Mercogliano, C. Making it up as we go along. NH: Heinemann publishers, 1998.

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History

May you live in interesting times.

—Ancient Chinese curse

The year the Free School started was the year of the Cambodia crisis, the student strikes, and the first Earth Day. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated the year before. These were indeed interesting times, when the birth of hope and the death of hope seemed on a collision course. And there we were, along with an uncounted number of other independent, experimental schools of all shapes, sizes, and micro-philosophies, determined to create genuine alternatives to the rigid, compulsion-based model of education that had been corralling the minds of American children for the past century.

As the Free School was taking shape in 1969, the diverse movement to bring about radical social change was more or less at its height. There was no unified agenda. Rather, the general order of the day was stopping the war in Vietnam, completing the work of the civil rights movement—especially eliminating the economic roots of racism—and breaking down the increasingly monolithic control of major social institutions such as the public school system.

This wouldn't be the first time in history (or the last) that among the activists attempting to bring about fundamental social change were those who believed that focusing on the prevention

of problems was equally, if not more, important than trying to solve them after the fact. Nor would this be the first time that the idealistic questions had been asked: What if we could raise a generation of children free of race and class prejudice, free of an overdependence on material things as the basis for the good life, and free of the belief in the necessity of war? And what if society were to begin embracing education as a process that encourages learning for learning's sake and enables children to develop fully and authentically?

Many, both in this country and abroad, have been addressing such fundamental questions for centuries. The family tree of the most recent attempts to radically alter the society's concept and practice of education, known first as the "free school movement" and later more euphemistically as the "alternative school movement," and now joined by the "homeschool movement," has many branches and deep roots. But anything more than the most cursory history of radical educational experimentation and change is beyond the scope of this book; thorough and excellent ones have already been written by Paul Avrich, Ron Miller, and others. My purpose here is to locate the Free School within the context of the larger movement from which it drew inspiration and to which it offers a certain measure of leadership, while at the same time viewing that movement in the larger historical context from whence it arose.

There were numerous common sources of inspiration. Certain schools, for example, chose to base themselves on the theories of nineteenth-century educational theorists like Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, who believed human development to be guided by a spiritual force of some kind. Both believed, too, that all children have an innate desire to learn, and that it is therefore the task of education to nurture that desire through creative activity and direct experience. Finally, both considered the learning process to be far more than a series of abstract mental events, with Montessori tending more toward the sensory dimensions of intelligence, while Steiner, more esoteric in his thinking, homed in on the primacy of the imagination.

Ironically, while both dedicated their lives to the uncaging of the human spirit, both were responsible for the development of highly structured methodologies that sometimes leave little room for children's individual developmental needs. Meanwhile, the schools that their teachings have spawned—the majority of which have numerous points of agreement with mainstream middle-class cultural norms—continue to gain in popularity and numbers, in some instances even making inroads into the public system.

Other schools, far fewer in number, incorporated the ideas and ideals of either or both of the nineteenth-century countercultural paradigms, transcendentalism and anarchism. Two noted transcendalist philosopher-writers, Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, at one time founded schools of

their own in which they set out to foster the spontaneous development of each child's natural gifts rather than the imposition of "knowledge" from the outside. Their ultimate goal was wholeness rather than merely mental or technical proficiency.

The radical political views of the anarchists led certain of their ranks to start their own schools as well, driven by the belief that the primary reason governments institutionalize education is in order to use it as a tool of social and ideological control. Furthermore, they believed that the surest route to a just society was to raise children according to just principles. Inspired by the writings of Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Tolstoy—who himself established a school for peasant children on his estate in his native Russia—the Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer started a short-lived school in Barcelona that ran from 1901 until 1906, when it was shut down by the state. It was named the Modern School, and its mission was to maintain an atmosphere of freedom in which children's inborn spontaneity would be protected and where children would learn to think for themselves. Ferrer made every effort to integrate middle- and working-class children, as well as girls and boys (coeducation was unheard of in Spain at that time). After his assassination by the government in 1909, the Modern School became the model for a number of schools in the United States.

Still other schools chose to imitate more contemporary radical school models such as A. S. Neill's Summerhill, founded in England in the 1920s. Though Neill steadfastly refused to sanction any followers, many nevertheless set out over the next half-century to adopt Summerhill's principles of freedom and democratic self-governance for students of all ages. The spread of "Summerhillian" schools continues today, and Summerhill itself is now run by Neill's daughter, Zoe.

Finally, in the 1980s, increasing numbers of families began withholding their children from the society's schools so that they could accomplish their learning at home, within the orbit of family and community and outside the hegemony of "government monopoly schooling," to quote John Taylor Gatto. They were guided by the writings of social thinkers like Ivan Illich and master teachers like John Holt—both of whom questioned the underlying idea of school in any of its forms. The homeschool movement, as it came to be known, is a truly grassroots phenomenon, essentially leaderless, and fiercely dedicated to the distinctions that Illich and Holt drew between "schooling," by which they meant a series of compulsory and artificial academic exercises, and real learning.

