

IN THE PRESENCE OF A GIANT

by Robert Martin



Robert and Steve, 2009

I met Stephen Angell in 1983 when I was incarcerated at Fishkill Correctional Facility in Beacon, N.Y. I was beginning the sixth year of what would become ten years of imprisonment in the NYS prison system. When I arrived at FCF near the end of 1982, I heard about a program called the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). I signed up for the program, and in February or March of 1983 I was invited to a Basic AVP workshop. The late Larry Apsey facilitated the workshop I was in, and Steve was the lead facilitator in an Advanced Workshop. I didn't have any direct contact with Steve during the three day workshops, but I do remember him being the first person in line at each meal, and me thinking that all of the outside facilitators were losers coming into prison to do something to make them feel good about themselves.

By the time I completed the Basic Workshop, Larry Apsey had shocked me into a different way of thinking, and I signed up for the next Advanced Workshop at FCF. Steve was the lead facilitator in the Advanced Workshop, and was impressed by my participation. Back then you had to be invited to the Training for Trainers Workshop by the facilitator(s) of the Advanced Workshop you attended, and Steve invited me to the next T for T Workshop at FCF. I attended the T for T, began apprenticing workshops under Steve's wings and eventually became the inside coordinator of AVP at FCF working directly with Steve who was the outside coordinator. When I became the inside coordinator one of the first lessons I got from Steve was the importance of integrity. He told me that the Deputy Superintendent of Programs was always complaining about receiving anonymous letters from some of the incarcerated men who complained about having to pay a carton of cigarettes in order to attend a Basic AVP Workshop. Steve said if the program was not represented honorably by the inside coordinator it would have less than its intended effect in prison. By then I was in the process of transforming myself from a criminal-thinking person into a decent human being, and I followed Steve's direction without question in the effort to polish up the image of AVP at FCF.

In 1986 after I was granted parole and before I was released from FCF Steve asked me if I was interested in going to Detroit with him to start an AVP program there. I said I was, and gave him the necessary information to contact me in Brooklyn, N.Y. By the time I walked out of FCF in May, 1986, I had forgotten about that conversation with Steve, and like most incarcerated men granted parole, my focus was on NYC and starting off where I left off. Believe me. Even though I had been accepted into a Marist College Transition Program that enabled me to complete a college degree program I had started at FCF, when I walked out of FCF that day in May all I was thinking about was how to get paid in NYC.

In 1986 the crack cocaine craze was alive and well in NYC, and all of my boys were getting paid and living large. My woman and I had always hustled together and her image was based on propping me up as a successful hustler. So with pressure from my woman coupled

with my own creed, I was ready to step back into the streets when one Friday in June 1986 less than one month out of FCF I heard this voice below my apartment window calling my name. I looked out the window of my apartment and there stood on the street a white man, surrounded by a group of black kids who had stopped their playing in wonder, calling my name. It was Stephen Angell! I yelled down that I was in apartment 4B, and buzzed him in. Steve entered my apartment and greeted me with the AVP hug. Hugging Steve I looked across his shoulder at my woman who had that "what the f--- is this?" look on her face. Steve asked me if I were ready to go. I told him that I had not spoken to my Parole Officer about going out of state, and he told me that he had just spoken to my parole officer, and that my P.O. had approved it and was waiting for Steve to return to his office with me. At that moment I felt trapped between Steve and my woman. I had to take the chance at a new possibility, or re-embark on a path that would predictably take me back to prison or to an early death. I walked into my daughter's room, grabbed one of her luggage bags, threw a few clothes and toilet articles in the bag, and said, "Lets go." I walked out of that apartment, and I've never looked back.

We drove to the office of my P.O. hardly saying more than a few words to each other. My P.O. gave me the "legal talk," got me to sign a few documents, and by nightfall we were headed upstate. We drove upstate by way of the Taconic Parkway, and I will never forget how peaceful that ride was. I knew right then that I was accepting the tutorship of a person who would help me bring some meaning to a life I had neglected and abused since arriving in NYC in 1963. When we arrived at Steve's home, I was greeted by his late wife and youngest son. I remember we had pizza for dinner that night. I had always eaten pizza as a snack, but never as dinner! Anyway, Steve, his wife and Sam went to bed early. Steve told me what time we were leaving for Detroit the next day, and told me I could stay up as long as I desired. I stayed up for about an hour thinking about my day, and trying to figure out what made Steve and his family trust me enough to go to bed and leave me UNSUPERVISED. The next day Steve, his wife Barbara, and I drove to Detroit.

The workshop was a success, and on the drive back Steve told me that my P.O. was concerned about me and seemed to welcome the opportunity for me to leave the city. He asked me about my plans after returning to the city, and I reminded him about the Marist College possibility. He reminded me how close it was to September, and encouraged me to remain upstate, and begin planning to enter Marist in September. I agreed, and about two days after we returned to his home where I stayed, Steve had helped me rent a room within walking distance from Marist, had helped me enroll in the Transition Program and obtain a job in the grounds keeping department at Marist College. That July, just two months after being paroled and traveling with Steve to Detroit, Steve asked me if I wanted to go with him and Barbara to the New York Yearly Meeting, (Quakers), conference in Silver Bay, N.Y. which is held in the last week of July. By then I was convinced that Steve could make things happen, and I said yes. By then my parole had been transferred from Brooklyn to Poughkeepsie, and Steve took care of all the clearance work including getting Marist to excuse me from my job for a week! I went to Silver Bay, was treated like Royalty by the Quakers there, and have attended almost every Yearly Meeting Summer Conference since then.

