
Dakota Constituents Vote to Close Dream Academy

by Berneice Lunday and Tom Seibold

On 1300 acres of gently rolling terrain overlooking the Missouri River, 11 miles north of Bismarck, North Dakota, stands a singularly unique building housing Dakota Adventist Academy. Today, 10 years after the groundbreaking at this site, the physical plant looks lush. Trees and grass now grow on what used to look like a construction site. But this year the building that was envisioned as the most modern and comfortable boarding school ever designed, stands empty. Dakota Adventist Academy has been closed.

In a vote taken at a conference constituency meeting August 16, 1987, a difference of 16 votes spelled the doom of the school whose history goes back to 1904, and previously was known as Sheyenne River Academy.

John Thurber, president of the Dakota Conference, called for the special August constituency meeting to provide financial information on the academy and to make a final decision on its operation for the 1987-1988 school year. At a similar meeting in April 1987, the constituents had voted to keep the financially troubled school open. Fund-raising efforts during the summer had generated more than \$150,000. But that was not enough to totally solve the problems of a school with a capital debt of \$1.5 million and an operat-

ing budget of close to \$1 million per year.

The action taken in August called for a temporary close of Dakota Academy until financial problems could be solved, but after the motion carried with 189 yes votes and 173 no votes, Thurber urged the selling of the building.

"I am not willing to give up on secondary education in North Dakota," he said. "I do feel that this building is beyond us. We need to put our building up for sale. I, for one, don't believe that because we have voted to close our academy that it couldn't happen again with much less cost for secondary education." (Thurber has since resigned as president.)

The building that Thurber mentioned was originally intended to cost \$3 million, has already cost \$11 million, and the total may be \$15 million by the time everything is paid for, according to Treasurer William Brown. Designed to house all campus activities in one building, the structure was meant to free students and teachers from trudging through snowbanks during brutal North Dakota winters.

This unusual, one-building campus design has been criticized as its greatest curse from the day students first moved in. The lack of barriers between the boys' and girls' dormitories (just a 30-second stroll, indoors) was a perennial source of frustration for deans. In 1984, doors were installed between the dormitories and central mall area, and the doors were locked after classes. Students wishing to go to the gymnasium for the evening recreation period walked on the outside sidewalks. In recent years special effort was also made to hold physical education classes and recreation outdoors as often as the weather permit-

Berneice Lunday recently received her B.A. in communications from the University of Mary, Bismarck, North Dakota. Southern Publishing Association published her first book, *Unblessed*.

Tom Seibold, a former student at Dakota Adventist Academy, was the editor of *College People* and associate editor of the *Collegiate Quarterly* when he attended Union College, his alma mater. He is currently news coordinator for Pacific Union College.

ted. "Getting fresh air is an important part of the Adventist health message," said Vice Principal Chris Williams, "and a building like this defeats that purpose."

At the August meeting Treasurer Brown showed figures indicating Dakota Academy owed more than \$92,000 on accounts payable, some of which dated from 1985. A total of \$170,587 (which includes the \$92,000 for accounts payable) was needed by the conference to subsidize the 1987-1988 school year. Dakota Academy's annual budget was \$1,134,299, making the school's cost per student approximately \$10,000 a year.

During the debate over closure, some people had suggested that it would cost as much to keep the school closed and honor teacher contracts as it would to operate the school. The accounts payable of \$92,000 and the capital debt would still need to be met, but constituents might not be willing to "pay for a dead horse." Others argued that Ellen White counsels us to discontinue our business if it cannot run debt free.

Ron Zeeb, of Yankton, offered the first year's profit of his yet-unpublished manuscript, *For Jesus Sake It Is Written*, to help pay the debts. His offer followed in the spirit of other fund-raising projects for the school. For example, during camp meeting in June, literature evangelist Stewart Lozensky conceived the idea of establishing a modern-day "Joash's Treasure Chest," based on the biblical story in which Joash's chest was created to receive gifts for rebuilding the temple. Responding to appeals from Lozensky and others, members attending camp meeting deposited offerings of \$43,000 in the box. Additional thousands were raised at an antique sale organized by lay members. According to the conference handouts distributed at the August meeting, constituents under the leadership of Vern Vliet, a lay member of the conference committee, and Clifford Kahler, president of the conference's lay advisory council, had raised \$147,704.13 for academy building debt reduction and \$72,228.67 for operating expenses. Thurber gave delegates to the special conference constituency meeting another opportunity to make money pledges before the vote on the school was taken. The 369

delegates present pledged \$62,493. Vliet said another \$30,000 for operating funds was available. According to the figures written on the chalkboard at the meeting, that left only \$78,094 to be raised.

