
Pioneers: Joan Almon

Joan Almon is distinguished in North American Waldorf Early Childhood education as one of the prime “movers and shakers” of our movement. Having “blundered” into Waldorf education in the early 1970s, she stands as a visible and striving educator who learned by doing, initiator of “kindergarten training” opportunities when no formal trainings yet existed in North America, researcher, founding member with others of what has become WECAN, and co-founder and director of the Alliance for Childhood in recent years. She is a strong advocate in early childhood education for the rights and needs of children everywhere, not just in Waldorf programs. Encouraging opportunities in our times for healthy, free play is one of her most earnest commitments. Joan has also served as co-general secretary for the Anthroposophical Society in the US.



As a “child of her times,” Joan Almon became acquainted with spiritual paths in her years of living in San Francisco. When she moved to Baltimore on New Year’s Day of 1971, she soon encountered a small spiritual community that wanted to open up a preschool the following fall. Three teachers were needed, and she wanted to be one of them. Yet by her own description, she knew nothing about education. The program opened the next October with fifteen children. Everyone thought it went well. The parents were happy with the teachers’ innovative, experimental approach, which changed things almost daily. Five or six children cried each day, but the teachers thought that this was just normal.

One of the teachers attended a conference on alternatives in education and met Werner Glas, a prominent European Waldorf educator and teacher trainer in this country. He advised that if they wanted to keep the spirit of childhood alive, the teachers should look into Waldorf education. From the Waldorf initiatives in Washington DC and Virginia, Joan and her colleagues gleaned what they could. What they learned one day they instituted the next. There was no formal kindergarten teacher training in North America and only one kindergarten book in English, the classic by Elizabeth Grunelius. This pioneering spirit suited Joan just fine. She loved being guided by practicing teachers, seeing something for a brief time and then running with it. Rudolf Steiner’s indications were there, and different people implemented these indications in different ways. Each developing

teacher then had to figure out things her own way.

A lucky encounter brought the little school into connection with Ilse Kimball, a eurythmist who had worked with Marie Steiner, and her husband, artist Maulsby Kimball. Maulsby came yearly and lectured, mentored, and did artistic work in Joan’s kindergarten. With artistic work and a predictable, daily rhythm for the class, Joan’s children became far less tearful and began to open like flowers to the sun. They drank deeply everything that Waldorf education offered.

In 1975-76 a kindergarten training began in Detroit. Prominent European Waldorf kindergarten teachers began to come to this country to teach in the institute. These included Elisabeth Moore-Haas and Johanna-Veronika Picht. Willi Sucher, who developed Astrosophy from Rudolf Steiner’s indications, was also there. Joan went for six weeks and got to know Johanna-Veronika well. Joan had been troubled by how she had seen teachers organizing the children into a group activity each day. This seemed too directive and confining to Joan. Johanna-Veronika explained that in Europe the teachers did not organize the children in this way. The teachers just “did” and the children imitated. This was a liberating revelation that kept Joan in the Waldorf circle and imitation became the guiding principle for her future work.

In 1976 Joan’s husband, Clopper, returned from a trip to Germany with a book for her—Freya Jaffke’s book on toymaking. The toys and playstands were a revelation to her. Knowing some German, she would translate a page and then run to where she had her

craft supplies and make what she was reading about. This was typical of how things were done in these early days. There was not a lot of buildup before trying something and not a lot of depth of understanding to begin. This was learning by doing.

In 1978-79 came an opportunity to spend a year in Europe and observe Waldorf teachers there. Werner Glas had told Joan to make acquaintance with Bronja Zahlingen in Vienna. She ended up spending three mornings a week in the Vienna kindergarten. By June, when she was invited by Nancy Foster to teach at Acorn Hill in the Washington DC area, where she and her husband lived, she was itching to again take a kindergarten class and accepted the offer.

During her time in Europe, Joan had come to meet many of the “greats” there—Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen, Margret Meyerkort, and Freya Jaffke. She also got to know Elisabeth Moore-Haas better and became very close to Bronja Zahlingen. These contacts gave her a foot in the door to the European Waldorf early childhood movement.

As Acorn Hill was establishing itself, the state of Maryland (the school’s licensing agent) began to require that each teacher have twelve university credit hours in Waldorf education. It was not clear how to satisfy the state’s requirement, but Joan had contact with a professor at Towson University who agreed that Acorn Hill could bring master teachers from Europe and the university would supply the credit. Thus began a very rich time for Acorn Hill with these great teachers. Acorn Hill was looked to for guidance by younger Waldorf initiatives. When a time came that the university no longer was interested in granting these credits, the state of Maryland had fortuitously passed a rule that schools could run their own internal trainings and supply credits. So Acorn Hill was able to develop its own internal training. This ran for a number of years, offering anthroposophic studies, arts, and pedagogy. Then the Associate Teacher Training programs began in Sacramento and Sunbridge, and these programs met many of the training needs for early childhood teachers.

