

ALF - SLD

Sez. 6

Sottosez.

Serie 9

Sottos.

Unità 219

PUV 55

NOTES ON THE BLOOMINGTON FREEDOM SCHOOL  
after its first year, 1970-1971

By Lleni Jeffrey, Bobi Meyer and Gail Weaver

If you've ever been interested in alternatives to public school, you may want to read this and think about joining us next year.

OUR FEELINGS ABOUT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In a small brick schoolhouse a fourth grade girl sat chewing on the end of her braid, reading Greek and Roman mythology during geography class. She didn't hear the teacher's question so she couldn't answer it, and the other kids all laughed at her. She felt very dumb again. The only way she ever discovered to survive there was to construct elaborate daydreams or to sneak books. So she became dumb, although she was not stupid; and suffered most of the time, although she was capable of joy. She grew up terribly shy, and lacking the skills needed to relate easily to other people. Her creative abilities were severely stifled. This was Bobi's experience.

Gail: That is probably a pretty common experience. From what I've seen, many children who have attended public school become very unsure about their own abilities, competitive, unaware of what their real needs and desires are, dishonest with themselves out of an effort to conform to adult standards, and distrustful of adults in many cases. These children grow into adults who are out of touch with themselves, who lead very non-integrated, compartmentalized lives, and who are never sure what it would mean to pursue their lives in the way most beneficial to themselves. This is quite a price to pay for the acquisition of a body of "basic skills" and knowledge, much of which is forgotten anyway.

Lleni: I think our public schools destroy the joy of learning. I noticed that the free school kids who had been in public school didn't want to do anything that remotely resembled school work, while those too young to have been in public school really wanted to learn and were willing to work amazingly hard and persistently. I can understand that from my own experience: in grade school I read novels voraciously, but that tapered off until after I finished college I didn't want to read anything for a year. In the

free school, giving the kids freedom to play led to what seemed like a very long period of their avoiding academic subjects, but by the end of the year all of them were interested again.

I think the most effective method the public school system has for destroying the desire to learn is to supplant it with competition and fear of failure. This produces adults who are suspicious and scared of one another and who measure their own success by the failure of others. Another effective method for destroying joy in learning is the standardized snail's pace of classroom learning. Most schoolwork is needlessly boring and repetitive. That is supposed to help "slow" learners, but they're bored too because it isn't really paced according to their interests. The real reason for the slow pace is to train kids as dull, mindless cogs for the corporate machinery of the U.S.

Bobi: Those things that destroy the desire of children to learn point up the fact that the educational system is designed for control more than for learning. It functions by imposing arbitrary chores on children, and robs them of their natural enjoyment of learning.

Gail: It's almost impossible for anyone working within the public school system not to put more emphasis on control of the children than on meaningful experiences for them. I taught in public school and had a lot of trouble at first with "discipline" - I felt very proud of myself when I finally achieved control of the class. I remember at the beginning of one school year the principal telling the teachers, "I don't care if all you do for the first six weeks of school is to teach the kids how to line up and follow classroom routines. That has to come first." No wonder the children's personal growth gets stunted by the public school system.

Bobi: And no wonder they dislike it so often! It was because of this kind of thing that I wanted something different for my children. I want them to have the best possible chance to develop into autonomous human beings, not just obedient cogs for our overly industrialized, overly militaristic, dehumanized society. In fact, I want them to have a chance to become strong and whole enough persons to help restructure society along more humanistic, less oppressive and destructive lines. I want them to have enjoyable experiences of successfully working out projects of their own so they can feel that their own interests are valid to pursue. Also I want them to be able to perceive and respect differences in the abilities and interests of others, without feeling threatened by those differences.

I do not want them to have to endure being controlled by other people with arbitrary and abstract goals, because being controlled excessively leads either to the desire to control others or else to a sort of apathetic docility. People have the right to have power and control over their own lives, but not power and control over other people.

We should also have a healthy respect for the natural balance and rhythms of the planet we inhabit, lest by trying excessively to control and exploit our environment we destroy the whole planet, and make it incapable of maintaining life. I think my children have a better chance of developing such an attitude in the free school than in the public schools. Many individual teachers are avid conservationists and I don't want to overlook their influence, but I remember from my own schooling that such informed and concerned persons always seemed to be fighting against the current.

#### OUR HOPES FOR THE FREE SCHOOL

Gail: I started working in the free school because I wanted, if possible, to help create a situation in which children could grow and develop in a relaxed and integrated way, a situation in which we could really try to think about each individual child: what he likes to do most and is best at, what makes him happy or unhappy, how he feels about himself, his problems and his needs. I hoped we could form relationships with the children in which they felt comfortable and free to be themselves, and in which they would remain in touch with their real feelings and needs. After a year's experience I am convinced that such a situation can be set up, and that it is not at all incompatible with the learning of "basic skills" or the knowledge that adults worry so much about children's acquiring.

Lleni: I decided to work in the free school because I saw it as a place where kids could grow up to be full people with the courage to really live and with a sense of their own inherent goodness and worth. Here they could escape being dwarfed and twisted by senseless discipline, dulling drill and competition. This means that the primary concern of the school is that happy, loving kids come out of it. I believe that kids need to learn by experimentation and practice how to find and do things that will make them happy. That is the most important kind of education they can get. In any case where academics conflict with the needs of the kids, the academics lose. This is a point that is very difficult for many people to realize fully.