A motion that constituents be allowed until September 1 to raise the remaining funds and reopen school on that date was defeated, 184 to 113.

Dennis Kaiser, former Dakota Academy farm manager, noted that for the price of two candy bars a week from the 5,000 Dakota Conference members, the school could operate.

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Robert LeBard, principal of Dakota Academy, said the school had recruited around 90 to 100 students for the fall term. The academy enjoyed its highest enrollment of 195 students in 1977-1978. Enrollment dropped to a low of 81 in 1985-1986 and shot up to 106 students in 1986-1987. LeBard said, "It's hard for me to say much now," as he observed his staff nearby in tears. He said his prayer was that provision would be made for his students to have a Christian education.

After the vote at the constituency meeting, students stood in disappointed clumps. Reed Anderson, a senior from Redfield, South Dakota, said, "Mr. LeBard changed the students' attitude to positive. Before he came, kids were troublemakers here, but LeBard cared about what happened, and he disciplined and let us know where he stood."

Most of the students interviewed said they would go to Maplewood Academy in Minnesota. But lives were being messed up, according to Derek Reiner, a junior from Rapid City, South Dakota. Reiner's mother is not a Seventh-day Adventist, and Dakota Academy has given him spiritual support. "They tell us to find another school, but that's not it. We come here for the

kids.” What were his plans for school? Reiner said, “Probably public school, but I hate to leave my friends, so maybe Maplewood.”

Joel Tompkins, president of Mid-America Union, said after the vote at the August constituency meeting, that he felt good about a lot of things. “The people had a chance to vote knowing the facts. Of course, I am sad we voted to close the school. I’m glad for the word *temporary* in there. We have an opportunity to work out other arrangements. For instance, the Bismarck church could have a 12-grade school. I have no idea what will happen with this building. Get a reasonable bid and sell it.”

The administrator added that he hoped this particular building would not be in the picture in the future. He said he felt it had caused problems and that many North Dakotans resented the building. He added it may be that someone will come up with something creative, but he had no plans to hire any specialists to decide about the building or its use.

Vliet observed it was too bad to sacrifice secondary Christian education in Dakota to get rid of a building. Patrons who had given heavily of their time and money to build and operate DAA stood aghast at losing it over only \$78,000.

But conference officials were worried that the membership, even if it paid off all the debts, did not have the resources to operate the academy. Conference Secretary Marvin Lowman estimates that only about one-fifth of the approximately \$500,000 recently raised actually came from members. Treasurer Brown said, “Some people have given their life savings for this project. And those who can give have given, often sacrificially.” He said he is impressed that the 5,000-

member conference has been able to maintain the facility for this long. The conference tithe base is around \$2.5 million, and Brown estimates that the conference has put “close to \$500,000 per year into the academy.” Registering amazement, he added, “Conferences with a tithe base two to three times ours don’t put that much into an academy!”

The contention that the academy was dragging down other ministries of the conference became a highly disputed point. Lowman, the secretary of the conference, said about 11 pastors had left the conference in the past five years. Because of a lack of funds, they have simply not been replaced. So, the remaining 22 pastors have often had to serve districts covering entire counties within the 145,000 square miles of the Dakotas.

“I support secondary education,” said Lowman, “But you’ve got to look at the total mission of the church in the conference and ask, Should we sacrifice the rest of our mission on the altar of Dakota Academy?”

Brown, the conference treasurer, concurs. “Much of the money that comes in from mature trusts, from members who die, goes into the legal association of the conference. A great deal has already been siphoned off, or ‘loaned’ for the operation of the academy. Now that money is gone; we’ll never see it again. The time may have come when we have to face the reality that not every conference can afford an academy.”

Evy Hanson Allram of Bowman, North Dakota, former member of the conference executive committee and a present member of the board of education, said, “It’s so sad. We were so close to making it. We spent a lot of time in prayer and when a constituency votes, it has to be God’s will.”