

FALL '70

Communiversity

... a beginning



dictatorial and unresponsive to the needs of students and society. In 1964, the SDS began civil rights teach-ins in Missis-

40 years ago a 12 x 20 inch folded poster appeared on the streets of Kansas City heralding something new. On the front panel it proclaimed Communiversity, a beginning... It was, of course, the beginning of a new kind of education program, a free university: where teachers learn and participants teach; where it's believed that everyone has a skill or an idea to share with others; and where this sharing could help defragment a society, creating a vital community. It is also a journey of new beginnings for the countless number of people who have benefited from this simple idea. Communiversity has helped teachers and participants alike through many life changes.

Today, Communiversity is a non-academic, non-credit program under the Office of Student Involvement at UMKC. Our belief is that a community is strengthened when its members have avenues through which they can share their skills and ideas with others. We offer a diverse catalog of classes five times a year. Subjects can range from walking tours of historic districts, art classes, first-time home buying workshops and even a class on how to transform your lawn into a garden. Many classes are offered in libraries, community centers and private homes. We receive approximately 7,500 registrations each year and offer about 850 classes annually. All of our teachers are volunteers from the community and our classes are fun and informative.

American adult education has been episodic throughout its brief history, responsive to local needs and out of the limelight of the hot education issues of the day. Adults have always found ways to learn what they need, from the subscription libraries of the 1700's to the Chataqua's that blossomed in the mid-1920's (literally millions attended cultural, artistic and political events that traveled throughout the U.S. in circus tents).

In this great tradition free universities emerged out of the radicalism of the '60's. In 1962, a group of students calling themselves Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) issued the Port Huron Statement. This document outlined the social conditions of the early sixties and called for action in several areas—including a call for students and faculties to take control of an educational system that had become complacent,

When the Berkeley students involved with these returned home in the fall, they were struck by their own limited role in determining their education. The protest that ensued involved the occupation of the admissions building by 1000 students. It was during the 15 hours that building was occupied that the first free university was born.

It took another four years for the idea to reach Kansas City—where Bill Laing founded the Kansas City Free University. It lasted a few semesters.

In 1970, according to Al Hannah, former director of Communiversity, "Steve Eimer, a candidate for All Student Association President, seized on the free university as a campaign issue. He negotiated office space in the Student Union, talked the Student Association out of \$800 seed money and Communiversity was born." That fall the Communiversity registration table was parked under a large plastic bubble supported by fan-blown air. Slogans solemnly declared the irrelevancy of the university such as:

Try not to let school get in the way of your education. - Mark Twain

We know everything except how to make democracy work and what to do with ourselves. - Buckminster Fuller

For this is the truth: I have moved from the house of the scholars and I have banged the door behind me. My soul sat hungry at their table too long; I am not like them, trained to pursue knowledge as if it were nut-cracking. I love freedom and the air over the fresh earth. - Nietzsche

Those were the days of the hippies, yippies, flower power, black panthers, the free speech movement, the anti-war movement and the alternative school movement. Everything was under scrutiny; especially, on college campuses, higher education itself. As stated in the first catalog of classes: *Our accepted forms, styles and definitions of education are no longer adequate... Communiversity hopes to transcend the definition of education which claims that it can be bought, or that a bundle of 'A's' guarantees it. Curiosity, imagination and a deep desire to take responsibility for one's own learning are the only requirements.*

The first semester boasted 40 classes and over 400 people signed up! The second semester saw 80 classes and 800 participants. The community at large responded overwhelmingly to Communiversity. Conveners (teachers) offered classes in their homes, on campus, at community centers and libraries.

The student government regime changed hands and quickly lost interest in Communiversity. The program continued to flourish and enjoyed continued support from UMKC in the form of office space, classrooms and administrative support. As importantly, Communiversity established itself in the community. Originally the classes were free to everyone (they are still free to UMKC students). After three years a \$1 registration fee was collected to replace diminishing support from student government.

The earliest class success included a class by Rev. Michael Gillgannon on Teilhard de Chardin (he now lives in Bolivia); The infamous Sewer Treking class where hundreds of Kansas Citizens followed a white rabbit into the now defunct sewers of Brush Creek; and a class on New (non-competitive) Games led by local comedian David Nastor. Although social action classes were probably never the most popular, they certainly were more prominent in the early years. But Communiversity's purpose was never to force public opinion one way or the other but rather to establish a forum. The catalog of classes became the vehicle by which people of all walks of life could share an idea or skill. In the past a soap box and a circus tent may have worked. Today, much of this exchange is through the internet. But there will always be a need for people to spontaneously meet over the ideas and needs of the time, whether they be financial planning, learning to salsa dance, glass blowing or how to get a job as an ESL instructor.

Our present challenges include developing and paying for a new online database that will feature a true shopping cart system for registrants and secure, but easy, access to class information for our teachers. Also, the office is moving to the new Student Union and merging with the Office of Student Involvement. As a result, when people call to register or to offer a class, they will be greeted with "Student Involvement." Don't hang up. We'll be glad to help you with all your Communiversity needs.

Through a process of change and attrition, Communiversity is now the largest adult education program in the country with all volunteer teachers. We continue to charge only a nominal fee for some exceptional experiences and it's right here in Kansas City.