

Michael Gregory Pursues Varied Interests, Causes (August 8, 1985)

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“I suppose you could call me a cause junkie, but I’ve never been involved in anything that I didn’t consider self-defense,” says Michael Gregory as he sits in the study he rents in the Central School building in Bisbee. Gregory has in recent weeks come forward as a spokesman for the group of artists and artisans which makes up the Central School tenants association, now known as the Central School Project, Inc.

Although politics has come to be a part of Gregory’s life, it is not his first love. He grew up in the midwest, a normal kid with normal interests. He went to Toledo University where he received an interdepartmental degree in history, English and philosophy. The academic world appealed to him and he continued his studies at Pennsylvania State University, receiving a master’s degree in English and folklore. He also spent a year studying comparative folklore at UCLA, satisfying an interest in Celtic mythology. He chose the University of California at Irvine to begin work on his doctorate.

The world was changing all around Gregory at Irvine. It was 1969, the war was still raging overseas and starting to heat up at home. “I just quit,” says Gregory of his decision to leave school. “It didn’t seem relevant anymore. I headed up toward San Francisco for a while.” But the San Francisco scene didn’t satisfy him for long and he soon found himself on the road, even spending some time in Canada.

Eventually he found himself back in California — this time working as a Forest Service firefighter. The work was hard and exciting, something he really enjoyed. His work with the Forest Service ranged from the adrenalin-charged, on-the-front-lines work supervising a Helitack firefighting crew, to the solitary work of a fire lookout.

Gregory’s travels and acquaintances brought him to Tucson. When the mid-1970s arrived and he decided to settle, he chose to do it out near McNeal, on Frontier Road.

During what he refers to as his “60s journeys,” and his time with the Forest Service, Gregory had begun to write. Poetry mostly, but not exclusively. His frustrations with attempts at getting his work published led him to develop first an interest in and later an expertise in printing.

Gregory has what every writer wishes he had, a print shop. Room 5 of Central School is the home of Mother Duck Press, Gregory’s commercial printing operation. Through Mother Duck, Gregory handles contract printing work, business cards, flyers and other types of job printing.

Mostly, the press is for writers. Under the auspices of The Bisbee Press Collective, Gregory teaches writers, poets and anyone with an interest, how to print and publish their own work. Many of the small books and pamphlets in local stores were printed on his small press.

Gregory also spends a lot of his time at Cochise College where he teaches history. “I hadn’t planned it, but I was told I had too much education not to teach,” he says. He admits he really does like teaching because it keeps him in touch with the academic world he once rejected.

His political involvement can be traced back to his Forest Service days when he learned the Service was a major herbicide user. “I was writing a manual of plant uses. I was interested especially in medicinal plants and food plants,” he explains. In the course of his research he kept running into references to herbicides. The more he learned, the more he wanted to understand the nature of herbicides and how they were used. His discovery that the Forest Service was a major user alarmed him.

At that time — 1971 — the armed forces had quit using a chemical called 2,4,5-T, or Agent Orange. After a fact-finding tour in Vietnam, the American Association for the Advancement of Science had recommended the military stop using the chemical because it was causing birth defects and other problems.

Faced with an abundance of Agent Orange, the Forest Service began to use it here at home, to help control weed trees.

“Commercial forestry is a plantation operation, where trees are clearcut, and then the area is reforested with trees set in nice, neat rows. The herbicide is used to control competing vegetation, giving the new trees a better chance for survival,” he explains. “In Arizona, they use it to knock down brush in order to clear land for grasslands and cattle.”

Gregory contributed to the long battle to stop the use of 2,4,5-T on public lands by writing articles warning of the dangers. His voice joined with others across the country and, eventually, in March of this year, Congress voted to ban the use of the chemical.

Locally, Gregory has contributed his energies to preserving the wild nature of some of the recreation areas. He has also been active in the successful effort to extend the wilderness designation to many previously unprotected areas. Parts of the Huachuca and Chiricahua Mountains will benefit from the work he and his colleagues have done.

“My interests center on broader issues,” Gregory says as he tries to explain why he has not always gotten involved in Bisbee issues. “It’s a hassle to have fights going on in your own backyard, and since I’m not really a Bisbee resident, I would prefer to keep things at a nice friendly level. Sometimes that’s really hard,” he adds.

He does not always agree with things he sees happening in Bisbee. “I’m opposed to the ‘gentrification’ that’s taking place in Bisbee,” he says. “I think it’s a mistake,” he says. “The town has not yet come to grips with the idea that the only reason the town is alive now is because the artists moved into town. I object to the developers that have come into Bisbee and tried to turn it into some kind of Yuppie City, or whatever. Bisbee isn’t cut out for that. There is nothing here for that element,” he adds emphatically.

Gregory is much kinder to the city's efforts to attract tourism. "I think tourism is important, but tourism is not the same as Jetsetism. This town's economy has to be home grown." He says he recognizes many people expect new money coming into the city will be its salvation, but he doesn't agree.

"I think this attempt to develop Bisbee is really just boosterism, and it's got a big crash at the end of it. If you're always reaching for outside money, and you have to change your own character to bring that market here, then you are in danger of destroying yourself."

As for the Central School Project, and the hopes of the tenants to remain in the building paying reasonably low rents, Gregory is not sure what to expect.

"This place is really shaky. I don't know what is going to happen here. There is a very strong indication that some people want this building closed down. It may be that we'll be out on the street in 30 days," he says.

Gregory has chosen to focus his energies on the work he does for the Sierra Club, and in spite of what happens with the Central School issue, he will continue his work. If necessary, he will move his press equipment to his home in McNeal.

It is Michael Gregory's nature to be involved, and it is not likely he will disappear entirely from the Bisbee scene.