquent and elongated, and his chick tall Francelle. Dave, who dug politics more than girls, has since run for public office and founded a really fine local paper.

I can't go on with the people because there are so many of them. They all knew what the Free U. was. You could just walk up to one of these people and say, "What's the Free U. about?" And they'd do a 10 minute (minimum) rap on their version of it. Always, personal, always an idealized ego trip. It was 50 different things to as many different people. That's cool; that's O.K. The hang came when the group sat down to write a preamble/statement-of-purpose thing. It took the Free U. three years to come up with a satisfactory statement of purpose. It states nothing new, yet it says everything. It is merely an affirmation of life. Each new preamble committee produced dirty-underwear prose about oh-how-shitty-is-the-system. At some point it was suggested that they can the negativity; a new statement emerged, full of hope: who we are, what we want and what we need--yes, yes, yes.

There used to be (1) the proponents of an anti-university, (2) the community worker, do-gooder sort, and (3) the politicians.

The anti-university people had good ideas: sick of the way the multiversity had deified its administrators, they affirmed that learning was the important thing, and furthermore, that the line between "faculty" and "student" was unnecessary. Teachers and students should have equal status. In fact a teacher of one Free U. class might easily be a student in one of his own student's classes. Learning was the issue and everything life had to offer is valid educational experience. Anyone could hold a class on any subject, at all; the only qualification to teach a course was interest in the subject matter.

This concept horrified the local masses--unqualified people, influencing the minds of others. What the hell kind of education is that? The idea was, of course, that if a teacher is unqualified, uninspiring and full of shit, the students are the first to

sense the inadequacy and to split. Thus, only the good teachers, i.e., those having something meaningful to say, will survive. The community-oriented Free U'ers were intensely concerned with who was learning and teaching. With a missionary zeal they sought to involve the black community in this new educational project. It was this faction that insisted if we got a Free University building, it must be in East Palo Alto. Politics was the hottest issue. The liberal academicians delighted in filling their heads with ideas and theories, but were vehemently opposed to being involved in a Free University which gave blanket support to a controversial political or moral issue. Everyone was, to some degree, opposed to the War in Vietnam, suppression of minorities and archaic drug and sex legislation, but how could the Free U. speak for all its members? The radicals, as usual, finding

## at the beginning

We recently received a letter from Diane Seidel in Durham, North Carolina, asking about our history and how to start a free university. Gail Teel, our office manager, passed the letter on to MFU veteran Susan Bass, and her response has become the first spontaneous, on-paper reminiscence of where this whole thing of ours sprung from.

by sue bass

themselves rendered near-impotent by the liberals, declared that the Free U. was worthless if it did not formulate social convictions and action them. This was the Free University in October 1965: lots of dissatisfaction with the status-quo and much energy available to be spent on changing it. That's what I felt--lots and lots of energy. With my coffee shop in mind, I approached Eli and asked, "Where are we going to have the Free University?" It was as if the question of location had never come up before. "Where? I don't know. If you think we need a place so bad, why don't you find one?" So I was the Housing Committee. Eva joined me and we searched the area for someplace to hold classes. We certainly wouldn't have enough money to buy any property, so we were looking at rentals. There were problems of zoning, parking and general suspicion. No one was too eager to rent his property to a bunch of long-haired radicals and foreign-looking types. Marcia and Button

looked too. Then we all searched together, combing the streets in Button's tough Land Rover. We finally landed a two-story house in East Palo Alto. We exterminated and the roaches crawled out of the walls to die--ankle deep on the kitchen floor. About 25 of us formed a work party, hauled trash, cleaned, painted and chopped weeds, until the place looked beautiful.

In the meantime everyone had been working to get classes started. More people became interested in participating in the Free U. Publicity, at this point, consisted of word-of-mouth and notices of meetings--printed in the Stanford Daily and passed out by hand. There was also some attention given to the Free U, by the conservative and ever-threatened-by-20th-century-ideas Palo Alto Times.

In January 1966 we sent out 100 beautifully hand-written invitations to the town's most wealthy and/or influential left-wingers, inviting them to a cocktail party. This was for the purpose of introducing the Free University of Palo Alto to the community. Our official beginning was January 10, 1966.

I became coordinator--I suppose because I was the one who suggested the office and because I had lots of free time.

Susie Mae was coffee shop committee chairman and together we converted the kitchen and dining room of the Free U. House into a coffee room. There were candles, chairs and tables of every height, cushions, paintings. We had plenty of volunteers--every night of the week a different chick made the coffee and brought a batch of home-made something. We also served tea and cider. People dug it every night--before and after classes--just a place to be. We even operated at a profit.

Classes were meeting in the House, as well as in private homes. The lack of rugs and cozy furniture as well as its ghetto location kept the House from being as much of a center as we had hoped. Many instructors didn't show up to teach their classes. Other courses folded because of lack of interest or ability on the part of "teacher" and students. This was expected. Many people were neglecting classes in favor of political involvement. In general, nothing was really

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Official registration took place the following weekend at the East Palo Alto Women's Club, at a meeting where the guest speaker was Felix Greene. At this meeting everyone was urged to volunteer for the various Committees which were the administrative component of the Free U.

**T**he Committee system was decided upon weeks before registration when total anarchy threatened complete demise. People volunteered or were invited to head committees in areas where we needed representation and work done. Publicity mass media, Publicity local and mailing, Housing, Curriculum, Community Relations, Finance, and Coffee Shop. It was decided that another person act as a coordinator of these committees--mainly to see that the committees communicated and worked harmoniously together.

stable. Many activities, both complementary and conflicting, went on at once.

Due to problems at home, in addition to my Free U. responsibilities, I freaked and saw all this activity as a threat rather than a positive dynamic force. I retreated and didn't venture back to the Free U. for over two years.

By June 1968 the Free University of Palo Alto--now the Midpeninsula Free University--had a co-operative store with an office in the rear; classes were held in private homes rather than in a central building; there was still no coffee shop.

Love,  
Susan Bass

### #3

draw a line. carry yourself into your past  
draw the breath that comes from your child-mouth  
nothing erases.

the elliptical path of long dead starlight  
knows no more than you

you: circle  
the constellation of loneliness

no alchemical clarity can match disaster.  
the mystic rush of brightly colored death  
whirlwind of sight and sound and pleasure

simple knowing that occludes past and future

whispered panic floods my night dreams  
this vision of God

there is so much muck in trying so terribly hard  
at so little

life

I sink deeper and deeper into my own inner water.

**by jim boyers**

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