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The New School Lives!

by Diane Olsen

"Reach out for someone. To communicate is the beginning of understanding," proclaims the poster on the freshly painted white brick. In one corner of the room sits a box of games. A cat named "Dog" snoozes on the curved sofa as Kelly, the dog, looks on. A casual, constructive atmosphere prevails throughout the room as one person creates a poster with a cut linoleum stencil; another is freeing his imagination on canvas, and another is receiving help in balancing a personal budget.

At the New School, these individuals are not merely having a good time; they are students working toward a general equivalency diploma (a high school certificate awarded by the state after a successful performance on a battery of tests), besides helping and enjoying themselves.

Located at 414 West 11th Street in Waterloo, the New School is just now testing its wings after an initial move and a name change. It was originated for local persons from age 14 to adult who, disillusioned with conventional public education, have dropped out of the mainstream. The school's purpose is to provide a relevant educational experience for these people.

Whence came this revolutionary concept? Its humble origin is most likely Herbert Kohl's *The Open Classroom*, published in 1969. His ideas evolved into those of the progressive new "free" schools that are popping up within the state and across the country.

"What we are right now, we have been since January of 1972," says Jim Gilder (B.S. degree in Spanish and English, Bowling Green), school director.

Richard Kaplan, a UNI student interested in new educational alternatives, originated the idea of a free school in this area. After a boost from the VISTA program, Hawkeye Center adopted the notion. Eventually the school received a \$2,500 Youth Grant through Operation Threshold, a branch of the Office of Economic Opportunities.

Educational Equality

In a nutshell, the New School intends to meet the needs of those dissatisfied with public education, those whose needs for knowing how to read, write, calculate and communicate have not been fulfilled. The school shuns over-crowded classrooms, limited individual attention, grading systems, and obsolete courses. Learning must be woven into the daily life of every person. In addition, the individual should receive the responsibility for his own education in a positive learning environment. This involves a teacher/student relationship of trust and honesty, placing stress on their equality as persons. The creation of this positive atmosphere is conducive to learning throughout one's life.

At the moment, the staff at the New School consists of four certified teachers, Jim Gilder, Terry Hol-

loway (B.A. in Economics and Sociology, Grinnell), Bob Sigsbee (B.A. in History, UNI), and Mary Nissly (B.A. in English, UNI). The resident artist, Bruce Ream, has done work in California and Iowa.

Housed in a rejuvenated warehouse, the school is not unlike the once common little red schoolhouse in appearance. Upon entering the structure, however, the average little schoolmarm would swoon in astonishment. Gone are the straight, neat rows of prim desks; gone is the ominous desk of the teacher; gone is the no-nonsense authoritarian attitude.

Two rooms make up the school, a large central one and an art room. In one corner of the main room is a mini-library containing approximately 1,500 donated volumes, plus a number of magazines and records. An indefinitely loaned piano stands at one side, along with several large stuffed chairs, sofas, tables and desks scattered around the room. Nearly all of the furnishings and materials were loaned, donated, or found.

At first, the tedious clean-up of the potential school blocked progress. "We cleaned for three days straight," relates Terry Holloway. "The ceilings and walls were all scrubbed and then painted. It took us two days to paint the pipes." Following this brief obstacle, the staff was able to attend to the business of finding and teaching students.

Drop-outs Drop In

The majority of the New School's students have left public schools for personal, medical, or academic reasons. Many students classified as "drop-outs" were not realizing their full potential. Jim Gilder explained that "some of these 'drop-outs' are low-achievers, some are average, some have a hard time coping with authority, and nearly all of them have some type of family problem."

Some students have almost literally been "pulled in from the streets," but as Bob Sigsbee stated, "they generally hear about the school from other people and come in voluntarily." With the co-operation of Hawkeye Tech, there is a possibility of acquiring fifty more pupils. As Jim puts it, "We're trying to become accredited because we'll get more students if we can offer credit. An education isn't enough anymore."