The typology for this broad new/old array of alternatives became as varied as the schools and households that chose to take up the experiment. "Humanistic," "free," "open," "new," "alternative," "holistic," "democratic,"

and "community" were some of the labels worn by the different types of schools. Some were more systematized than others; some tended to stress creativity and free expression while others concentrated on true democratic procedure; some were more academically oriented or carried a political agenda of one kind or another while others remained adamantly apolitical. "Homeschooling," "deschooling," and "unschooling" were some of the names given to home-based learning, with the latter two terms referring to a less formal method.

The stylistic differences between these various approaches to education were many; it was this very diversity that would become one of the unifying principles of the new freedom movement in American education. Spanning the broad spectrum of philosophies and ideologies was a single, underlying theme: there is no one right way to do it.

AMID THE UPHEAVAL and turbulence of the 1960s, the Free School was founded in 1969 by Mary Leue in the heart of New York's small, provincial state capital. For Mary this was an act of outright necessity. Recently returned from England with her husband and two of their five children, she watched her youngest son, Mark, becoming increasingly miserable in his fifth-grade class at one of Albany's better public schools. Mary made repeated attempts to address the problem with the teacher, the principal, and the school's PTA; all to no avail. Finally Mark refused to go at all; he asked his mother to teach him at home. Mary consented, and at that moment the Free School's basic operating strategy was born: Act first, get official approval later.

It wasn't long before Mary received a threatening call from Mark's principal, the school nurse having ascertained that Mark was no longer coming. This prompted Mary to attempt to establish the legality of teaching her son at home and led to the development of strategy number two: When you do seek out official approval, don't take no for an answer. Instead, keep cruising the bureaucracy until you locate that one "angel" who is willing to go to bat for your plan of action. Mary's persistence and determination paid off as she finally managed to find a man in the curriculum office of the State Education Department who assured her that she was well within her rights to educate her son at home. He offered to give her a copy of the "state guidelines," which she could then present to any school official who might challenge her decision.

Sure enough, the local school district's truant officer called Mary the very next day and began issuing all sorts of final warnings. Mary calmly gave him the name of her newfound friend in State Education and not long after, the truant officer, who was actually the head of the district's Bureau of Atten-

dance and Guidance, called back to apologize and to offer his assistance. Ironically, this man would later become the Free School's official liaison with the superintendent of schools, and a powerful ally. Thus, the first chapter of the Free School's story closed with Mark Leue becoming perhaps the first legal homeschooler in the modern history of New York State.

Two weeks later, Mary ran into a friend who had three children who were equally unhappy in school; she begged Mary to take them on. Not wanting Mark to be isolated with her at home, Mary agreed on the spot and at that moment, a school was born.

The rest of that initial year, to quote Mary, went swimmingly. As summer approached, Mary and her gang of four unanimously decided to continue the school for another year. They also agreed on a name for their new school, the same name it wears today. It was at that point that Mary began to step back and reflect on its future course. She visited other free schools, like Jonathan Kozol's Roxbury Community School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Orson Bean's Fifteenth Street School in New York City. She also read *Summerhill*, and struck up a correspondence with old Neill himself. At that time Mary was a member of a local group of civil rights activists who called themselves "the Brothers." She asked Neill what he thought of her idea of creating a school with Summerhill-style freedom for children of the inner-city poor. His inimitable response: "I would think myself daft to try."

Myriad influences from Mary's past also began to shape her vision for the new school. For instance, she had read the novels of Louisa May Alcott as a young girl and was fascinated by Alcott's descriptions of the school that her transcendentalist father, Bronson Alcott, had once operated. Also, Mary's grandmother had homeschooled Mary during what would have been her first-grade year. That early experience had reinforced in her Alcott's model of informal and self-directed learning, which incorporated large measures of free play and time spent immersed in nature. Mary's family, who lived near Concord, Massachusetts, even took swims in Walden Pond, made famous by the transcendentalist philosopher Thoreau.

Years later, while attending a Harvard University summer session, Mary was exposed to the ideas of nineteenth-century Russian anarchist Prince Kropotkin. Like many anarchists of his day, Kropotkin believed in allowing individual development to unfold naturally, and in freeing people from the straitjacket of a culturally conditioned point of view.

Finally, during her year in England, Mary had worked with David Boadella, a Reichian therapist who was the head of a small village elementary school at the time. In addition to her therapeutic work with Boadella, she studied Reich's voluminous writings and, like A. S. Neill, was particularly attracted to his theories concerning the healthy psychosocial development of

children. All of these background influences would loom large as the Free School quickly took shape.

