

LESSON PLAN:

The Third Wave began as an experiment in the classroom of Palo Alto history teacher Ron Jones in the spring of **1967**. Over five days, the movement he created took on a life of its own as it spread from the 30 sophomores in Jones' homeroom class to more than 200 students from all three high schools in the Palo Alto school district eager to pledge allegiance to a social movement that promised acceptance and reward to those who obediently followed its rigid rules.

At the time, no one realized the experiment would become a significant catalyst for much broader discussions about bullying, history, peer pressure, fascism and psychology or inspire multiple stage productions, a musical, movies and books. In more than 32 countries, study of the Third Wave has become part of the classroom curriculum, including in Israel and Germany, where the story is a high school reading requirement.

Jones had just graduated from Stanford University when he was hired at Cubberley High School during the 1966-'67 school year. At the time, Cubberley was a freewheeling school that prided itself on being experimental, and Jones, who liked to bring in guest speakers and conduct unorthodox lessons, quickly became a favorite teacher on campus.

No one had any reason to be alarmed that April when a student asked how could the Nazis have been so appealing to the general population that no one spoke up during the Holocaust, and Jones responded, "I don't know. Let's try an experiment. I will be the dictator, and you will be the movement."

The following Monday, Jones ordered the students to address him as Mr. Jones, instead of Ron. He lectured them on the benefits of discipline and ordered them to practice the proper way to sit and stand at perfect attention through repeated drills.

Tuesday morning Jones went to the blackboard and wrote the slogans, "**strength through discipline,**" and "**strength through community.**" The class began to chant the words in unison, and a movement was born.

"There was this excitement about being part of a community," Jones said.

In class that day, he created the secret salute and gave the group the name, "**The Third Wave**"

"When the bell sounded ending the period, I asked the class for complete silence. With everyone sitting at attention I slowly raised my arm and with a cupped hand I saluted. It was a silent signal of recognition. They were something special. Without command the entire group of students returned the salute."

The next day, Jones issued membership cards to any student that wanted to continue in the Wave. Not a single student elected to leave the room, he said. During the week, the regimentation and enthusiasm continued. Jones kept waiting for someone to step in and stop the experiment- but no one ever did. The parents, the faculty, the students all trusted him without question.

"By now, I'm deep into it and I'm thinking, 'How is this going to end?'" Even the principal, Jones said, liked the fact that students seemed more ordered and weren't roaming the halls- Even as they cut classes to attend to their new leaders lesson plan.

At the end of the week, Jones dropped a bombshell on the students: He entered the class and pulled the curtain across the windows to darken the room. He was no longer smiling.

He lowered his voice and told the students he had an important announcement: "**The Third Wave isn't just an experiment. ... It's real,**"

The students had been chosen to be part of a new third political party that was going to revolutionize American politics. He told them their national political leader would unveil himself during a televised speech at a rally that afternoon.

That afternoon, students piled into the auditorium carrying posters, chanting and believing the large

THE THIRD WAVE



number of "reporters" and "cameramen" documenting the event were from real outlets, not part of Jones' experiment.

When Jones turned on the television, however, only white snow appeared on the screen.

Everyone silently sat in position waiting and waiting for their leader to appear. Several minutes passed and nothing happened.

Moments later, video of the Nuremberg Rally started on a giant screen against the wall, displaying Hitler and the Third Reich.

"Listen closely, I have something important to tell you," Jones recounted "Sit down. There is no leader. There is no such thing as a national youth movement called the Third Wave. You have been used. Manipulated. Shoved by your own desires into the place you now find yourself. You are no better or worse than the German Nazis we have been studying."

Jones said there was a wide range of reactions. Some students cried, while others said they knew it was a joke all along. Others had run out of the rally in fear before Jones made his final announcement.

Jones said silence was the common experience shared by all. No one publicly spoke about that rally for 10 years.

"That was really the genesis of that student question, 'How could the Germans behave that way after the war?'" Jones said. "Silence is what happens when you feel shame."

