

A Profile of the Albany Free School

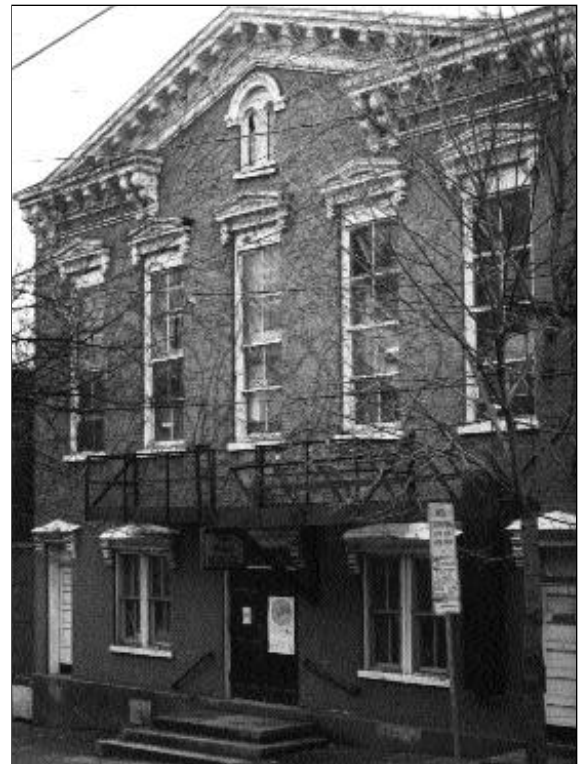
BY CHRIS MERCOGLIANO

Chris Mercogliano has been a teacher at the Albany Free School since 1973 and its co-director since 1987. His book about the school, Making It Up as We Go: The Story of the Albany Free School was published last spring by Heinemann. He is currently working on another book, Rid-a-him, Or Why Are So Many Boys Labeled and Drugged in School.

The Free School is an intense place. It always has been — for many reasons. When Mary Leue founded the school in 1969, the nation was embroiled in an intense period of transition. It was the height of the counterculture's challenge to the status quo, and everything was being questioned: political and social institutions, gender and family roles, the distribution of power, wealth and status, basic human values, and authority of all kinds. From the start, Mary intended her fledgling school to actively involve children and their families in the struggle for racial, economic, educational, and environmental justice. She and the kids cleaned up the school's inner-city neighborhood and investigated pollution being dumped into the Hudson River by a local meat packing plant — this well in advance of the first Earth Day. They testified at statewide hearings on elementary and secondary education, held by the New York State Board of Regents.

The Free School is also intense because Mary is an intense person. Every small, independent school I have ever visited has a "personality" similar to its founder. It's no wonder really, since Mary lives every day totally, and she urges those around her to do the same. When her nine-year-old son finally declared that he wouldn't go back to school because it was cruel and stupid, she agreed to let him stay home, where together they invented a school of their own. Soon their school had four students, then the next year, a dozen, until it eventually reached its present-day maximum of fifty-plus. Local officials of

every stripe quickly regretted their decision to challenge Mary's audacity. Almost single-handedly she won state approval, attained not-for-profit status, and purchased a permanent home for the school that miraculously passed the muster of local building, fire, and health inspectors. But the news media, sensing the threat of a school that was so radically unconventional, began calling for Albany's mayor (second only to Mayor Daley of Chicago as the longest tenured machine politician in America) to shut down the funky new school. So Mary and the kids made up signs and picketed City Hall, and before long Mayor Corning, who would later eclipse Daley's record by quite a number of years, became one of the Free School's staunchest defenders. Its troubles with the powers that be were history.





Mary is a person of passionate convictions who embodies a fierce dedication to the truth. She was careful to set up the school without the usual role definitions, so that there would be no artificial barriers between participants and their own personal truth. Kids were to have as large a share in decision making as they wanted, and teachers were to thrash out policy and personal issues in weekly staff meetings. Mary always faced conflicts head-on, believing that each one contained valuable life lessons.

The Free School is also intense because from the outset it included all comers. Mary purchased an old, semi-abandoned parochial school building in the ghetto, so that the school would be easily accessible to lower-class black, Hispanic and white children, kids without educational options. A sliding-scale tuition was established so that no one was turned away for financial reasons. As a result, the school quickly filled to capacity with the wildest imaginable mix. There were well-heeled sons and daughters of university professors and other progressively minded professionals, large families of Puerto Rican immigrants who spoke little or no English, dirt poor black children who only recently moved up from the rural South, hippie kids from the surrounding countryside, and everyone in between. Students came from the immediate neighborhood, from uptown, from the suburbs, and from neighboring towns and villages. Since the Free School was the only school like it for a hundred miles around, the only genuine alternative to conventional schooling, it attracted all sorts of refugees from other schools. Adamant that the Free School not be considered a school for problem children, Mary nonetheless accepted kids regardless of the size of their problems.

