Winston Sims: Before Harrisville

It takes a while to see the ethos of Winston Sims among the anecdotes he shares through understatement and wry humor. At the core, he has been a lifelong humanitarian. As a teen, Louis Fischer's *Ghandi: His Life and Message for the World* impressed on him a sense of social injustice, and an introduction to the Quaker Friends while at college helped direct his path. A cosmopolitan, he has lived in and traveled to many countries, always working for people's needs: lack of access to clean water, housing disparity, civil rights, women and children's health, family planning, the right to free and democratic elections, and pre- and post-conflict peace building.



Winston grew up in Lawrence, Long Island, but by ten his parents had divorced. The memory of his mother's subsequent home on Chesapeake Bay led him many years later to find his own waterside house here on Lake Skatutakee.

Family and friends have always been important to him. He talks of encounters and resulting relationships that have had a lasting effect, shaping his life and career. Names, dates, stories, and circumstances include political figures such as his uncle, FDR aide Louis Brownlow, and Senator J. W. Fulbright, whose first wife was a classmate of his mother.

Winston's economics professor at Washington College, Irving Barnett, introduced him to the Quaker Society of Friends, which became an important part of his life. And so began his commitment to humanitarian work. He started by taking part in a housing survey among a mostly Black population residing in inadequate living conditions, with access to water only through a shared source, something "like a common hydrant."

From there he began to "make good trouble" around civil rights issues, "becoming familiar with the police department," and going on many marches, once accompanied by members of "SNICC" (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). "I was learning vital lessons about active nonviolent resistance."

He registered with the Annapolis, Maryland draft board as a conscientious objector, saying, "While I could not say what I would do under all sets of circumstances, if I had the chance to reflect, I would not kill another." After graduation, under the umbrella of the American Friends Service Committee, in July of 1962 he went as a volunteer to Haiti.









His orientation project was an excavation for a large cistern to catch rainwater that fell on the roof of the artisanal center, a building used for teaching carpentry, masonry, literacy, cooking, sewing, and other skills. It was during this time that he learned Haitian Creole, exchanging English for the French-based language spoken locally.

After recovering from a bout with malaria (and a fever of 105 degrees!), he began his next assignment, a survey on maternal and child health, which teamed him with a Canadian nurse working with the Panamerican Health Organization in the town of Arcahaie. Their goal was to ascertain where people got their water (irrigation ditches), if they had access to a well or clean water (no), and how close they lived to their animals (adults, kids, chickens, and pigs lived together). Children tripping and falling into the cooking fires, usually located in the center of the floor, resulted in burn injuries. Winston and his partner identified the priority issues there: access to safe drinking water, keeping animals out of the house, and the use of a stove to keep fires off the ground and vent the smoke outside.

Winston found the Haitians "the most hospitable people in the world." He recalls one walk home, when "three guys on a porch started to play the Star-Spangled Banner . . . [It's t]he only time I've cried in my life listening to the Star-Spangled Banner." And the kids too were curious about him, asking, "Why do you want to come to Haiti? Why don't you want to be home with your friends?" He was often enticed to play football (soccer) or venture through the sugar cane fields to swim at the beach with them.

Winston's time in Haiti was cut short by President François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's increasingly autocratic and despotic regime. His secret police, the Tonton Macoute, were "truly nasty people. They would round up people and shoot them willy-nilly." The American Friends Service Committee decided to leave. "There was not one volunteer who wanted to. . . . We were doing such interesting things. We all loved the Haitians so much . . . but we had to pull out because it was not manageable for the field directors and others." He had been in Haiti just under a year.

For his second volunteer year, he went to Guatemala, again choosing to work with water issues. None of the houses there—which were adobe with straw or tile roofs and dirt floors—had access to clean water. Winston's job was to assemble a team of men and scout locations in town where they could dig wells.