In October Steve took me to the AVP annual conference at Camp Empworth somewhere near the Catskill in upstate New York. I was enrolled in a degree program at Marist College

where I was excelling academically and really feeling good about myself. At that meeting I met most of the early founders of AVP, Ellen Flanders and the late Janet Lugo among them. Larry Apsey, at Steve's urging I am sure, nominated me for vice president of AVP's board of directors, and I became the first ex-incarcerated person appointed to an official position in AVP. After that Sunday nomination and as we were readying for departure, Steve faced me and placed both hands on my shoulders, and told me I was special and that I had just made one of his dreams come true.

Sometime after the annual meeting Steve asked me if I was ready to go back inside prison and show the correction officers and incarcerated men how AVP had changed my life. What do you think I said? That December, the week between Christmas and New Year's, and at the same time every year until Steve moved to Pennsylvania, I was co-facilitating an AVP workshop with Steve at FCF. Shortly after co-facilitating my first workshop as an outside person with Steve, Steve and I arrived at FCF one Sunday morning for the final day of a three-day workshop. We were processed through the front gate by a C.O. who had been unsuccessful in his efforts to put me in keep lock during my four years of imprisonment at the prison. He let us through because my name was on the gate clearance. But by the time we arrived at the workshop location two Correctional Officers were waiting to escort me out of the prison because I was an ex-incarcerated person there. I had never seen Steve at the verge of losing his poise and composure, but he was at that point that Sunday morning. He said if I could not stay he was leaving too. He was asked to calm down while the chaplain made some phone calls. Shortly thereafter the chaplain said the superintendent had personally informed the officers of my clearance.



**Robert and Steve with AVP facilitators
in Auckland, New Zealand, 1991**



**Robert and Steve with AVP participants
in Auckland, New Zealand, 1991**

By 1991 Steve and I were a facilitating team. I had graduated from Marist College with BA and BS degrees, and had earned a Masters of Social Work degree from Adelphi University. I was employed as a clinical social worker at a residential treatment center for adolescents. Steve's wife had passed away and he had begun his work of taking AVP to other countries. One night I was awakened from my sleep by you know who. Steve asked me if I was ready to go with him to New Zealand and Australia to assist him in starting AVP programs there. You know what my answer was. I had never been out of the country before and here was an opportunity to go half way around the world, of course I said yes! I was not allowed permission to enter Australia, but had no problem with New Zealand. I went to New Zealand and had a ball.

Years later when Steve, Betsy Rothstein and I were facilitating what would be Steve's last AVP workshop at FCF, we had just finished a Pattern Ball exercise when Steve realized that two of the balls used in the exercise were missing. In a room with about twenty males and one female Steve yelled out, "Does anyone have two balls?" The entire workshop broke out in a laughter that lasted about five minutes.

Steve moved to Pennsylvania, and began facilitating workshops there. I co-facilitated about three workshops with him at Pendle Hill, a Quaker conference center near Philadelphia. During one of those workshops I was pressuring Steve about going with me to see the movie "Saving Private Ryan". Steve kept saying he did not want to go because the movie was too violent. We were doing a T for T workshop and at the debriefing of the second day of the workshop I asked Steve about going to see the movie with me again. Again he said the movie was too violent for him. As the debriefing continued Steve asked me what exercise(s) I wanted to facilitate the next and last day of the workshop. I responded saying that I had a terrible headache, and probably needed to return home. Steve looked at me with those smiling eyes and said if we went to see the movie we had to be home by ten or eleven o'clock because tomorrow is a long day. My headache left, and the next day we went to see "Saving Private Ryan."

At one point it seemed like Steve was inviting me to Philadelphia every week for something. One Monday he called me at my office and told me he was receiving an Honorary Doctorate Degree from Haverford College, He wanted me to be at the ceremony that Friday night and Commencement Exercise on Saturday. I remember having to cancel something important. I don't remember what it was, but that Friday I left work and headed straight for the New Jersey Turnpike. If Steve called me, I went.

Shortly afterwards Steve went into his international AVP workshop trainings mode, and we lost touch for awhile. When I received my Masters in Social Work Degree and passed the state certification exam I was denied certification because of my record pending a hearing before the state licensing board to determine my conduct. I was not ready to go before a bunch of bureaucrats and talk about my past, so I forgot about it... until I got a job that required CSW certification. I called Steve, and explained my situation. Steve told me to call his son Tom who is an esteemed public defender in Dutchess County. I called Tom, and Tom agreed to represent me before the board free of charge. I appeared before the board with Tom Angell as my attorney and Stephen Angell as my sole character witness. Tom warned me before the hearing that appeals like mine were almost never successful. The board consisted of three social workers and a lawyer who grilled me relentlessly for more than two hours. When I stepped off the stand I was not optimistic at all. Then Steve took the stand and requested to forgo the oath because of his Quaker beliefs. His request was granted and he began telling the board members about the Robert Martin he helped change. When we walked out of the state licensing building I knew I was a CSW at last. A few weeks later I received my CSW certificate.

Steve and I attended the AVP International Conference in South Africa in 2006, and shortly after we returned to New York we celebrated his ninetieth birthday on his eighty-ninth birthday at his son Tom's house because we didn't think he would make it to his ninetieth birthday. Well, a year later we were celebrating his ninetieth birthday at his son Sam's house in Philadelphia. I remember Tom's wife Janet and I laughing about how Steve had fooled us all.

The last time I saw Steve was at his granddaughter's wedding in late summer of 2010. He was almost ninety-one years old and still smiling.