Add freedom to the equation and an intense environment is all but guaranteed. When, early in the game, Mary wrote A.S.

Neill to ask him what he thought of her idea to include children of the underclass in her experiment, he responded as only he could, "I would consider myself daft to try."

Intensity aside, the Free School is nothing short of total chaos to most first-time observers. They are puzzled that children can learn in an environment so often overrun with motion, noise, and spontaneous excitement, and I shrug and nod understandingly. Then I usually call upon the Grand Central Station at rush hour analogy that Jerry Mintz (who in the mid-sixties started the Shaker Mountain School in Burlington, Vermont) likes to use to explain the "structure" of free schools. Jerry says that if the action in that immense rail terminal could be viewed from its high, vaulted ceiling, an inherent order would emerge in the teeming tangle of humanity that scurries through it every day. Everyone always manages to get where they're going, though sometimes there's a bit of doubt and confusion, or a missed turn or two along the way.

To Mary, who is now retired and living on her family farm in the beautiful Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, the Free School is like a labyrinth, a place where teachers, students, and sometimes parents, can spiral into the depths of themselves. The school was never intended to be just for the children; it exists to support the growth of everyone involved. Mary talks about the importance for people of coming to terms with what she calls "the politics of experience," which the Free School seems to offer in abundance. The development of a personal style of self-assertion is viewed as an important learning task for everyone. The Free School quickly began to be noted for graduating children who displayed a self-confidence and a maturity beyond their years.

In the establishment of the Free School, Mary was deeply influenced by the work of the radical psychotherapist Wilhelm Reich. A.S. Neill had sought him out because Reich believed in

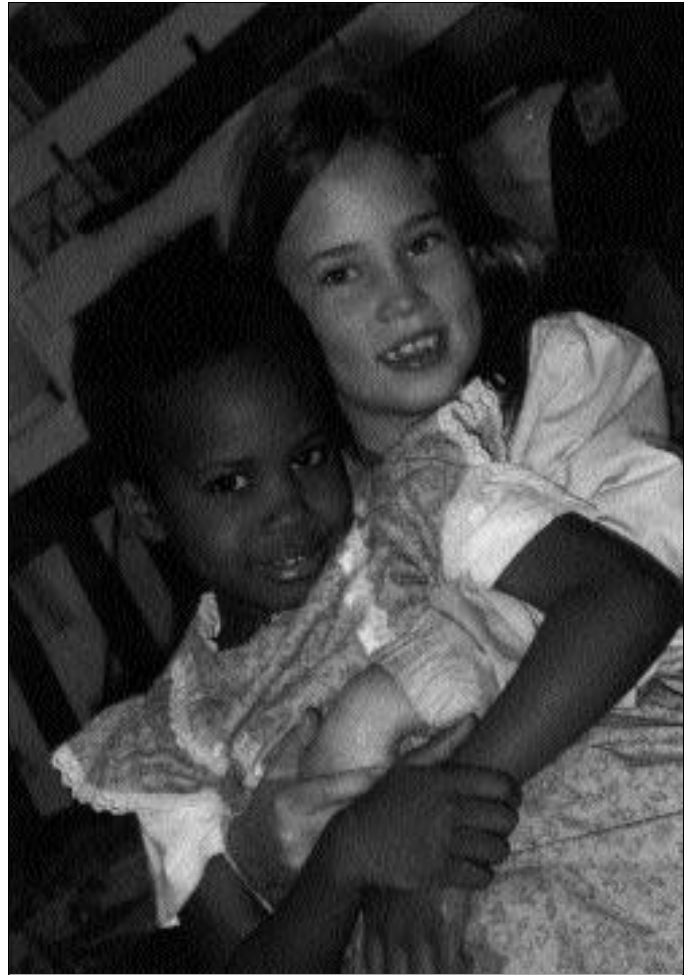


the vital importance of close observation of children's emotional lives; and the two men became fast friends. Reich discovered that the painful emotions stemming from early psychological trauma literally get frozen into the body's musculature, a phenomenon he termed "armoring." Inner healing is brought on by the expression and release of the stuck feelings. Here, the school adopted therapeutic techniques such as one that enables kids to rage it out when they are bursting with anger. The child is held, front to front, on an adult's lap and allowed to struggle, kick, and scream until the energy of his or her rage is spent. Very often tears of pain and grief have been trapped beneath the anger, and are allowed to pour forth. Many times over the years I have seen children's armoring dissolve right in my lap after I hold them in this way.