During that summer following the school's first year, Mary met with educational filmmaker Alan Leitman. He advised her to continue sifting through the realm of possibilities in order to find the approaches that would best suit her particular circumstances; and above all, to proceed slowly, making certain to complete one stage of growth before moving on to the next. Mary returned with three of Leitman's films about successful educational alternatives, which she then showed around the city to growing audiences. Suddenly, four students became seven, two teachers climbed aboard, and the need for a building was obvious.

A rapid and exhaustive search led to an inner-city black church in Albany's South End, which was moving to larger quarters across town. The minister agreed to rent the old building to the school for one hundred dollars a month. The deal accomplished two things: First, it gave the new school an affordable space. Second, the location ensured that the school would become well-integrated both in terms of race and social class. The rest of the summer was taken up with round-the-clock renovations and fund-raising. Come September, the Free School opened its doors for business.

What followed was a wild and tumultuous year. Parents battled over educational philosophy and practice, kids from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum thrashed out their own issues, and several city departments (building, fire, and education) all vied to shut down this funky, radical, and penniless storefront institution. Once again, an ironic twist occurred within Albany's officialdom. As the bureaucratic noose tightened around the school's neck, and as the call to the city's mayor (who was nearing the end of his forty-two-year reign over a Democratic machine the power of which rivaled that of Chicago's infamous Mayor Daly) "to shut down that damned Free School once and for all" grew louder, it was Mayor Corning himself who came to the rescue, ordering his officials to work with Mary on whatever changes were called for. It wouldn't be the only time he would defend us, anarchists and hippies to the last.

Two important developments came out of that initial year of constant trial. First, teachers and parents hammered out, in a series of heated sessions, the policy that only those actually present in the building could determine the school's day-to-day operating policy. Others were welcome to attend meetings, and to advise and make suggestions, but that would be the extent of their power.

Next, in order to empower the kids to hold up their end of the bargain of "freedom not license," Neill's famous phrase from *Summerhill*, and also to give them a nonviolent way to work out their differences (which were many

in that initial period), Mary and the others instituted a "council meeting" system. Accordingly, anyone who wanted to resolve a conflict or to change school policy could call a general meeting at any time. This enabled student and teacher alike to make new rules or change old ones, provided they could garner sufficient support for their position.

Council meetings proved to be an excellent forum for resolving conflicts between angry kids. And above all, they provided a solid sense of safety for all, acting as a kind of emergency brake whenever things got out of hand. When the focus was an interpersonal rift, meetings tended to take on a therapeutic rather than a governmental tone. They then became an empathetic space where emotions could flow freely and where the thread of the problem could be followed back to its source.

The council meeting system quickly became the heart and soul of the young school. It, more than anything else, would provide the wherewithal for the school to operate as a community in which everyone had an equal stake in the school and in which mutual responsibility and interdependence were daily realities. Also, students of all ages would grow adept at running the meetings in an orderly, coherent fashion, making council meetings an excellent form of leadership training.

The following year brought continued expansion and the need for a larger site. A new search turned up an old parochial school building situated in the old Italian section of the same South End neighborhood. At that time, the building was home to an Italian American war veterans group that had been the social center for a rapidly disintegrating immigrant community. Utilizing a small inheritance from her mother, Mary was able to buy it for practically a song from the veterans group, which was anxious to flee the influx of black and Hispanic newcomers.

The new building was perfect. Located in a row of solid four-story nineteenth-century brick row houses on a quiet side street, it had room to spare for the future growth that was soon to come. The first floor was already divided up into classrooms from the time that the building had served as a school. The largest of the rooms contained a new addition—a beautiful twenty-foot-long wooden bar, which would serve as a wonderful stage prop in many a drama during the early years. (The bar would later be sold to create more space and much needed cash.) The second floor consisted of a single open space, forty feet square, ideal for the kind of mixed-age preschool Mary had in mind. Already in steady use for more than a hundred years, the building was well worn and ready to accept the rough treatment it was about to get. Meanwhile, everything was in at least marginal working order so that no substantial additional funds were needed for renovations. To top it all off, the building came with a fully equipped commercial kitchen, enabling the school

to participate in the federal free breakfast and lunch program and serve two good, hot meals a day.

With the addition of IRS tax-exempt status, the fledgling school began to take on a sense of permanence. Now it was time to tackle the two issues that would most profoundly determine its future—money and philosophy. Money wasn't an immediate problem, since the school's overhead was extremely low: Mary could manage on her husband's university professor's salary; the building was paid for; and the early teachers were able, at least initially, to work for little or nothing.

