

Mona Shaw: School for Moral Courage

Mona Shaw is a fourth-generation Iowa native and was born in Burlington, Iowa. She grew up in a socially stigmatized tenement neighborhood called Flint Hills Manor. She became a social justice activist in 1961 when she was ten-years-old and worked in a strike kitchen and walked the picket line during a labor union strike at the Champion Spark Plug factory where her mother worked. This led to her involvement in the civil rights movement while she was in high school in the 1960s.

Still believing in the Horatio Alger myth, Shaw earned a few scholarships and was the first person in her family to attend college. (Neither of her parents finished high school.) She moved to Iowa City to attend the University of Iowa in 1971. At the University she encountered and began to analyze existing class barriers and their expression in academic institutions. While in college she was involved in anti-war efforts and the women's movement. She also became active in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender equality after coming out as a lesbian in 1978.

While her two sons were growing up, she held a professional position at the University of Iowa as a marketing and public relations director. During her seventeen years at the University, she witnessed chronic and institutional barriers to justice and even education itself as the academy pledged itself more and more to be run "like a business." During this time she continued working on several justice initiatives including race, sex, class, sexual orientation and gender identity.

She left the University and Iowa City in 2001 and ultimately took a position as the director of the Capital District Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York. She discovered the imbedded abdication to greed and corruption she had left in the academy was also rife in the now commodified social justice and other nonprofit organizations.

She returned to Iowa City in 2004 aware that rather than effect change that the culture had changed her and that her conscience and thinking had been severely infected and damaged by it. She realized that the end of human suffering would not come from clever strategies or marketing but from an internal renewal of the soul's commitment to moral courage principles. She began to independently study the teachings of nonviolence and peace by teachers like Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, jr., Mary Harris Jones, and Gandhi. She began to practice and experiment with these teachings in all of her dealings with others.

In 2005, she founded the School for Moral Courage as a place that would foster these teachings as a basis for life and work. The purpose of the School is to instill belief in sacrifice for change, giving for the sake of giving, doing the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do, and that taking care of each other is more important than profit or property or social status. The School offers activities that provide another way of looking at social and cultural paradigms and offers support to those in service actions that follow moral courage principles.

Most recently Shaw traveled with other peace workers in the 2006 Living the Dream project, a re-enactment of King's walk from Selma to Montgomery. The walk ended at the annual call to close the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, GA. Shaw is also a writer and is currently working on an anthology of the literature of contemporary peace and justice workers.

Shaw currently lives in a trailer park in Iowa City with her cat companions Frida and Charley. She works with numerous antiwar and human rights initiatives in the area as well as with a number of regional and national groups.



Mona getting on the bus to attend the Jan. 27, 2007, March on Washington