In like philosophy, a decision was made to allow fighting in the school. When two kids are determined to go at it physically, in order to work out their differences (if they aren't inflicting significant tissue damage on each other), they are permitted to proceed, with an adult nearby to ensure that no one gets hurt and to help the combatants reach a mutual sense of completion and reconciliation. It's amazing the lessons children receive from facing their own and others' aggression.

Such a high level of emotional freedom entails risk and requires safety. In order to provide everyone with sufficient protection, the school borrowed the "stop rule" from the Shaker Mountain School. It's very simple. Whenever someone is being treated in an unacceptable manner — teased, threatened, shoved around, or bullied — all he or she has to do is yell STOP in a loud, clear voice. If the offender doesn't stop immediately, then the next step is for the offended party to call a "council meeting."

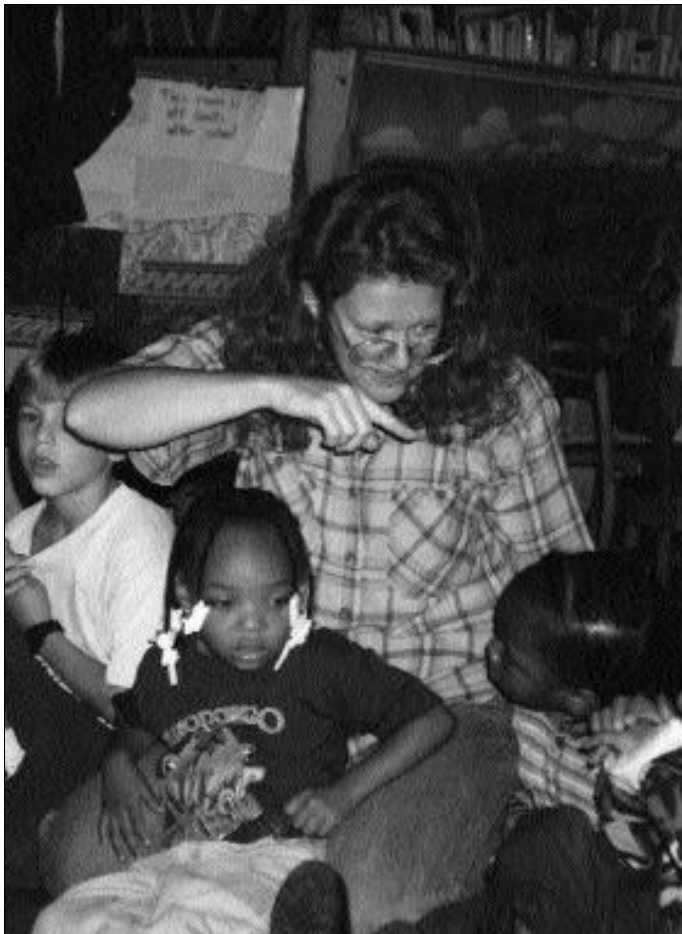
The mechanics of a council meeting are as follows. Anyone can call a meeting at any time. By general agreement, but



always subject to change (a six-year-old once got the mandatory attendance rule suspended temporarily), when a meeting is called we all drop what we are doing and come to the largest room on the first floor of the building, where we sit in a circle on the carpet. Three nominations are taken and a chairperson is elected. This is usually a student, and sometimes one as young as six. It is the chair's responsibility to recognize speakers, keep the discussion on track, and maintain order. Interestingly, while the atmosphere of the school is characteristically free-wheeling, strict decorum is required in council meetings at all times. This is seldom a problem because everyone tends to take the meetings very seriously.



The general rule of thumb is that meetings are to be called only for urgent matters, and only after other attempts to solve the problem have been unsuccessful. The chair begins by requesting a statement of the problem. If the matter is deemed by the group to be too trivial, then the meeting is usually adjourned. In a case of someone repeatedly "crying wolf," a motion might be passed prohibiting that individual from calling any more meetings for a prescribed length of time (an action



With kids' personal privacy and confidentiality respected at all times, meetings become a safe, supportive space where problems can be traced back as far as they need to be. Maybe it all started with something that happened a day or two before at school, or with some kind of trouble at home (an abusive older sibling, parents fighting, etc.). Tears are not infrequent.