Nevertheless, the school was going to have to find a way to pay teachers a salary if it wanted to sustain itself in the long run. And the policy not to exclude any student for financial reasons—with tuition individually negotiated on a sliding scale based on income—certainly didn't help the situation. To make matters worse, Mary and the others were having no luck in getting grant money from private foundations.

Mary saw the failure to win grants as a mixed blessing of sorts. She knew that many of the new schools that went that route had folded up their tents as soon as their start-up grants ran out. Determined to set the school on solid financial ground, she decided to adopt Jonathan Kozol's suggestion that schools develop some sort of business scheme in order to avoid becoming tuition- or grant-dependent and therefore essentially restricted to white middle-class children.

The first two attempts at free enterprise—a college-textbook distributorship and a corner store—were both unprofitable. Then it occurred to Mary that a golden opportunity might be waiting literally right outside the school's front doors: with the neighborhood just about at its nadir, there were dozens of deteriorating buildings on the block for sale, cheap. Mary, using the remainder of her inheritance, bought a number of these sites for between $1,500 and $3,000 apiece. Altogether, the school has acquired ten properties. We gradually rehabilitated them ourselves, and now use them to house Free School teachers, families, and several adjunct enterprises. Much-needed financial donations are brought in, in return for the use of our properties.

Settling on the school's methodology proved to be an even more troublesome issue than money. Just like in the school's previous location, curious neighborhood children immediately began checking out our unorthodox operation—which had suddenly appeared to them out of nowhere and which bore little resemblance to school as they knew it. Since the only admissions requirements were parental consent and a good-faith effort to pay at least a little tuition, the student population of the school quickly reached a fairly even mix of middle-class and poor children. While this was wonderful in ideological terms, it presented the new school with a number of philo-

sophical conundrums, because as Mary and the other teachers soon discovered, the parents from the different socioeconomic groups tended to have very different expectations regarding their children's schooling. Now it would be necessary to learn perhaps the hardest operating principle of all: You can't be all things to all people.

Mary and the other teachers, invoking the policy of absolute internal autonomy, set out to cut a middle road through the forest of conflicting goals and ideals. The working-class parents wanted the Free School to look and function like the local public school, which virtually guaranteed their children would remain trapped in the cycle of poverty. Their expectations were largely governed by the values of a class system that had only betrayed them generation after generation, one based on upward mobility as a key measure of success. They wanted their kids to have desks, textbooks, mandatory classes, competition, grades, and lots of homework. The absence of these trappings of a "real" school became fertile ground for the fear that here their kids would "fall behind," lose their competitive edge vis-à-vis the rest of society.

Mary, on the other hand, envisioned an egalitarian model in which kids would be free of competition, compulsory learning, and social-class-based status rewards. She thought that school should be a place where the students could choose responsibly from open-ended sets of options, because only in this way would they ever learn to chart their own life courses.

As one might imagine, getting this message across to a group of conservative lower-class white, black, and Hispanic parents was no easy task. Especially when the school's high-energy atmosphere, secondhand and thirdhand furnishings, books and equipment, as well as the near invisibility of routine all made it appear to them that we were not a school at all. It didn't help that the word among kids on the street was that the Free School was a place where kids could play all day, and also where they could curse!

To these doubtful parents, our school represented the fast track to failure and low status. Unable to cope with the uncertainty, sooner or later they would end up putting their kids back in the public or parochial schools from which they had come. In certain other cases, however, either the strength of the personal relationship between these parents and the school, or of their perception that at the Free School there existed a depth of human caring not found in other schools, was enough for them to hang in with us long enough to discover that their kids were growing in ways that would ultimately set them free. Those who took that leap of faith quickly became heartened by how totally their kids threw themselves into the daily life of the school. They were equally impressed by the immediate improvement in their overall attitude toward learning and by their obvious jumps in maturity. A great many of those early pioneering students still come back to visit today, and it is

wondrous to see how each has made his or her own unique way in the world. All are leading meaningful lives.

It was actually the upwardly mobile members of either social class who did most of the agitating for the school to be more formal than it had set out to be. They wanted proof that their kids were progressing in step with kids in the public schools. Parents for whom upward mobility was not a primary goal tended to be much more relaxed about the whole business. They were pleased by the behavioral and attitudinal changes they saw in their kids and were less concerned with homework, grades, and the like. For them, their children's happiness and sense of fulfillment here and now was more important than the promise of future rewards based on the society's predetermined scale of performance criteria.

"Discipline" was another area of potential polarization, and here the differences did tend to follow class lines. The middle-class parents generally wanted to see the school take a more laissez-faire approach, and when necessary, to set limits on children's behavior by reasoning with them or impelling them with adult-contrived incentives. The working-class parents, on the other hand, preferred strict enforcement of clearly defined rules of conduct, with punishment as the primary deterrent.