In the late seventies Werner Glas and Charlotte Dukich brought forth a proposal to form a Waldorf kindergarten association that would be part of AWSNA. The proposal was turned down. But at an AWSNA conference in Toronto in 1984, Joan and Susan Howard invited kindergarten teachers to meet about creating an association within the early childhood community of teachers. Johanna-Veronika Picht

was the European liaison who guided the group toward forming a professional association of individuals at first, rather than institutions. At the organizational meeting, Joan was tapped to become the chair, as she had more time and flexibility than other founding members. But from the very first, Susan Howard, who stepped in as WECAN coordinator when Joan went on to other things, and Joan worked closely together along with many other teachers. Over time, what began as the Waldorf Kindergarten Association became the present-day WECAN.

The connection to international Waldorf early childhood was strengthened through an international kindergarten conference in Dornach in 1984. One hundred American teachers attended the conference on travel grants. Joan took on a new role at this conference. All lectures were in German with no English translation. There was great frustration among the English-speaking teachers and Joan was asked to do the translating. She took notes during the morning lecture and gave a 5 p.m. summary in English. It was not ideal but the best one could do at the time. [There is now simultaneous translation of lectures transmitted through headsets in each of the major languages represented at Dornach conferences.]

The richness brought by the European master teachers also introduced some interesting challenges. Each teacher had individual and unique ways of interpreting and bringing forth the indications for Waldorf early childhood. Different styles began to emerge across North America linked to different master teachers. When teachers introduced to Waldorf pedagogy by these different European teachers encountered one another as colleagues, some tensions—and even some clashes—arose about which approach was the right one. Joan and Susan Howard saw that divisions were opening up in the kindergartens. So the first North American kindergarten conference was held in Wilton, NH in the late 80’s. Presenters were Dr. von Kügelgen, Werner Glas, Freya Jaffke, Margret Meyerkort, Bronja Zahlingen, Johanna Veronika Picht, and Elisabeth Moore-Haas. It was astonishing and liberating to the audience to see how each presenter took hold of anthroposophical truths and worked with Rudolf Steiner’s indications in different ways. The puppet play performances, which were a major part of the conference, were very different yet all true to the indications as well. The gift teachers took away from this conference was experiencing that there are many ways to do the right thing.

With all this accomplishment behind her, Joan's concern for healthy childhood for children everywhere—not just for those in our Waldorf programs—called loudly to her. In 1999 she co-founded the Alliance for Childhood in the United States. Its mission is to “promote policies and practices that support children’s healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living.” The Alliance has advocated for play and play-based early education, and it speaks out strongly against the overuse of screen time. Joan served as the director of the US Alliance for twelve years and is still involved with its projects on play and is part of the international working group of the Alliance.

When asked to reflect upon what stands out to her as accomplishments through these incarnational years for Waldorf early childhood education, she mentioned:

- The development and availability of Waldorf early childhood training programs is a huge step and benefit for our work. The first teachers did what was necessary with limited resources and tools. The foundation that trainings now give is essential to meet the complex needs of children and families in our time.
- The founding of the Kindergarten Association and its development into WECAN has been critical. There is now a way to communicate among schools and colleagues. We can carry forth our deepening of the work through association and can now work closely with AWSNA, as well.
- The early newsletter, now *Gateways*, has been here from the beginning of the Kindergarten Association and is an important resource for our continued pedagogical growth.
- Imitation has been deeply studied, understood, and applied. This is critical for understanding and supporting development with the young child.
- First grade readiness has now received much attention and study. Children are being more thoughtfully and successfully enrolled in the grade school at developmentally appropriate ages.

In the category of “unfinished business” or concerns as we move into the future, Joan made these observations:

- Rudolf Steiner gave a few indications for early childhood education that are based on the anthroposophic understanding of the human being and child development. Teachers then took up, formed, and infused these indications with their own individuality. But we do not want to codify them into “the Waldorf way.” There is a strong tendency in mainstream education to move toward formulaic approaches to education. We do not want to fall into that same trap. Like the Waldorf pioneers, we have to study but also watch the children and see how they respond to our efforts. We have to guard against any temptation to become “programmed Waldorf teachers.”
- The times are calling for wider out-reach toward and interface with the mainstream early childhood world. Waldorf has much to offer and should be more prominently represented. We will do well to put attention to having Waldorf presentations at state and national conferences with other early childhood streams. We need to be present and truly active to be seen equally alongside Montessori and Reggio Emilia. Development of videos and books to represent the education to mainstream colleagues is a priority. [We do have our new brochure and video presentations are under production.]
- Waldorf education will benefit from cultivating supportive relationships among all programs—both independent and public charter schools. All pedagogues working out of Steiner’s indications, no matter what setting, deserve support and recognition. [Since this interview with Joan, AWSNA and the Alliance of Public Waldorf Education have entered into an agreement of understanding, opening up this door.]
- Developing relationships and conversation with our school colleagues, especially Waldorf high school teachers, will benefit everyone. Appreciation and respect for one another’s work can arise out of dialogue so we can recognize how each educational level mutually contributes to human development and wholeness.

Since her retirement as director of the Alliance for Childhood, Joan is once again more available for Waldorf activities and conferences, recently assisting with Waldorf teacher training in China. Thanks to Joan and the other intrepid Waldorf pioneers for plunging forth with so little resources and such dedicated energy to serve the needs of young children. ♦