As evinced by the Free School, there are three cardinal terms that have become entrenched in the vocabulary of contemporary alternative educationese: democracy, community, and leadership. Council meetings demand the daily practice of all three, on levels that are real to children and not just to high-minded commentators, school brochures, or grant-writers. Free School kids know that they have an equal voice, that they will be heard, and that they share in the responsibility for keeping the ship on course. The council meeting structure engenders an important sense of mutuality and interdependence. Everyone discovers on a daily basis how much they rely on each other for the protection of their rights, and for the support they need to reach their personal goals and dreams.

Perhaps the bottom line is that everyone in the school is empowered to care deeply about one another; and that includes the parents, cooks, interns, volunteers, and visitors. Herein lies the source of the school's existence as a genuine community—which is a state of being, not doing. In other words, the Free School is an intimate place, intensely so, where a great many life-long friendships are born. Love should be inserted at the front of the above list of educational principles. Mary would always say that when she found herself not loving a particular child, it was a sign that something was wrong. Happy children are inherently lovable, and when they act out in ways that invite disapproval, it is always a cry for help, for attention.

that sometimes sets off wonderful constitutional debates). All meetings are run according to Roberts' Rules of Order; and rules are made and changed, consequences meted out, and so on, by majority vote. When the issue is a particularly serious one, the discussion tends to continue until some sort of consensus is reached, although this is not required. A meeting generally concludes when the person who called it considers the problem solved and makes a motion to adjourn. Not every meeting has a happy ending, however; it sometimes takes several go-rounds before a genuine resolution is achieved.

The council meeting structure serves a number of important functions in the day-to-day life of the school. Most importantly, it keeps aggression from turning into a toxic force. Because even the smallest kids have power equal to or greater than the oldest and largest, via their strength in numbers, bullying and gangstering are easily controlled. Violations of the stop rule are always taken very seriously by the other kids. The therapeutic potential of council meetings is practically limitless.





You've probably noticed that I haven't described a typical day at the Free School. There's a reason for this; there really isn't such a thing. Each day, we more or less make it up as we go along. There are a handful of organized classes for kids who like to learn in that style. The classes are optional, and students are neither graded nor ranked. If students want report cards in order to be like their friends or siblings in other schools, then we are not averse to creating them. It's important, we feel, not to become too orthodox about any issue, no matter how noble, including freedom.

Food is an important ingredient of our community. The children are required to serve on a once-a-week crew that cleans up the lunch room after our excellent noon meals. This task takes only about fifteen minutes, when the kids cooperate with one another and work efficiently. Both breakfast and lunch are served every day, family-style, and kids are always welcome to help in the preparation, which they frequently do.

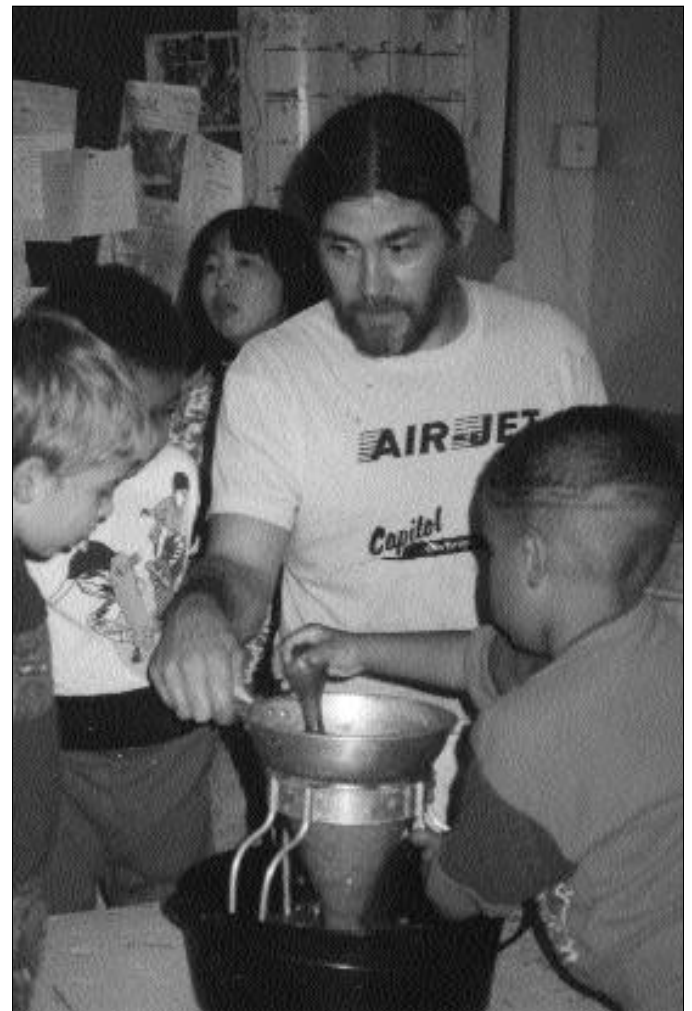
These days, when people ask about the school's structure or philosophy, I usually say the closest available model is what many homeschoolers call "unschooling." We place great faith in children's natural intelligence and their inborn desire to learn. Kids acquire their basic skills and gather knowledge about the world around them largely by following the thread of their own interests, just as they would if there were no such thing as "school." Though the majority of us in the building at any given time are biologically unrelated, the school is infused with a strong sense of family. The older students (we go up through the eighth grade) frequently become big "brothers" and "sisters" to the preschoolers (ages two through five), who occupy the second floor of the building. Teachers tend to love children as though they were their own, an exchange that is quite mutual.