Individualization is the key word to use in regard to a student's goals. He may merely want to learn a new skill, brush up on an old one, or sample a variety of areas, while working toward the general equivalency diploma may be the motivating factor for someone else.

A student chooses an advisor who assists in planning a worthwhile curriculum corresponding to the student's needs and desires. A personal relationship, as well as an academic one, is the advisor's goal. The student is evaluated in terms of his own projected

goals by the staff members who know him best. Evaluation is by a verbal test and an over-all view of his progress.

Those who are bugged by large, impersonal classes will be pleased to know that the New School's classes are unusually small. Five or six students with a common interest in a certain area usually comprise a class. A large share of the emphasis is placed on individual instruction. Pressures due to competition and keeping up with other class members are minimal, since a large part of any class work is composed primarily of group discussions. The concept is retained, however, taking into consideration the fact that small group interaction can result in large-scale learning. There is no mandatory attendance since the school's staff feels that attendance cannot be forced. It is hoped an environment is created that will make the students want to attend.

Teachers are responsible for the curriculum in their respective areas, although they are not limited specifically to one subject. Twice a year, instructors are evaluated. Each teacher is responsible for the aides in his area. The school's board of directors has the final decision in terminating a teacher or volunteer worker.

Academic Freedom

The New School offers not only individualized instruction, but also a number of unique courses of study as well. Usually hampered by a structured curriculum, the student can choose what he wants most to learn. There are four basic areas of study:

- 1) Basic Skills—These are the academic courses that are important for anyone working towards a GED. They include English, history, math, readings, etc.
- 2) Arts and Crafts—These are available for the student wishing to develop skill in painting, ceramics, leather work, and many of the other arts and crafts.
- 3) Social Awareness—These are generally group discussions or seminars on current relevant issues, including sex education, women's lib, and acting and drama. Sensitivity sessions are offered.
- 4) Survival—These courses offer the students a chance to learn how to buy an insurance policy, finance a car or buy a used one, set up a budget, and do many other "how-to" necessities for living in today's complex society.

Without concerned people, what would the New School do? "Outsiders," such as UNI professors, have shown an interest in its progress. At request, the school staff has explained the school's purpose and function to numerous education classes at UNI. College students have expressed an interest to help, but as Jim Gilder says, "They really haven't shown their interest by coming over and actually doing something." On the other hand, some have, such as Becky Maas, a senior, and Penny Altenhein, a graduate assistant, both from UNI.

A chance for fame is in the future, now that Dwayne Kelly, a Hawkeye Tech student, is writing a

book about the school. At last word, the book's introduction was requested by its publisher, and hopes are high for a literary masterpiece to mark the school as a distinguished monument for education.

Presently, the main problem in relation to operation is the lack of money. Funds come primarily from public donations, although projects such as bake sales also sustain the school's proverbial cookie jar.

Personal Process

The New School would like to stress the point that what it offers is not measurable through tests or diplomas. Its basic offering is a new and positive view of learning. Most important of all is the small student/teacher ratio. This allows the instructors and their students to see each other as people rather than just as objects across a desk. Personal attention and individual instruction are of the highest concern. It should also be noted that each person involved with the school (student, teacher, parent, and volunteer) has a say in how the school is run, since he is directly associated with it. The staff hopes that the Cedar Falls-Waterloo community, including UNI, will add to the potential worth of the school.

Speculating on improvements to come, the New School staff hopes that college students eventually will tutor other college students. Plans for many learning centers within the school, art supplies, and room partitions are in the works, Night classes for those working during the day are also forthcoming.

Desperately needed now are money, resources and people who are willing to help. Anyone wanting to help in any way or desiring to enroll is welcome to call 234-8031 in Waterloo between 10:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M.

Educational reformist Jim Holt, in his book, *Freedom and Beyond*, suggests keeping schools open the year around, letting the student pick his own day to attend classes, and receiving high school credit from other than scholarly subjects. If he were given the opportunity to view the Waterloo New School, he would undoubtedly beam in pride to see this step in the direction toward an educational Utopia.

