



SENG's 25th Silver Anniversary Conference – Reflections on SENG's History

By James T. Webb, Ph.D.

In August 1980, a very bright, talented 17 year old Dallas Egbert, from Dayton, Ohio, committed suicide. His parents contacted me, as a child psychologist, to inquire whether there were any programs that focused on the social and emotional needs of gifted children and their families. It soon became apparent that despite a clear need, few resources existed.

It was from this tragedy that SENG began, and today I am happy to say that SENG and its many programs—indeed its very existence—have touched the lives of thousands of gifted children and their families in positive ways. Now, more than 25 years later, we look back on an interesting history—and forward to an even more interesting future.

Many people now take SENG's existence for granted, but it was not always that way and many people have been key in determining SENG's growth. SENG started in 1980 as part of the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University, thanks to the wisdom and support of the Dean, Ronald Fox (elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1994) who protected SENG from faculty members who believed that programs for gifted children and their families had little relevance for psychologists.

In January 1981, television talk show personality Phil Donahue hosted a show about gifted children and depression. I participated in that show, along with Dr. and Mrs. Egbert, Jean and Bill Casey (parents of a gifted son who had also committed suicide), several other families, and Joyce Juntune, who was then the Executive Director of the National Association for Gifted Children. To everyone's amazement, that edition of "The Donahue Show" resulted in 20,000 calls and letters from people across the country confirming the extent of neglect, misunderstanding, and prevalence of myths regarding gifted children and their families.

This outpouring from viewers caused those of us involved with SENG to redouble our efforts. We wanted to increase the awareness of parents, teachers and others working with gifted children, and to help them realize that these children and their families do have special emotional needs and opportunities that are often overlooked and, thus, neglected. Sometimes, the result is underachievement or unrealized potential; but sometimes the outcome is misery and depression.

Following the Donahue Show, Betty Meckstroth, a parent, volunteered her time and energy. She and I initiated SENG parent support groups—a series of guided discussions focusing on ten major topics of concern to parents. We provided basic written material noting key points relevant

to the topic, encouraged parents to express their concerns, and offered professional comment, advice, discussion, and guidance. As the parents shared ideas and experiences, they learned from each other—lessons such as how to appreciate and encourage each child, how to anticipate problems and find solutions, and how to prevent difficulties. We are deeply indebted to those parents for their sharing, courage and support; we probably learned as much from them as they did from us. These parent group sessions eventually led us to write the book, *Guiding the Gifted Child*, and later *Gifted Parent Groups: The SENG Model*. The parent support groups continue to be a hallmark of SENG.

Another early aspect of SENG was consultation with psychologists, teachers, and other professionals individually and through workshops. It quickly became apparent that professionals lack useful training in characteristics and needs of gifted children—an unfortunate situation that continues to this day.

Thanks to Betty Meckstroth's efforts, the Junior League of Dayton provided seed money and volunteers that allowed us to hold the First Annual SENG Conference in 1982. We invited speakers from across the country; and to our amazement, they came. In a few short years, the SENG program gradually developed a reputation as a support system for gifted children and their families, as well as for educators interested in the emotional and social concerns of gifted children. SENG began to receive national media coverage, which have included interviews and commentary from *Good Morning America*, *CBS Sunday Morning*, *National Public Radio*, and *CNN*.

As is often the case, a program does not develop smoothly. Funding was—and continues to be—a problem. However, miracles do happen, sometimes in surprising ways. The owner of a Bingo game discovered that, for tax reasons, he needed to give money to a charity, and SENG became the grateful beneficiary of his donation. These funds allowed SENG to hire staff and underwrite programs for several years. Then, just as this funding waned, a new and very special donor appeared and continued SENG's funding because she remembered how she, as a very bright girl in New York City, had suffered from discrimination and lack of support for her talent and abilities. This donor was Eugenie Radney from Akron, Ohio. Eugenie donated money while she was alive, and bequeathed money from her estate that SENG received when she died.

In the years from 1981 through 1993, SENG continued to hold annual conferences, train psychologists, and conduct parent support groups. With help from people like Arlene DeVries, of Des Moines, Iowa, others around the country were trained in the SENG parent support group model. For three years, 1986-1989, AAGC (the American Association for Gifted Children) merged with SENG, thanks to the efforts of AAGC President Anne Impellizzeri, and SENG was involved in working with the Presidential Scholars program in Washington, DC.

In 1994, when I knew that I would be leaving Wright State University, we moved SENG to Kent State University where Dr. Jim Delisle and Dr. Joanne Rand Whitmore—both national leaders in the social and emotional needs of gifted children—were faculty members. A few years later, we decided that it made more sense for SENG to become its own entity, independent of any university setting.

In the year 2000, a SENG National Advisory Committee of people who were knowledgeable and representative in the field of gifted education was established to decide SENG's future direction. Committee members were: Dr. Ed Amend, Raenele Côté, Arlene

DeVries, Carolyn Kottmeyer, Sharon Lind, Dr. Rick Olenchak, Dr. Joanne Whitmore Schwartz, and Dr. James Webb. This committee became SENG's first board of directors and decided that SENG should apply for official non-profit 501(c) (3) status. Thanks to Board President Sharon Lind's dedicated efforts, SENG achieved non-profit status in 2001.

As SENG celebrates its 25th "Silver Anniversary" Conference, the organization shows promise of being even more active in fulfilling its mission to educate others about the needs of gifted children. Recent SENG accomplishments and programs currently being developed include:

- Continuing Education credits for psychologists (offered at all SENG conferences since 2002 and home study courses currently in development)
- Establishment of a National Professional Advisory Committee in 2005
- A DVD on issues of misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children
- A brochure (developed jointly with NAGC in 2007) about gifted children to be distributed to all pediatricians and family practitioners in the U.S.
- Establishment of *SENG Nos Apoya*, a program with emphasis on special needs of Hispanic parents of gifted children, currently in development
- Hiring our first Executive Director, Amy Price, in March 2007
- Establishment of *The SENG Honor Roll*, to provide national and local recognition to educators making a difference for gifted children
- Designating National Parenting Gifted Children Week, the third week of July of each year, to be launched July 2008

I hope this information about the history of SENG will prompt you to support SENG's efforts, both financially and emotionally. Most of all, I hope you will register to attend SENG's 25th Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. You will meet many of the people mentioned above, and others, who have helped SENG grow and develop to what it is today. Our continuing goal is to help gifted children and their families not only to obtain important knowledge, but also to understand and accept themselves and others in ways that value, nurture, and support them in families, schools, workplaces, and communities.

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