Again, we have no curriculum, or if we do, it is highly individualized and flexible. We utilize the resources of the surrounding city whenever and wherever possible. Most of the

older students, for instance, choose to undertake one or more apprenticeships or internships each year. They work with attorneys, vets, artists, actors, models, horse trainers, magicians, anthropologists, chefs, car mechanics, or pilots — the sky is literally the limit.

Anyone who likes kids and has an open heart is invited to come into school and share a skill or a good story. We usually have several young volunteers and interns at any given time. The walls of the school, in other words, are intentionally kept permeable.

Like all freedom-based schools, we value play, creativity, and the natural world very highly. Children play a lot here, and they learn a great deal from their play. The little ones upstairs dress up endlessly, creating magical worlds in which they structure their own play. We try to manage their activity as little as possible because we believe that children need to learn to tell their own stories. Given the chance to be in charge of their own lives, they will ask for guidance or assistance when they need it. Teachers try to resist the temptation to overdo it, and in any event, kids are always free to say, "No thanks."





The art room and pottery studio, staffed by a half-time paid teacher and several volunteers, is almost always busy. In the preschool, the paints, crayons, markers, scissors, paper, and glue are in constant use. Kids also love theater and drama and from time to time put on their own marvelous productions and puppet shows. Sylvia Ashton Warner once wrote that if children's "creative vents" are kept open, their destructive ones will close. Our nearly thirty years of experience at the Free School have absolutely borne out Warner's observation.

The importance of the natural world in children's experience cannot be overstated. Every year the Free School sees its share of hiking, camping, caving, and mountain climbing trips. Our efforts in this area received a great boost ten years ago when the school was given 250 acres of semi-wilderness, located about twenty-five miles outside of town. We spend as much time as possible on the land, doing all the things one usually does in the forest, and we recently completed the construction of a low and high ropes course, which we are now in the process of learning how to use.

A note on finances: because nearly half of the kids come from low-income families, tuition covers only about a third of the school's shoestring budget. Grants are as scarce as hen's teeth, and we rarely try to obtain them anymore, unless we need one for a special project, such as the ropes course. Mary addressed this problem right in the beginning by following Jonathan Kozol's advice. The only way for a school to remain independent and inclusive, he said, is for it to develop some other means of earning income. When the college textbook and corner store ideas failed to pan out, Mary decided to start buying up some of the abandoned property that abundantly littered the residential block on which the school is located. Teachers and parents worked together to rehabilitate the buildings (a project that is ongoing), and today, in addition to housing teachers and Free School families, the buildings generate

the rest of the needed funds. Salaries, however, remain low—\$185.00 per week at present.

Over the years, in order to get by, Mary and the teachers developed a number of internal community support structures to keep living expenses down and prevent the money "from leaking out," as Mary puts it. For example, we started our own food co-op to supplement the food that we raise ourselves; we developed a kind of home-grown credit union that Mary named the "Money Game"; and we taught ourselves enough to provide each other with the majority of our own legal help and health care—both mental and physical.

On organization: the school is loosely broken down into approximately eight smaller groups, mostly based on age and maturity. Each group has a primary teacher to check in with, but generally these days it's one big free-for-all. Kids are free to migrate to where their passion is engaged, and teachers are free to share and teach only the things that excite them, an unschooling approach to education that the kids prefer. Mastery over things such as the multiplication tables and correct spelling sometimes comes later than they might in conventional school settings, but all of our graduates seem to do fine, if not excel, in high school and beyond. They never seem to stop loving to learn. Or is it learning to love?