He became concerned about disrupting the romantic lives of the young people by siting the wells in the center of town. Previously, the girls or women would go early to a stream, when the water was less disrupted by mud and chickens. It was quiet and private, allowing young men and women to express interest in each other. "I didn't know if being in the middle of town would put the kibosh on their romantic lives." But it worked out. The young women came, happy to get water where the team was digging, knowing it was clean; this actually helped the workers to dig deeper. "After about 12 feet, you'd find water. We'd put in casing, seal it up, and you'd have a clean source of well water."

One of the Guatemalans he worked with in the

Common Threads Annual Appeal

Every October we ask our readers to show their support for Harrisville's newsletter, *Common Threads*. And ever since our beginning in 1997, they have been doing so, generously donating as much as they can to keep us in the black and motivating our staff to write the next issue.

We ask that you pause to consider how much this small publication means to you. Our intent is to provide you with information about the workings of the town and its current happenings, its people, and its history. We, in turn, are grateful for the input and feedback from you, our concerned citizenry.

I hope you have had a chance to visit our website: *commonthreadsharrisville.com*, where we have indexed and loaded all the issues back to 1997. It is a living history of our town and its talented residents, some of whom are no longer with us.

An exciting part of the website is the ability for readers to donate online. But if you are like me, a technological dinosaur, a check in the enclosed envelope may be easier. In any case, we appreciate any amount, conveyed in the easiest way for you. Thank you.



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village was a poet, Luis Alfredo Arango (later awarded the most important literary prize in Guatemala). Luis helped Winston discover why the children in the village would run away screaming when they saw him. Luis reported back, " 'Los gringos comen gente —gringos eat people."

"The number-one evidence was the school lunch program: feed the kids to fatten them up so they could be shipped to the States to be eaten." The solution came unexpectedly. Winston was informed at a community fiesta that the locals wanted to see him dance. Traditionally, women danced with women, men with men. He asked an older man to dance, not realizing his partner was a village elder, deeply respected and trusted in the community. That dance smoothed Winston's way with the children.

By the time he left Guatemala, in June of 1964, the village had three wells and clean drinking water for the first time.



After returning to the States, he took a job with the Children's Division of the Baltimore City Department of Welfare, where he worked on 60 cases of neglected or deserted boys. He coordinated with local hospitals to assess the boys' needs. "Some kids needed a foster family. Some kids needed a group setting. I never saw a kid going back to his own parents."

One 12- or 13-year-old boy with scars all over his body told Winston, "My mother and father thought I was evil. If my mother thought I was lying about something—and I didn't lie—she'd take a kitchen spoon and heat it in the burner flame and she would apply it here, there, and all over my body." Winston said, "This boy was on the right track because he knew it was not his fault. He knew he was not evil, and he knew his mom was doing the wrong thing."

Winston went back to school, this time at the University of Pittsburgh, earning two master's degrees, one in Community Organization and the other in Public Administration. He had a particular interest in family planning to address population issues. While working toward his degrees, he also headed the Pittsburgh election office for his friend, Norval Reece, who was running for the Democratic Party nomination for United States Senate. After the election was over (Reece did not win) and he completed his studies, Winston moved to New York City for a job with International Planned Parenthood. And then he got married.

He became the program coordinator at Planned Parenthood for Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and Venezuela. "Traveling to these countries and meeting with the boards . . . was such an interesting time. Abortion was verboten in all of Latin America. Family planning was a close second." But the Family Planning associations were largely autonomous within their countries. The boards were often made up of professors, lawyers, doctors—people of a status respected in Latin America. Board members cultivated outside relationships. "Because they knew the prime minister, the president" they could suggest family planning methods. "If they worked out a deal to do abortions without law enforcement or the attorney general coming down on them, it became a fact of life."

After three years Winston joined Planned Parenthood of NYC. When the Supreme Court decision of Roe v. Wade came through in 1973, he was no longer needed there. He and his wife moved to Ossining with their young son, Adam, and then, to "keep out of mischief, I decided to build a log cabin from scratch in the Adirondack Mountains."

