

letters

Accessing Random Memories of The Children's School Circa 1979-1985 ~ Henry Merrill

From this parent's perspective, Janna and Alex, made a reasonably smooth transition from the Pauline Trueblood Nursery School at Earlham College to The Children's School. We were used to being involved as parent-volunteers in that community – and we knew all about Stone Soup! We quickly became involved in The Children's School community. One regular memorable even was Saturday clean-up duty. This was usually a two family even so the kids were around helping (some) and playing in the comfortable environment. Sometimes we'd hear stories about events that happened in the bathrooms during school days (so hard to supervise on that lower level!!). Then there were the days of getting the school cleaned up before the school year, during vacations, and at the end of the year to get ready for summer school. Now that I think about it, a lot of memories revolve around clean up activities!

At some point I was "invited" to become part of the Board and the next think I knew had been selected president. Of course this meant many meetings and a whole new level of engagement in the parent-operated enterprise. The most important topic on the agenda (besides scheduling the clean-ups), always seemed to be recruiting and retaining students and families so there would be enough money to pay the teachers. During the summer Board meetings, when we weren't sure if we'd have enough students to give teachers a raise or hire a new teacher to have that group of upper-grader students, Christ would calmly tell us not to worry, things will work out and she could do without a raise if necessary. And you know what? Chris was usually right – a few new families would find out about the school and we'd be able to project at least a break-even budget. Then during the year a few more families would show up and to project at least a break-even budget. Then during the year a few more families would show up and we'd make it through another year. It seemed to be a classic "if you keep it going, they will find us" story.

There are also fine memories of family picnics at the Nicholson farm with stone soup, lots of other food, and activities for all in The Children's School community. Ed Nicholson was patiently supportive in the background, as usual, and sometimes one or two of the Nicholson girls were there to help

look for frogs around the pond and bring to parents those dripping wet kids who “slipped” into the pond.

Central to most of these random memories of T Children’s School is Chris Nicholson. We could always rely on Chris to have a list of things that needed attention during weekly cleaning, ideas for improvements to the classrooms, or the cubbies and coat hooks in the entryway, or special activity learning areas in the small rooms because that was that this group of kids needed. At the start or the end of the day, there was Chris in one room and Sharen Wood in the other, both surrounded with kids, orchestrating activities and ready to share an observation about something neat that just happened. At the end of the year, Chris wrote insightful, holistic assessments of each child focusing on individual, family and social development as well as cognitive and academic gains. We still have and treasure some of those reports.

As I reflect on The Children’s School, it is this holistic approach to individual and family development in The Children’s School community, personified by Chris, that I value most. Many people and experiences have contributed to Janna’s and Alex’s growth and achievements, but I think much of the foundation for becoming “readers” and realizing the enjoyment of learning in a community was The Children’s School experience. Thank you Warren Smith and Christine Nicholson for your vision and commitment 35 years ago. And congratulations to the other teachers and families past, present and future for engaging with and sustaining this vision!

Family update:

- Janna Merrill Bennett (married to Fritz Bennett) is Curator of the American Collection at The Children’s Museum, Indianapolis, and is completing a M. A. in Public History at IUPUI.
- Alex Merrill (married to Collen McColl) is Digital Initiatives Librarian at Washington State University, Pullman, WA. He completed a M.L.S. in Library and information Science at the University of Arizona in 2004.
- Colleen & Henry Merrill work at IUPUI and live in Avon, IN. Colleen is a research technician in School of Medicine and Henry is a faculty member in the IU School of Continuing Studies.