



MR. DAVID H. ALBERT

Recipient of the International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values Outside India - 2021

Born: February 13, 1950

David H. Albert was born to a lower middle-class Jewish family in New York City. He holds degrees from Williams College, Oxford University, and the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, but gave up a promising academic career to become a student of Gandhi. In 1977, Albert moved to Philadelphia to the nonviolence training community of the Philadelphia Life Center, where he was mentored by the Gandhian and Quaker activist George Willoughby.

In 1977, David Albert was the American representative to the Asian Seminar on Nonviolence Training, held at Gandhi Vidyapith in Gujarat. There he met three future mentors: Padma Bhushan Krishnammal Jagannathan with whom he worked for the next 40 years on land reform efforts in Tamil Nadu, providing land for more than 15,000 Dalit families; Jyotibhai Desai, who mentored him in Nai Talim and community-based education; and Narayanbhai Desai, who provided mentoring in nonviolence training and the power of story. In 1981, he spent a year at the Gandhigram Workers Home in Tamil Nadu, working with and learning from Krishnammal and S. Jagannathan, and conducting research on Gandhian “meta-economics” and the connection between Gandhian thought and Jain ethics (specifically the doctrine of *syadvada*).

Back in Philadelphia, he served as media relations director of the Fellowship Commission, America’s oldest and largest human rights/human relations agency, at a time when race relations were particularly fraught. In 1980, David Albert founded New Society Publishers, soon to become the largest and most important publishing house dedicated to Gandhian nonviolence in North America. (www.newsociety.com). It is still going strong and quickly expanded its focus to include constructive work especially related to environmentally sound agriculture and ecology, feminism and nonviolence, alternatives to traditional views of development, peace making resources for children, and much more.

Over the years, Albert wrote and edited more than 15 books, on nonviolence theory and practice, home schooling and community-based education, and public health, including two volumes called *The Healing Heart* on the use of storytelling in public health efforts. His book *People Power: Applying Nonviolence Theory* brought together pointers in how to make practical use of the theory of nonviolence in social and political conflict situations. It was translated into dozens of languages. One translation, into Tagalog, was utilized by Catholic nuns who ended up blocking tanks with their bodies during the overthrow of the Marcos’ dictatorship in the Philippines.

With the publishing house now well-established, David Albert turned his attention to two other avenues of Gandhian thought and action: *nai talim* and community-based education, and the constructive program leading to *gram swaraj*. He lectured across North America on progressive, community approaches to home schooling.

David Albert co-founded Friendly Water for the World, working with extremely poor and dispossessed communities in sub-Saharan Africa and India. Many of these communities experience both past and ongoing trauma related to military activity, rape and sexual abuse, kidnapping of children, tribal and ethnic conflicts, infectious diseases, and lack of resources to meet very basic needs. This trauma is

exacerbated by lack of access to water – worsening as a result of climate change, waterborne illnesses especially among children who experience parasitic stress – permanent damage making it difficult for them to learn; and a general lack of control over their own lives.

Communities Albert has worked with include: widows; people with HIV; refugees; former child soldiers; survivors of wartime rape and sexual assault; tribal communities and Dalits; people with albinism; unemployed youth; orphans and survivors of genocide; differently abled people.

Friendly Water for the World currently trains people in seven core technologies for implementation by communities themselves at the community level: rainwater catchment systems; interlocking stabilized-soil brickmaking; rocket stoves, BioSand Water Filters; Micro Flush toilets, Permagardens, and soapmaking. But technologies aside, the critical issue addressed by Friendly Water is to overcome the barriers in the way of individuals and communities attaining some measure of Swaraj/Swadeshi – community-based self-reliance, self-governance, self-esteem, community self-realization.

Much of what Friendly Water attempts to do is assist communities in recovery and in reimagining themselves. The real work is in social technology, making it conceivable for communities to revive themselves, making the impossible possible, utilizing the tools of appreciative inquiry, asset-based community development, community engagement, and longer-term empowerment. David Albert notes this is a long road, with communities taking the lead, but there is no easy substitute for it. There have been Friendly Water projects and programs in Kenya, India, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Afghanistan, Mexico, Bolivia, Congo-DRC, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

In 2014, Albert co-founded the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund (FUST). Modelled on the Quaker-based Underground Railroad in the U.S. prior to the Civil War, to date FUST, with its very courageous local “conductors”, has rescued 2,711 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) individuals in Uganda who were facing lynching, beatings, homes being burned out, dismissal from all employment, and complete repudiation by their families. These individuals are now found in countries around the world.

David Albert is also on the board of the Congo Integration Network, delivering assistance, counselling, and providing services to Congolese refugees and immigrants in the Seattle area, and on the board of advisors of Congo Threads, providing safe housing and community for war orphans in eastern Congo-DRC. He also works closely with the Rape Hurts Foundation in Jinja, Uganda, which provides rescue, safe housing, counselling, economic support, and employment training for women and children who have been raped, sexually assaulted, or battered. Their shelter for survivors of gender-based violence is named after him.

He is fond of citing the maxim of Gandhi, “The best way to find oneself is to lose oneself in the service of others.” At the core,” he says, “I am a student of Sarvodaya, trying to remember to put “the last man” before all others. It has required creativity and discipline to see and act at all times as if the needs and aspirations of others are, in reality, the same as my own.”

David Albert continues, “In other words, it has required me, over time, to develop an expanded definition of myself. I could easily say that this is “inner work”, but the reality is that, for me, over time, the distinctions between inner work and outer work, between immediate family and my larger and growing global family, have fallen away, offering new vistas of possibility. I have not found these vistas through a formulaic application of Gandhian philosophy, but in identifying and practicing its basic elements that lead to liberation.”

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