One student, Philip Neel - who has made an award winning documentary about the experience- '**LESSON PLAN**', said when it was over, his initial reaction was, "Wow. That was an amazing experience, and boy did I learn a lesson."

He said there are some who see the documentary and say Jones should have never conducted the experiment in the first place and are upset that his students still endorse him today.

"My feeling is the opposite," Neel said. "It was a given that what he was doing was ethically wrong, but the lesson he taught far outweighed (that)."

Neel called the experience a wake-up call that has had lifelong impact.

"I think I process things differently now," said Neel, who remains leery about joining any kind of group and questions everything he hears and reads.

Jones launched the Wave just two months before the **Summer of Love** got into full swing. It was a time of unwanted war, protests and racial integration taking place for the first time.

"With the unrest that all of that brought, there was a sense that maybe we could change these things," Jones said. That made the Wave appealing, especially to the boys who were facing the draft in two years.

There also were grades to think about and the peer pressure of being part of an elite group.

"Jones pulled it off so well because we could identify so easily with him," Neel said.

"He was young, he spoke our language, and we felt very comfortable with him."

50 YEARS ON.

He didn't make the experiment racist or anti-Semitic, Mark Hancock another former student and producer of the film added.

"If he had crossed that line and asked us to turn against each other, it might have been a different outcome," he said.

The biggest appeal was the way Jones conducted the experiment, Hancock said.

"What people don't understand is the way that Jones rolled out the Wave. We got sucked into it because it was gradual," Hancock said. "By the time you felt trapped, there wasn't much you could do. The reality is that it was your social studies class, and you really couldn't go anyplace else. The only thing you could have done is take the game to a new level and be a revolutionary or try to get out through the administration, but that didn't seem like a possible avenue because everyone was part of the Wave as far as you knew."

Hancock, who now travels the globe to speak to students about the Wave, said the experiment was an emotional milestone in their lives.

"Most of us have very strong memories of it," he said. "But the reality is not everyone had the same experience. Each one of us had to make the decision during that time whether we were going to be for it, resist it or just try to stay out of the way and get an A and move on."

For Hancock, he wanted to be a revolutionary but never found a way to resist.

"I wish I had done more and could say I was a major resistor," he said. "I had good intentions, but it was like a totalitarian state, so if you said the wrong thing, you would disappear. I made up my mind to try to figure it out from inside the system, but everyday everything kept changing. I kept thinking, 'The clouds will part and I'll know what to do,' but that never happened, and I didn't act."

Neel said he opted to stay out of the way -- a decision he regrets.

"I was in the middle, which is probably the worst place to be," he said. "I was just going along with the flow and going along with everybody else and not challenging it, but not entirely endorsing it. ... I stayed too long. Some people ran out of the rally, but I was there until the bitter end."

Can it happen again?

"People often say it wouldn't work today because there would be parent involvement, but take a look at our own national election," Jones said.

Many of the questions those students faced 50 years ago, he said, are the same ones we are facing today: "**How do we change things? Do we work within the system, or risk arrest? Do we accept civil disobedience?"**

For Jones, who now spends his time in the theater and writing, the Wave represents a period in his life that he prefers not to talk about. The experiment ultimately brought an end to his teaching career in the public school system two years later when he was denied tenure despite support from hundreds of students and parents who petitioned to have him stay.

Jones said he was particularly surprised how the students in the middle- those who weren't the athletes, cheerleaders or part of the "in" crowd- responded to the Wave.

"Sometimes as a teacher, you miss the middle group, those who just want to be successful at something for once in life," he said. "What was interesting during the Wave was that the very bright kids were excluded and martialled out of the classroom by guards early on. That left the middle group, who then felt empowered. That's probably what's happening today in the United States. People who felt left out suddenly are in control, and it feels good."

**"Can it happen again?
I say, 'It's happening.'"**

-Linda Taaffe
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