This same cultural dichotomy carried over to the controversial area of aggression, both its expression and its management. For many of the more liberal middle-class parents, aggression was practically a taboo, and they grew increasingly uncomfortable when they heard reports of fighting in the school. They liked the *idea* of sending their kids to a school with race and class diversity, but not the reality of exposing their kids to situations where occasional physical expressions of anger and sometimes rage were not ruled out.

In the end, it was decided that kids would be required to spend their mornings engaged in lessons and projects to improve their basic skills. Afternoons would be left open for kids to do more or less what they wanted—play indoors or out, paint, do ceramics, bang around in the woodshop, tend to the animals, visit parks and museums or any number of other interesting downtown locations. Boredom was seldom an issue. As the young school gradually gained confidence and experience, and as it established a certain respectability in the larger community, it would take a more and more relaxed approach to academic learning; but for the time being, the majority of the school's parents appeared to be satisfied with this initial compromise. It was then left to the teachers to contend with the sometimes mighty resistance of the kids who were already on the run from being compelled to learn to read, write, and figure in a school setting.

Mary was far less willing to compromise on the issue of aggression, and her Reichian influence was evident here. Reich's psychotherapeutic model

had been based on the Freudian proposition that neurotic behavior and psychosomatic illness are in large part caused by the repression of certain urges, memories, and emotions. It was Reich who discovered that the energy of suppressed emotions is stored up in the body's muscle structures, which slowly rigidifies them and renders them less and less conducive to the flow of feelings, thus reinforcing the tendency to avoid emotional expression. The end result of this systematic blockage of energy, which Reich termed "armoring," was an inner sense of emptiness and isolation.

This, for Reich, was the taproot of the array of dysfunctional patterns that leads people to seek out the help of a therapist. In order to reverse the process, Reich added an active component to his form of therapy, something largely missing from the classical Freudian system. He got his clients up off of the couch to express, and if possible, to reenact, old, stuck emotions, believing that this was the fastest and most effective way to stimulate change.

Accordingly—and the fears of the middle-class parents notwithstanding—Mary was adamant that the Free School serve as a safe space where the expression of emotion would not only be permitted but would also, when appropriate, be encouraged. The school adopted a technique that enables kids to "rage it out." Here a willing and sympathetic adult holds a child who is ready to explode front-to-front on his or her lap and allows the child to safely struggle, kick, and scream until the energy of the rage is spent. Then can come forth the tears of pain and grief that are so often trapped beneath the anger. Many times over the years, I have seen children's armoring dissolve right in my lap after holding them in this way.

Also, it was decided not to outlaw physical fighting in the school. If two kids were determined to go at it in order to work out their differences—if the fight were fair and they weren't inflicting significant tissue damage on the other—then they were allowed to proceed, with an adult nearby to insure safety and if necessary, to help the combatants reach a mutual sense of completion and reconciliation.

Not surprisingly, given that the policy to permit fighting was such a radical one, it wasn't long before the school began to acquire a reputation in certain circles for "teaching fighting." The school's response to this spurious charge was to emphasize that there were numerous alternatives to fighting in place like the council meeting system, and that physical fighting was not all that common anyway. Furthermore, many mild-mannered children had sailed through the school without ever having had to lift a finger in defense of themselves. Mary talked about the importance of children coming to terms with what she called "the politics of experience," which the Free School, with its wildly heterogeneous mix of students, always seemed to offer in abundance. Thus the development of one's own personal style of self-assertion

became an important learning task for everyone. On balance, the Free School quickly began to be noted for graduating children who displayed a self-confidence and a maturity beyond their years.

As it neared the end of its third year, the young school had managed to establish at least a bare-bones financial solvency and a mode of operation that seemed to have at least a chance of succeeding in the challenging mission that A. S. Neill would have thought himself daft to try. Growing pains remained intense. But the commitment to make it work shared by Mary, the other teachers, and core families was deep enough to keep everyone coming back.

As for Mark Leue, the reason it all began, he would move on through a progression of public and private schools until graduation from high school, try college for a semester and find it alien to his purposes, and then initiate his own training as a wood craftsman. Today he is one of the finest makers of stringed instruments in the state of Massachusetts.

MY WIFE-TO-BE, BETSY, and I arrived together in the late fall of 1973 to find a burgeoning school filled with adults and kids of all shapes, sizes, ages, and colors, about forty-five in all. Two naive and idealistic nineteen-year-olds, we had written to Mary the previous spring about the possibility of volunteering at the school, but wouldn't finally arrive until having spent the summer working to save money and then a few months gypsying around in an old Ford van.

At the time of the letter, I had been wrestling with the decision to withdraw from the southern university where I was a successful but frustrated liberal arts student. Two volunteer projects in which I was involved, one as a "big brother" to a ten-year-old black boy living in a dirt-floor shanty and the other as a tutor to a poor white boy of about the same age who was failing in school, had already begun to radicalize me in ways many of which I wasn't yet aware.

