Active Neutrals

Young Adult Quaker Justin Wright has co-founded an Alternative Dispute Resolution non-profit organization called Active Neutrals, which has now run multiple negotiation trainings for an energized, mobilized, and fast-growing group of fossil fuel divestment activists: college students across the US.

Active Neutrals is a group of professional neutrals who have joined together to provide training, facilitation, mediation, and coaching services to the relevant stakeholders involved in public dialogues about social change. Their current areas of focus are gender equality, income equality, and sustainable resource management.

In the area of resource management, Active Neutrals’ goal is to provide training, individual consultations, and coaching to opposed parties involved in conversations regarding resource use (for example, investment in fossil fuels). Active Neutrals looks to empower participants in these conversations around social change to implement the best practices of negotiation and effective communication, allowing them to shift away from conflict and confrontation towards dialogue, understanding and constructive, joint problem-solving. As we know from the Apartheid Divestment Campaigns and the Anti Vietnam War Protests of the 1960s, college students are often well-positioned to catalyze social change, both on campus and beyond; those involved in the fossil fuel divestment movement are therefore ideal clients for Active Neutrals.

On September 6th and 7th, 2013, Active Neutrals taught college students communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills tailored to the challenges they are currently facing as activists. The curriculum provided a new framework for thinking about and preparing for negotiations, hands-on exercises, and a four-party role-play designed to simulate a real-life divestment negotiation. It was a diverse group, with representation from the University of Delaware, Temple University, Haverford College, Bryn Mawr College, and community activists from West Chester and Montgomery counties. End-of-training evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Participants cited improved communication skills and new shifts in campaign strategy. The interest in these trainings is growing; in the last six months, Active Neutrals has also trained students and community activists at Swarthmore College and Tufts University.

Unsurprisingly, Active Neutrals’ work strongly aligns with Quaker testimonies. Equality, environmental stewardship, and social justice are all guiding principles for the organization, as is a commitment to peace. Active Neutrals’ trainings are aimed at promoting alternative modes of conflict resolution, such as mediation, facilitation, and interest-based negotiation. Through the use of exercises, games and role-playing, Active Neutrals encourages participants to take others’ perspective, increasing awareness and tolerance. Fundamentally, the work of Active Neutrals embodies purposeful action based in integrity and respect for others. We care for ourselves, others, and the planet through practicing intentionality in how we communicate, listen, and make decisions; this is an ethos Active Neutrals shares with its Quaker roots.

Friends are invited to get involved with the work of Active Neutrals by providing student scholarships or hosting a local training. Or, if you are part of a divestment campaign or are an administrator at a school whose students are currently involved in a divestment campaign, Active Neutrals can work to support you. Please contact Justin.wright@activeneutrals.org (Active Neutrals is under the care of the Eco-Justice Working Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting).