**The Origins of Wisconsin**

**Future Problem Solving**

**Marilyn Bendiksen, First Affiliate Director**

My trek to gifted education from early childhood teaching was intense. After having been asked to design and teach an enrichment program for elementary gifted children with Stanford-Binet scores of 130+ in Pennsylvania where we were then living, I had a wonderful year of building community for the children and leading them into new areas of learning.  But the isolation that occurred because of the privilege/separation a single score allowed didn’t sit right with me.

My questions were many.  The IQ score that qualified children was too simple, I thought, and that my personal experience of gifted human beings went way beyond a single test score.  We had followed Pennsylvania Department of Education standard for districts to access funding for new programs they were encouraging rather than being able to think through what was best for teachers and students alike.

Our family decision to move to Wisconsin meant an opportunity to enter a degree program that would give me an opportunity to think about and build my skill set in gifted education.  Credit for mining conferences and workshops as a rich source of experiential research was just what I needed to reach my goals.

One of those opportunities was a week at the Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, NY, for two successive years.  Sidney Parnes’ structure for teaching a problem-solving process in a setting full of high creatives from every field was a great launching pad. Seeing the power of being able to organize one’s thinking toward a creative end was very appealing as a technique that would serve gifted kids well. I was ready to engage students in Paul Torrance’s recent adaptation called Future Problem Solving.

It was in the Fall of 1980 that I was hired as a G/T Resource Teacher in La Crosse.  My first task was to develop a grant-funded community mentorship program for high-flying high school seniors.  This time we started more gently with the g/t notion, and I offered Future Problem Solving as an extra-curricular experience at the high school level to four juniors who were enthusiastic and high-spirited.  The next year we added teams at all levels, among other adjustments for students.

At a meeting of the Wisconsin Council for the Gifted and Talented in Fall 1981, Bill Hartje, an Evansville teacher, and I discovered our common interest.  He had just come from a summer training program for FPS coaches and evaluators in Iowa. Bill and I divided the duties:  I would do the registration and the administrative tasks and he would be lead evaluator.  This worked really well because both of us were so committed to making the program a success.  We gathered together a number of districts where there were either parents or teachers willing to start teams, and after a busy year of learning as we went along, we hosted the first State Bowl at the University of La Crosse in the Spring of 1982.

Bill continues his evaluation interests with enthusiasm to this day.  Unfortunately, I had to turn over my state FPS duties after about five years when I was moved into an administrative position in La Crosse that included areas other than gifted and talented that meant losing the discretionary time I needed for a growing and increasingly complex state program.  I couldn’t let go completely, so I continued as a state evaluator for a number of years while managing the La Crosse program.

The FPS program in the School District of La Crosse continued to be strong into the 1990s, as long as our coaches were willing and successors could be found.  Over time, many of the original principals had changed, children of coaches moved on and networks lost. Our district g/t program changed its focus slightly and couldn’t sustain the interest, especially in light of competition from the more dramatic Olympics of the Mind.

My concluding thoughts are these:  more power to the districts that have found ways to continue their participation through the years and to the new districts who caught the spirit!  I truly appreciated the opportunity to work with wonderful people in both the local and state programs.  Who knows what the impact has been over the years on both coaches and students! If we were to gather stories systematically, based on the amazing anecdotes we all have heard, we might be surprised – or really not surprised at all, at the contributions they all will have made to make our world a better place.

Thanks to you all.

**Bill Hartje, Founder and Evaluation Director**

Serendipity!  I was sitting in a graduate class on the UW-Madison campus one day in the spring of 1981 when my future changed.  Someone passed around brochures on a program called Future Problem Solving.  I had long been a fan of science fiction, particularly the type that used the genre to explore concerns about the future.  The aspect of “problem solving” also fit into my education interests.

The handout gave a background of the program and information on training during the summer.  This training would be in July in Lincoln, Nebraska.  I thought it was worth exploring further.  I approached our teaching assistant, Donna Rae Clasen, about going with me, but she was not able to go.  Another student in the class was willing, so we sent off our registrations and made plans to attend the training.

My colleague met me at my home in Evansville on a rather hot Sunday afternoon in July and we headed out in my Toyota Tercel across Wisconsin, Iowa, and into Nebraska.  My car was not air conditioned and temperatures hit the low 100s, but we persevered.  (I recall stopping in Iowa on the Iowa/Nebraska border at 11:30 that night and seeing the temperature posted there at 98 degrees.)  We checked in to our hotel, grabbed some sleep and went to our training.  National director Anne Crabbe and national evaluation coordinator Cindy Anderson conducted the training.  There were two other people there also to be trained.  (I later got to know both of them through my national involvement in FPS.)

We spent the first day learning the process of Future Problem Solving; day two covered the evaluation process.  Training was intense but interesting.  Looking back I realize how much the program, particularly the evaluation methods, have changed over the years.  Each booklet then was evaluated by three people - one to read the booklet out loud, one to determine the scores, and the third to write them down.  Each booklet should be evaluated in fifteen minutes using this method.

No one went out much in Lincoln because the temps again hit 103 degrees those days.  (This was unfortunate as Lincoln had just been named the best place to live in America.  Of course Madison was second after Lincoln, and since the study had been done by the University of Nebraska, we felt vindicated.)  The training had been scheduled for two and half days but we completed our program by late Tuesday, the second day, then headed home on Wednesday.

I had been given a contact in Wisconsin by the national staff.  Marilyn Bendiksen was an educator in LaCrosse who had been doing the program for a couple of years through the “open division.”  Now that we had had a person trained through the national program, we could have a state program.  I got in touch with her and made the offer.  If she would do the administrative part, I would handle the evaluation aspect.  She agreed, and we started Wisconsin Future Problem Solving program in the fall of 1981, little realizing the commitment we were making at the time.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction gave a grant to FPS to help fund training of coaches and evaluators.  We recruited people from the training sessions and from my grad school classes.  All of us stumbled through as best we could and the schools involved seemed pleased enough to continue with the program.

Our first State Bowl took place in LaCrosse.  Teams did their booklets in the morning, then we copied each booklet and evaluated the work.  Needless to say we ran long in our evaluation, but somehow Marlie Bendiksen managed to keep everyone entertained until we could get the results to the anxiously waiting participants.

I also attended my first National Conference (the program had no aspirations of becoming “international” at that point) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the spring of 1982.  Anne Crabbe and Cindy Anderson were there, and I met Gordon and Dawn Schewach from Michigan for the first time.  They would take over for Cindy as national evaluation coordinators in time and were early pioneers of the program.  I also had the pleasure of meeting Paul Torrance, who began Future Problem Solving in Georgia, and his wife, Pansy.  I had studied the creativity work of Dr. Torrance in graduate school and was excited to meet him.  His commitment to the program inspired many of us to help grow the program in our own areas.

For the first few years of FPS, our program partnered with the Wisconsin Council for the Gifted and Talented (WCGT).  We gave several presentations at their annual conference and promoted the program as a good one for gifted and talented students.   They essentially supported our efforts, promoted the program, and kept the finances under their umbrella.  After we became more established, Wisconsin FPS became an autonomous program a few years later.