Soon I found myself independently reading books by John Dewey, Paul Goodman, A. S. Neill, Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, John Holt, and finally Jonathan Kozol's *Free Schools*. It was Kozol's book that led us to Albany. He had included a listing of inner-city free schools, including Mary's, in the back of his book. When we wrote to each school on the list, every letter except one came back stamped "addressee unknown." That one was Mary's. Her response went something like, "You both sound neat. Why don't you come and visit. We don't have any money, but maybe we can give you a place to stay."

The Free School turned out to be exactly what we were looking for. The year before I had filed as a conscientious objector with the draft board

(although the Nixonian draft lottery would ultimately exempt me anyway), and so volunteering at the school became for me a sort of unofficial alternative service. Betsy, who had worked with kids in various capacities while she was in high school, quickly discovered that she was a natural teacher. Later, after completing nursing training at a local college, she would become the school nurse as well.

I was excited to find the school located in a rough-and-ready, racially and ethnically mixed ghetto neighborhood, where it was as involved in dealing with the reality of inner-city poverty as any government-sponsored Vista project. And better still, unlike Vista, the Free School wasn't doing anything *for* anyone, but rather *alongside* them. After an exploratory visit, Betsy and I returned right after the Thanksgiving holiday and moved into a minicommune for teachers, interns, and volunteers housed in one of the school's newly acquired four-story flats.

All of the initial teachers had arrived in more or less similar fashion. Bruce had been the first to join Mary. Having just quit his public school teaching job in protest over the firing of a colleague for the high crime of growing a beard, he heard about the Free School from Mary's eldest son. Tall, easygoing, and mustached, Bruce plunged headlong into developing the new school, working evenings and weekends as a church sexton in order to keep the wolves from his and his wife's door.

Next to arrive was Barbara, with her two young children in tow. An Albany native, Barbara had no formal teaching experience, but was an excellent mother, and, like Mary, a formidable presence. Having already completed her hippy pilgrimage to Berkeley, California, she had recently returned to put down roots of her own in her hometown. Together, Bruce and Barbara would tackle the job of establishing a preschool program in the building's upper story, which grew rapidly due to the acute need in the neighborhood for affordable child-care.

Then came Lou, and then Rosalie. Both were Italian American and both were in retreat, to one extent or another, from their Roman Catholic upbringings. Like Barbara, Lou was a native of Albany and had actually grown up in the same neighborhood as the school. One of the first things Lou did was to move in the antique pump organ that had belonged to his grandfather. This added a particularly karmic touch to the building, which for its first forty years had been a Lutheran church built by German immigrants. No doubt there were ghosts smiling in the rafters as they listened to Lou's early-morning preludes.

Rosalie had just spent a year teaching children on an Indian reservation in North Dakota, and before that, two years at a parochial school in her native Bronx. She would later parlay her experience at the Free School into a

master's thesis on the relationship between the ideas of John Dewey and Jean Piaget and their practice in an inner-city free school environment. Rosalie had no plans for children of her own and the kids soaked up her gentle, doting style like dry sponges in warm water. Perhaps not so ironically, the school proved to be a magnet for renegade Catholics, myself included.

Such was the central group of full-time teachers who greeted Betsy and me when we showed up. Numerous others—volunteer parents, college interns, itinerant young people, neighborhood characters, foreign visitors—had come and gone, and would continue to come and go, each contributing in his or her own way to the school's constantly changing flavor.

MEANWHILE, THE SCHOOL was growing more intense than ever. Many of the students and their families were in crisis much of the time, and all of us who were working in the school full-time found ourselves living on the edge. Salaries, when we got paid at all, were minuscule, and survival became one of the overriding reasons for a number of us to continue living together communally in school-owned housing—a dimension that added greatly to the school's interpersonal froth.

Working closely with the kids inevitably brought teachers face-to-face with their own unresolved childhood issues. Many of us had grown up in dysfunctional families ourselves, and several had suffered various degrees and forms of abandonment or abuse. All of us felt extremely challenged by the intimate depth and the emotional content of the relationships in the school—children with children, children with adults, adults with adults.

It gradually became apparent that some sort of supportive forum was needed in which the adults could resolve conflicts and deepen their understanding of themselves and of each other. Mary suggested that we start a weekly personal-growth group where we could both clear up unfinished *inter*personal issues and safely delve into areas of *intra*personal growth.

Our four-hour Wednesday-evening group has now been meeting continuously since 1974. Its inception marked the first in a series of organic steps toward the birth of a permanent community surrounding the school. Part therapy and support group, part conflict-resolution setting, part community meeting, "group," as we call it, remains an absolute cornerstone of both school and community, and unquestionably is the key to the longevity of both. It is here that we continue to sharpen our "humanity skills" by attempting to practice emotional honesty through compassionate confrontation both with the truth and with each other.

