

## What I've Learned at Sudbury Schools

After sixteen years at Evergreen Sudbury School in Maine and Fairhaven School in Maryland, I retired in June. It was time to go and I have exciting plans, but leaving was hard. (And I hope to be back now and then as a sub.) I was tempted to write a thesis about how school has allowed me to prepare myself to become an effective adult, but at 65, if I'm not effective already, the chances of my making it are slim. I do know, however, that being a staff member has enriched my life beyond measure, and has made me a better and more useful person.

Getting to know and work with people like Danny, Hanna, Mimsy, and the bright, dedicated, funny staff at all the Sudbury schools, has stretched my mind and warmed my heart. The parents of our students are courageous, intelligent, and just basically outstanding, and then there are the kids—killer funny, outrageously smart, and adorable. Being surrounded by people who are dedicated to the idea that children are equally deserving of respect and freedom has been deeply satisfying, and a true learning experience.

So what have I learned at Evergreen and Fairhaven? For starters, I've learned that jumping enthusiastically into new projects without a lot of thought can have surprising life repercussions. I thought I could run a business and start a school on the side. That was sixteen years, a closed business, two schools, a major move, and two children graduating ago. I see jumping first/looking second as both a failure of imagination and a habit I acquired in conventional schools of always feeling rushed. Students at Sudbury schools have the time to develop their imaginations and to think things through. Because some of this has rubbed off on me, I jump into things more judiciously nowadays. But I'm everlastingly grateful for that Evergreen jump.

I've also learned some much-needed good habits. I pick up after myself, for example, before I move on to a new project. I learned this important lesson in my 40s at Evergreen, unlike our students, who learn it while still young. I became a professional organizer on the side five years ago because the process and aesthetics of being organized grew to interest me. Students, even the ones labeled ADD or ADHD learn (some immediately, some eventually) to use the systems set up in the art room and elsewhere, putting supplies back in their places, knowing that everything *has* a place. One of the pleasures of being a staff member has been the opportunity to see kids become competent, responsible members of the community.

I've learned that our view of our own kids isn't the only view there is. We all think our kids are special and brilliant and couldn't possibly do the bone-headed things other kids do. As a staff member with two kids at school, I was able to see that my kids—although, of course, brilliant and special—were among peers who were equally brilliant and special, and that my kids were just as capable of spinning tales at the dinner table about why they'd been hauled into JC *through no fault of their own*. And yes, even brilliant, special kids can do bone-headed things.

Working at a Sudbury school has taught me the benefits of a balanced life. As a student I was always studying; as a parent of babies, always changing diapers and playing baby games; as a graphic designer always hunched over my light table and then my computer. As a staff member I was a conversationalist, mentor, librarian, administrator, School Meeting member. And I had to remember to eat lunch. In fact, I had to remember to sit down and take a break, to jump up and bandage a knee, to play a game, to go see the skinks by the stream with enthusiastic six-year-olds. To do, in other words, what all students at Sudbury schools learn to do: create a life balancing work and play, solitude and community. Parents of gamers or bookworms or social butterflies often think that their kids do nothing all day every day but pursue their particular passion. They don't. Readers read a lot at school, but they also, like the talkers and gamers, play outside, serve on JC, and talk endlessly with others. Shy kids learn to open up, extraverts learn to be quiet in the Quiet

Room. And they all have to figure out, as do staff, how to balance their lives.

Being both a parent and a staff member has taught me that children are exquisitely attuned and vulnerable to parental feelings. Over the years I've made many mistakes as a parent, and even though my kids are grown, I'm sure they'd be happy to say that I'm making new ones all the time. I've toughened up, though. My stance now is that mistakes are inevitable, and it's best to just be forgiving. One particular mistake, however, is important to try to avoid. As staff members, we see, over and over again, that the hardest hurdle for students are parents who show a lack of faith in the child and/or the school. Kids can deal with parents who get cranky, who forget to pick them up on time, who wring their hands about too much sugar. They can even deal with divorces and illnesses and money worries. What demoralizes them to the point of not being able to succeed at school is when their parents clearly lack faith in them or the school, and threaten them with being pulled out if they don't do whatever academic thing the parent has decided is important. "Yes, you can be there, but you're never going to succeed if you don't [pick one] learn to read this year/learn math/focus on science." Even subtle worrying can sap children's morale. Will our students end up following a path their parents are comfortable with? Maybe, maybe not, but it will be a path they want to be on, a path they will follow with confidence—if they've had the whole-hearted support of their parents. As a parent I still worry about my children, but I think the routine expression of confidence and faith in them is absolutely critical.

Being at Sudbury schools has taught me patience, a virtue that has never come naturally. Watching many kids grow up over the years allows staff to take the long view. Kids can "waste" days, weeks, months of their lives playing computer games or collecting sticks in the woods, or sitting on the counters in the kitchen talking, and somehow grow into themselves—unique, irreplaceable, with all the survival skills they need to be effective adults. Growing up well isn't testable. All the little epiphanies people aren't even conscious of themselves, all the bits of information that add up to a whole, all the small decisions that add up to the development of a fine person—all of them are rarely visible from the outside. It's hard to take the long view when it's your own child and your friends are asking what her grade point average is. It's much easier to take the long view as a staff member, who can see all the stages of growth all around us. One of the jobs of staff is to share our confidence that all will be well. Patience. Patience. Patience.

My years at Evergreen and Fairhaven deepened my respect for children. Parents are so busy taking care of their children (and worrying), that the luxury of just spending time with them as equals seldom happens. Being a staff member at Sudbury schools taught me, on a daily basis, how intelligent and interesting kids are, and how much they have to contribute. A five-year-old showed me how to peel the back off labeler tape, a trick I hadn't figured out in years of use. A nine-year-old made a point in School Meeting that made me change my position on an important issue. A twelve-year-old shared facts about nature I had never learned in 20 years of schooling. A thirteen-year-old took photographs the equal of any professional's. A fourteen-year-old made a witty remark that cracked me up. A sixteen-year-old had insight into another student that amazed me, and a seventeen-year-old dealt with family tragedy with a courage and resilience I tried to emulate when my mother died. Every day I shared my knowledge and experience, and every day students shared right back—their poetry, art, passion, humor, intelligence. The enormous resource we have in children is unseen in the larger culture. Only at Sudbury schools, and in some families, are young people treated with the respect all human beings deserve.

Watching students arrive, grow up, graduate, and leave, and watching other students arrive to take their places has taught me that no one can ever replace Thor or Alison or Jen or Eric or Marlee or Max or all the others, each one unique and fascinating. But it's also taught me not to wallow in nostalgia, and to look ahead as students do each day, to a new and exciting future. Students and staff come and go, but what each of us contributes to the school stays, and makes it richer in tradition and experience each year. I'm so glad I've been able to be part of this best of all possible educations, the Sudbury schools experience.

— Lisa Lyons, August, 2009