

ARLAANA BLACK, EDISTO ISLAND, S.C. Chanting for a Community Revolution

When educator Arlaana Black moved to Edisto Island, she wasn't expecting to see racism there. But in trying to establish an innovative new school for middle school students, she wound up face to face with it — and found out that she could make a difference.

In June 1995, when my husband, our 10-month-old son, Spenser, and I left New York for Edisto Island, a remote island off the coast of South Carolina, it was to seek out physically (but definitely not financially) greener pastures. And for Spenser to have the wonderful experience of growing up near his paternal grandparents, who retired to Edisto from New Jersey 10 years ago.

Overpacked, filled with wonderful guidance and a spectacular New York send-off, we pursued our new life.

Edisto Island is a nature-lover's paradise with stately Live Oak blanketing the island. Part of the Ace Basin wildlife refuge, many unusual birds — in particular, the egret — and varied sea life have made this pristine environment their home. It is not unusual to see a pod of dolphins playfully dancing in Edisto's many creeks and shallow bays.

Edisto Island is split into two counties and therefore two school districts. The beach seceded from the island about 20 years ago. Edisto's year-round population is less than 5,000 — and the beach population is about 10 percent of this number.

After the first week of living here, I realized I had entered the "Southern zone" that had little interest in me as a newcomer, a Northerner and a Buddhist.

My husband and I taught together in a high school here the first year. Although I got close to the students, I felt extremely stifled, having come from teaching at the innovative Renaissance School in New York City.

The Renaissance School is based on the philosophy that curricula should be child-centered, relevant and inseparable from the life of the surrounding community and society. Its primary focus is on fostering many confident and capable young people who are able and willing to maximize their potential and contribute to society.

The next year, my husband and I determined that I would take a leave of absence from teaching and live on one extremely low teacher's salary, so that I could put all of my efforts into starting a "renaissance" school on Edisto.

Everything seemed to be perfectly timed. The new superintendent of Charleston County schools — who was moving here from Wyoming — was enthusiastic about my school proposal. I was not only going to create a small, innovative middle school, but it was also going to be racially integrated. This was to be a first for Edisto Island, whose two school districts are somewhat racially separated.

I began my campaign with full force. Although I got tremendous support from members of the *beach* community, I was met with tremendous mistrust from members of the *inland* community. Although some politely acknowledged my presence, others wanted nothing more than to see me disappear.

After one year of tremendous effort, I did not succeed in achieving my dream of establishing a racially integrated middle school. I was exhausted, financially broke and devastated. In my endeavor to create a school, I felt I was under personal attack, not only because of my race, but also because I was a "foreigner," and I sought rapid change in a traditional environment. I had to deal with the fact that my aggressive (and seemingly

egalitarian) New York attitude could not singly overcome hundreds of years of mistrust and resistance to change.

I received guidance that now was the time to plant many seeds rather than worry about seeing the flowers bloom. I chanted this way and received quick actual proof. One of the teachers at the elementary school that caters to the small Edisto beach population unexpectedly got pregnant and wanted me to substitute in her class for the last six weeks of the school year.

Since I desperately needed the money, I agreed. Simultaneously, the parents who had backed me so strongly in trying to establish the renaissance school fought hard to add an additional grade to the beach school.

They were successful in adding a 6th grade and needed to hire a 5th–6th grade teacher. (The school is so small that each teacher has to teach two grades.)

I vigorously started chanting about becoming that teacher, although I was only qualified to teach intermediate and high school. I had less than one month to accumulate nine additional elementary education credits.

I contacted several colleges and universities with long-distance learning curriculums and begged them to authorize me to complete the courses in half the prescribed time. I found one that agreed.

I cried, though, because in one weekend, I had to read more than 50 children’s books and write more than 50 pages of text! My family was incredibly supportive, both physically and emotionally, and helped me through my daily nervous breakdowns.

I was one of 17 applicants for the teaching position. It was unbearable. I was fighting so hard to get the appropriate credentials, not knowing if I would even get the job! But I did.

And for the first few months, it was absolutely wonderful.

Then, in December 1997, a bomb dropped. I was once again having to face severe racial tensions. A few days before Christmas, the county school board members — the majority of whom are African American — voted to close the beach school. They didn’t even attempt to hide the fact that it was an issue of race. I was again devastated. If the school closed, it would mean bussing children more than 50 miles to the nearest school. I faced ambiguous feelings — I was angry and resentful, yet I chanted to be understanding and broadminded.

My husband and I were the only Buddhists on the island, and we took this as our campaign. We chanted to awaken the bodhisattva natures in everyone as we struggled to act with absolute conviction and confidence. Our campaign was twofold: Keep the school open, and lessen the hostilities. I vividly recalled the Gosho quote: “A sword will be useless in the hands of a coward. The mighty sword of the Lotus Sutra must be wielded by one courageous in faith” (“Reply to Kyo’o,” *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 120).

The result was spectacular. The beach community truly united, and many of the parents realized their wonderful potential as letter-writers, campaigners and spokespersons. They came out full force to school board meetings and spoke of the need for all people to unite and the importance of education for the future. At times, I felt as if I were at a Buddhist meeting. It was an experience in community revolution.

Although the school board members continued to be stone-faced and seemingly unmoved, they finally relented and voted to keep the school open for at least one more year.

Thanks to the encouragement of our school principal, the local newspaper did a cover story on the four teachers at our school. I was so encouraged!

From these past two years of struggle, many positive changes have resulted. There will

be a lot more integration at the island school this year, and parents who had previously been behind the scenes are now taking a more active role in the school and the community.

Although I was unsuccessful in starting a school, the result was ultimately successful — for the first time in the history of Edisto, the “island” school, which had a 99 percent black student population, will be increasingly integrated with students who went to the previously all-white beach school. It’s very exciting to see the beginnings of what I hope is beautiful racial harmony.

Even so, the future of the beach school remains shaky. I have no idea what the future holds, whether I will have a teacher’s job next year or if my son Spenser will have a school to attend. I also have no idea why our destiny has brought us to such a beautiful, yet remote island. I do know that my family must live fearlessly, undaunted by immediate fears and worries, and do our very best always.

I naturally continue to be the proverbial fish out of water, but I am determined to keep on swimming with — and at times, against — the current. And to never give in to defeat.

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