Later that year he was hired by the United Nations, assigned to work on a study to promote family planning and to create a report. Using questionnaires collected from ministries of social welfare from different countries, he facilitated identifying and gathering experts from around the world to participate in an Expert Group Meeting (EGM). As the technical secretary, he managed all the details and wrote two of the chapters of the final report. From there, the Member States were able to design and apply family planning services to their ministries overseeing social welfare.



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Before the end of that year, his daughter, Anna, was born.

During this time, he became active on the executive committee of the United Nations Staff Union. That, he said, marked the end of his career advancement in the UN. "No more promotions. The administration mistrusted anyone working on the Staff Council." But Winston persisted, effectively doing two jobs.

In 1979 Winston moved with his family to UNO city, in Vienna, Austria—a housing and work complex built to host various United Nations and international organizations. He continued with the staff council while also working as a social affairs officer on issues of family planning and social welfare. This too involved international travel.

In 1990 Winston, one of a few who spoke Haitian Creole, went with an UN observation team to monitor Haiti's first free election. He chose Jean-Rabel, a "rough and rustic" town, to observe. The organizers warned Winston that 139 peasants had been massacred there by the Tonton Macoute a few years before. But that didn't deter him. He was moved by the passion of the young local election officers. "[They said,] 'This is our country. We've got to take charge . . . make sure these Tonton Macoute don't do anything more. This whole place needs to be cleaned up.' What a sense of determination and devotion. It was marvelous."

In the days leading up to the election, supplies—pencils, ballots, ballot boxes—did not arrive. Despite repeated requests and promises from various offices, they still hadn't arrived by the morning of the election. "The lines were long. This was their first election. They had been out there since two, three, five in the morning. They wanted to be sure they'd be voting." But by noon Winston called it off. He went from polling station to polling station, explaining in Creole, "I'm with the UN and the UN wants to be certain this is done properly. This isn't being done the way it's supposed to be done. I have that responsibility, and I can't let it go." The people were disappointed, some bitterly so. "But the first question out of most mouths astounded me: 'Is this inability to vote the same over the rest of the country?' " As far as he knew, it was not. They whooped and clapped. "Then we know who is going to win." And they were correct. Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the first democratically elected president of Haiti.

During his last two years in Vienna he became interested in peace building. He established and headed the Vienna chapter of the Society for International Development. He created a symposium and brought in experts: ambassadors, directors, secretaries, undersecretaries. Kofi Annan, then an under-secretary-general for the UN, asserted that Member States would not commit funds for preconflict peace building without visual evidence of the aftermath of conflict. But Winston was asked to provide questions and approaches to peace building for a United Nations Department Programme training program in Turin, which led to establishing a unit on preconflict peace building.

In 1993 Winston's entire division moved back to New York. By the time he left Europe, he and his wife had divorced. He retired in 1995.

By 1990 Winston had come to know Harrisville. In the winter of 1991, he bought his property on Lake Skatutakee. "It had no heat, no stove, no well, no potable water, no septic, no leach field" and a front porch which "had not a single board in it that was of any value whatsoever." But it was a house on a lake, in a place he knew he wanted to settle.

Many of you know of Winston's continued work as a volunteer in town. The hours we talked about his journey before Harrisville opened a world unfamiliar to me, but it's clear how deeply he cares about people. His attention to nuanced detail requires pondering, and his wit is sharp. When asked how many languages he speaks, he responds, "I know some English but am still learning. I hope." Beyond English he speaks French, Spanish, Creole, and what he calls "limited uptake" of Wiener Deutsch (Austrian German), Cakchiquel (a local Guatemalan language), and Portuguese.

He and Sherry met in 2003 and married in 2005 . . . but that is another story. When you next see them, ask about the foxes.

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder

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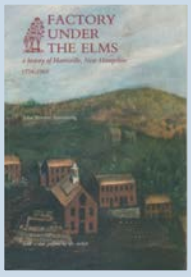

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