Over the next few years, we all threw ourselves with abandon into improving the school, the buildings that it had been steadily acquiring on the

block, and ourselves as well. Thanks to our remaining Italian neighbors, and to many other longtime working-class black and white residents, the neighborhood in which the school now found itself had a villagelike quality. It was to this well-established base that we began to add our own countercultural accent.

We would soon discover one of the real blessings of this Old World type of neighborhood: Though not without its prejudices, it will quite readily accept personal differences as long as they are presented without pretense. This would be proven out in the warm months, when the real business of our neighborhood is carried out on the "stoops," or high front steps of each building. In order to establish good neighborhood relations, we made a point of spending ample time visiting with neighbors on their stoops. Today, we are well-accepted members of the larger community, having at times been strong advocates for issues such as home ownership for poor people during the period of rampant gentrification that took place in the mid-1980s.

The teachers who stayed on at the school began settling into more permanent relationships and also began spreading out into the various Free School buildings. Because the buildings were on two parallel streets, they often had adjoining backyards. With the buildings more or less in order, we started improving the yards, creating cooperative gardens and outdoor gathering places. More and more, we found ourselves eating together, celebrating birthdays and holidays, and even twice mourning together, after the stillborn deaths of Betsy's and my first two baby girls. Though no one quite realized it at the time, this closely shared living and working represented another seed of community, one that was already sprouting.

Teachers began having their own children (Betsy subsequently gave birth to two wonderfully alive daughters), and with them came the urge to put down still more permanent roots. Following the school's earlier example, we began buying our own abandoned houses on the block. Betsy and I purchased one for five hundred dollars, though at the time it wasn't much more than a leaking roof over a hole in the ground. Equipped with the necessary skills and tools, but still with no money to speak of, we devised a cooperative system for helping each other with our houses, often by means of weekend-long "work parties," as we called them. For example, once, on two successive weekends, we had an Amish-style barn raising in our backyard and completed a two-story barn and hayloft over the course of those four days. The barn now houses three Alpine dairy goats, which students learn to milk, and two dozen or so laying hens, to whom we feed the leftovers from the school's free breakfast and lunch program. This sharing of skills and labor contributed dramatically to the sense of community that was now becoming quite perceptible.

It was also during this period that Mary, with assistance from Betsy (who dreamed of becoming a midwife and is a fine one today), started the Family Life Center. The new spinoff was a response, in part, to the Free School's own "baby boom." Its purpose: to offer counseling and prenatal care to pregnant women, to provide parenting support, and to teach medical self-care to young families.

The Family Life Center provided the opportunity for the first of many synergistic exchanges between the school and its offshoots. In addition to creating an internal source of support, the center immediately began attracting new families to the school and to the budding community. Soon, two "center families" got wind of what we were up to and bought houses on the block.

These center families would go on to send their kids to us at age two or three, and the school would thereby reap a further benefit from the births that Betsy and Mary were facilitating. We could see immediately that center children seemed to be in generally better shape than the children who were products of standard, mechanized hospital birth procedures. Current research in neonatal development is now confirming our earlier observations. Numerous studies show that newborns who are allowed to bond fully with both mother and father immediately following birth demonstrate much higher developmental curves than those who are not.

Now the influence of Kropotkin-style anarchism on Mary's thinking very much entered the foreground. Born just after World War I into a New England Yankee tradition of staunch self-reliance, Mary was appalled at the current generation's increasing dependency on experts. Like Kropotkin, she saw the need for people to return to living in small, sustainable communities where they could learn to work together to develop their own localized support systems tailored toward specific needs. It was Mary who first suggested that we organize ourselves into an intentional community.

Along with home ownership and growing families came the need to stretch what little money each of us had, as well as to be able to borrow it at affordable rates. Here Mary had the idea of pooling as much capital as each of us could individually afford, so that we could invest it jointly in order to earn higher rates of interest on savings and simultaneously create a capital fund that could be loaned out. The interest payments would then get reinvested, thereby "keeping the money in the family." Mary named this joint venture "Money Game." Today, its assets are not insubstantial.

Also during this period, we launched two additional spinoffs, one primarily for internal support, the other external. Mary and Nancy, a teacher who arrived not too long after Betsy and me and who was the first to give birth in the Family Life Center, had both started natural food stores in the past; together they decided to collaborate on a small co-op in the basement

of the school's Family Life Center building. Mary soon added a bookstore to the operation; a few years later, Connie, a costume designer and longtime community member, opened an adjoining community crafts cooperative and storefront.

