



FUTURE GENERATIONS GRADUATE School staff at the North Mountain headquarters overlooking Germany Valley, from left, are Michelle Simon, Jodie Wimer, Randy Brandt, Christie Hand, Rebecca Vaus, Traci Hickson, Mike Rechlin and Everett Ressler. Absent from photo, Kellen Harper.

Everett Ressler: Change at the Top at Future Generations

The Future Generations Graduate School has been in a state of leadership transition for about two years now.

Daniel Taylor, whose role in starting the international, academically accredited school was pivotal and who remains a member of the faculty, formally stepped aside as the president of Future Generations in August 2012.

The interim president, Nigel Fisher, left Future Generations behind but only after he accepted an invitation from the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) to take the position of regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria.

The ongoing violence in Syria has caused one of the most tragic and sweeping-in-its-human-toll humanitarian crises in recent decades.

A professional acquaintance of Fisher's was Everett Ressler, who had come home to Harrisonburg, VA, early in 2009 after working 14 or 15 years for UNICEF and having earned widespread recognition for his field work and scholarly studies in the international relief/aid/development community dating to the middle 1970s.

Ressler came aboard as Taylor's official successor as president of the Future Generations Graduate School this past September.

Ressler's achievements are impressive, but his humility and diffidence are such that it was like pulling teeth with

quarters on North Mountain near Rt. 33. Since the stimulus-funded broadband grant has been exhausted, Future Generations has moved out of the restored Circleville High School building and returned to the school's original headquarters overlooking Germany Valley. The broadband expansion grant, which was administered by Future Generations, funded a statewide program which, among other things, brought new computers to volunteer fire departments across rural West Virginia.

Mike Rechlin, the dean of faculty for Future Generations, also notes that heating costs at the restored high school were high.

Ressler was born and reared in Ohio in a rural area about halfway between Columbus and Pittsburgh, PA. His parents were Mennonites with a strong social conscience. His father was a farmer. In the Ressler family, there was a simple yet powerful understanding of the impulse of trying to be useful in the world and trying to be sensitive to others and to one's environment.

Ressler attended Eastern Mennonite University (EMU)

and majored in biology.

His goal was to become a physician, but it was the late 1960s and waves of social change and opposition to the existing political and institutional structures were sweeping over the nation. Ressler was among those who, as he puts it, discovered that "being socially active was more fun." Thus, he put aside his conventional career ambitions in medicine and began to turn more of his intellectual focus on psychology.

In 1985 he would become the author of a foundational study on the care of children who are dislocated during moments of conflict and social upheaval.

For two or three years after his graduation from EMU in 1970, he worked on getting new nonprofit social programs up and running in Harrisonburg. He was the first director of a foundation that worked to provide housing for the needy. Next, he helped launch Listening Ear, a crisis intervention program, which was followed by his seminal involvement in establishing the Rivendale project, which provided alternatives to incarceration

Ressler...

(Cont. from Page 1, Column 6)

and institutional confinement for troubled children aged six through 17.

He obtained his master's degree in psychology from James Madison University (JMU) around 1973. At that time, Ressler and his wife made a life-altering decision—to "see the other side of the mountain."

That led to 40 years of work primarily overseas and visiting about 100 countries. Ressler learned many things, notably how much people everywhere have in common with one another. "There are differences, yes," Ressler says, "but the differences are less than the commonalities. People want to improve their lot in life and be able to provide a good life with opportunities for their children."

He traveled widely in Africa and was able to study the shortcomings of development strategies brought in to struggling communities from the outside—from, that is, vastly more technologically advanced parts of the world. In Ethiopia during a time of famine, Ressler grew skeptical of some of the outside approaches that were implemented to improve local conditions.

Ressler saw firsthand that, "Sometimes, ideas from the outside are not as good as ideas from the inside. The processes of progress have to be owned locally, by the local social unit. People have good intentions, but the results are not always the best."

Indeed, Ressler's critical view of top-down, bureaucratic, old factory-model approaches to alleviating suffering and impoverishment in other parts of the world sync up perfectly with the community-based, change-from-the-bottom-up approaches advanced by the Future Generations Graduate School, which typically has between 40 and 50 master's degree candidates gathered from communities around the globe, from Logan County to Peru, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Haiti, Guyana and beyond and a faculty that is situated everywhere from Bolivia to Colorado and beyond.

"You can solve things for people," Ressler declares. "Help and solutions have to come from the bottom up, from within. It doesn't start 'out there.' It comes from within. The approach that is best is that of being a facilitator and coming at things from the standpoint of how to help communities with what they think is important."

A core Future Generations approach involves people already engaged in their communities in places of regional conflict coming together to learn from each other "how to be a better facilitator" for social change from within and from the bottom up rather than the top down. It is, says Future Generations' Traci Hickson about "peace building," about finding ways the public can take a meaningful role in shaping the destiny of their own communities and about conservation.

Over the years, Ressler worked in Thailand and Sri Lanka where the UN came calling on him—"That's how desperate the were," he modestly avers—for his experience and expertise. I was the Ford Foundation that provided half of the funding for his study of children in place of social conflict even though Ressler "had never written a book or conducted a global study of any kind."

It was a project that was to consume him for three full years. The book was published by the Oxford University Press in 1988 and Ressler became known in elite circles in that field of study as "the five percent guy." In other words, Ressler demonstrated that five percent is the percentage of children who will be separated from their families during certain types of social conflict.

In 1994 Ressler came back to the US with the intention of getting his Ph. D. at the University of Delaware. However, the world intervened again, when UNICEF came calling and asked, "Can you go to Rwanda for us?" It was a time of genocidal mass slaughter in that country, and Ressler found it impossible to say, "No."

That decision ultimately left him "A. B. D." (all but dissertation) but led to 14 productive years with UNICEF. When he returned to Harrisonburg early in 2009, he was studying how to prepare for and respond to social disasters for the UN when he was summoned to new duties at Future Generations.

Forty years later, Ressler had at long last come, literally this time, to see and become part of the community on "the other side of the mountain"—Shenandoah Mountain.

Lambert Named To JMU Dean's List

Adrian Lambert of Sugar Grove has been named to the Dean's List at James Madison University (JMU), Harrisonburg, VA, for the fall 2012 semester.

A sophomore, Lambert is majoring in nursing.