In order to help low-income Free School families take the same low-cost, "sweat equity" route to home ownership that many of the teachers had followed, we established a revolving housing-loan fund and rehabilitation-assistance group. We were able to bring together enough private investors to enable us to issue mortgages at low interest rates. Drawing on our accumulated skills and experience, we then taught families inexpensive ways to rehab their homes, doing as much of the work themselves as possible.

Our growing alliance gradually gained more definition as we moved together through the decade of the 1980s, when we began to refer to ourselves simply as the "Free School community." With the school buildings and our homes more or less completed, and with all of the various community projects up and running, next we turned toward spiritual matters. Having come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds—primarily Jewish, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist—we found ourselves sharing with each other the prayers, practices, and holy days we had carried forward into adulthood. We also began borrowing from other systems, particularly various Native American and ancient matriarchal rituals. And while we maintained our own spiritual identities, we each were nourished by this evolving shared tradition.

This added spiritual dimension contributed heavily to the permanence and vitality of the community of the now dozen or so families that had gradually rooted themselves in varying proximities to the school. At the same time that there was an ongoing exchange between the two, the Free School community began to establish a life of its own independent of the school proper.

BOTH SCHOOL AND community continued to evolve as people came and went, and as we added new dimensions. Certainly the most significant of these changes occurred in 1985, when Mary retired from daily teaching in order to establish a quarterly journal that would help to spread the ideas and accomplishments of the educational freedom movement she was devoting the last half of her life to. Borrowing the classical Greek word for *school*, she named it *ΣΚΟΛΕ* [pronounced sko-lay, the ancient Greek word for school], *the Journal of Alternative Education*. Over the years *ΣΚΟΛΕ* has developed a strong international following of readers and contributors and its influence continues to expand.

Not long afterward, Mary decided it was time to pass on the directorship of the school. First the torch was passed to Barbara, then to Betsy and me as codirectors, and when Betsy left to become a full-time midwife, to Nancy and me. The transition was not without its difficulties. However, thanks in part to the support and commitment of the surrounding community, effective new leadership is in place, with Mary continuing to play a valuable róle as a mentor and advisor.

The success of *ΣΚΟΛΕ* led Mary to envision a second quarterly magazine that would address the broader needs of families, incorporating the Free School's wide range of experience with issues beyond the ordinary confines of education. Today, the *Journal of Family Life*, as well as *ΣΚΟΛΕ*, are productions of the Free School community as a whole.

Realizing that all work and no play makes dull boys and girls, we decided we needed a place where we could get away from the city occasionally. Larry, a community member with a knack for finding bargains, managed to find a camp for sale on a small lake about twenty-five miles east of Albany, in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. (In upstate New York, *camp* refers to a vacation cottage or home in a wooded or waterfront area.) With two forty-foot living rooms, six bedrooms, and two kitchens, and an owner willing to sell for a low price because the building was in need of substantial repairs, it was exactly what we were looking for. We practically bought it on the spot!

Today Rainbow Camp, as we christened it, is a multipurpose facility, used by the community for retreats and vacations, by the school for daylong and weeklong trips with the kids, and by Rainbow Camp Association (composed of members of the Free School community) for its weekend workshop program. The workshops cover a wide range of topics in the general area of personal and spiritual growth, and workshop themes and leaders are usually chosen with the needs of our souls and psyches in mind. Any profits from the workshops go toward paying for camp improvements and taxes.

The purchase of Rainbow Camp led to a friendship with Hank Hazleton, a retiree living on 250 acres just over the hill from the camp. Hank was busy devoting the remainder of his life to defending the rights of Native Americans when he suffered a series of crippling strokes. He had yet to realize his dream of turning his land into a wilderness education center and a forever-wild sanctuary. To the Free School's great good fortune, before he died Hank willed his land to us so that we could assume its stewardship and carry out his vision. Currently, we are finishing a twenty-four-foot-diameter octagonal "teaching lodge" in a small clearing in the forest, and with the help of the Audubon Society of New York State we are in the process of establishing a wildlife sanctuary. A ropes course with both low and high elements is also in the works. Eventu-

ally we hope to convert Hank's house and barn into a small quasiresidential adjunct for Free School students.

As this unusual school urges itself forward, its future course is still largely uncharted. At every turn along the way, the development of the Free School and community has been essentially organic in nature. At no point has there been a master plan or a single guiding philosophy or model; rather, at every step, function and necessity—with occasional outside inspiration—have dictated form and process. With money in short supply, we've had to become our own experts, hashing out our own solutions, learning from our many mistakes. As both school and community grow and evolve to meet changing times and circumstances, the challenge remains for us to live out, on a daily basis, the basic principles of love, emotional honesty, peer-level leadership, and cooperation, which are the heart of the Free School's concept of education.