Of course kids love to learn, so learning will take place, but we must never force it at the expense of the kid's feelings. An important corollary to this is that we will do nothing that encourages competition, only things that encourage cooperation. I don't believe that my worth has its basis in someone else's inferiority to me, and I don't want to teach kids to think of themselves and others that way. Actually, while I think the free school is extremely important, I see it as a transitional phase between the present system where kids are incarcerated (and hidden from the public view like all prisoners) and the way I think it should be where the lives of kids and adults are integrated. Our system is designed for efficiency - maximum output (number of kids processed) for minimum input (number of supervisory personnel). If kids were really allowed to follow their own desires the burden would be too great for the present public school system, and the kids would have to be included in the life of the community.

Gail: I don't think any of us is naive enough to believe that the free school is "the" answer to the educational problems of our society. We are well aware of its limitations. But we do see it, as John Holt has characterized it, as a "rescue operation" for the children whose parents feel very deeply that they must be rescued from the inhumanity of our present public school system.

#### OUR EXPERIENCES AND PROBLEMS THIS PAST YEAR

Gail: Getting the free school going this year turned out to be extremely difficult. After two months of discussions and much do-it-yourself work on the building we were to use, we opened in September with 18 children, aged 5 to 10, and 3 teachers (two of whom were there at any given time). We paid for rent, materials and teachers' salaries from tuition fees of \$30.00 a month per child (\$10.00 a month extra for each additional child from a family), and a \$500.00 gift from my mother. We rented a house in town which turned out to have inadequate space inside and out. We ran into lots of problems which resulted in the withdrawal of 13 children and one teacher by December!

The parents of the remaining children still wanted a school so, no longer able to afford the rent on our first building, we moved the school into the home of one of the children for a couple of months. During that time 3 new children attended the school and one new teacher joined us. Having the school in someone's home caused many difficulties, and we finally were offered a building in the country, near Needmore, rent free. We finished the year

there, and it was during that period that I finally felt we had created a good situation for children and adults.

Lleni: The first question that our experience raises is obviously, "Why did so many people drop out?" The reason most frequently given by the parents was fighting among the children. Actually I see fighting as one of the many symptoms which were taken to be the problem but weren't. I think the root of all our problems was the difficulty of truly working cooperatively - I mean working as equals, not merely working on the same project in a master/slave = boss/employee = leader/follower type relationship. Actually I'm not surprised or too ashamed of our failure. We're all neophytes when it comes to working cooperatively. Master/slave methods of working have evolved over thousands of years and that's what we're used to. What we're doing now is something new and it is going to take many of us working on it for many years before we really learn to do it easily. However, we were so far from being a cooperative that we had quite different aims and didn't admit it to one another. The grossest example was that some of the parents saw the school as a place for their kids to learn more, and learn it faster - in other words, to raise their I.Q.'s. Even those who didn't have such extremely out-of-place ideas had idiosyncratic and often unstated ideas about what we should be doing. Similarly the teachers were neither of a common accord nor ready to work together. We are going to have to learn to relate to each other on new levels, to rise above our insecurities, defenses, fears, etc., to be honest in what we say and to be able to hear and see what other people are saying. This is as difficult as it is obvious, but we are working on it. One thing we're going to do is to have some group gestalt marathons to help us.

Fighting, as I said, was our worst symptomatic problem. It was something that was bound to occur, and we were absolute ostriches not to have seen it. Furthermore, we could have solved it much sooner, I'm sure, if our efforts had been directed towards understanding the causes instead of toward casting blame, judging the kids and one another, and being defensive about ourselves and our kids. I'd like to explain my understanding of it. First, the whole thing was grossly exaggerated. Many times the younger kids were frightened by a lot of yelling and by the older kids roughhousing with each other. I don't think the younger kids should have had to suffer, but I want to make it clear that the older kids were not usually being malicious. In fact a good part of the time they were behaving in a way that should have been acceptable, and would have been, had we been in a better physical setting. The noise and

energy levels were simply too high for the size of the building. We cooped kids up in cramped quarters like the public schools, but allowed them the freedom to move around. That won't work. When animals are overcrowded they will kill each other. This type of reaction in people can be temporarily repressed by lessening their life energy. Public schools do this by forcing the kids to work on long, tedious assignments, thus keeping them in a stupor. Sometimes, as was brought to light in a recent scandal, they even make them take tranquillizers.

Besides overcrowding, age and personality differences combined in a situation which magnified the actual behavior. We had a group of fairly aggressive 8 to 10 year olds who were in the process of responding to their release from the oppression of public school. The swing of the pendulum naturally made them wilder than would be usual. At the other end we had a group of rather timid 5 year olds. Age disparity also means size and strength disparity, so that even good-natured fighting between older and younger kids often was too much for the younger ones. Of course some real fighting did take place. That shouldn't come as a shock to anyone - kids do fight. I'm not saying that fighting with the intent to hurt the other person is a kind of behavior to encourage, just that it is normal. I think a lot of "growing up" is developing an awareness of and consideration for the feelings of others. But kids aren't there yet (and neither are most adults) and it is unfair and ridiculous to expect them to be. Furthermore I think that the fighting which is rough-housing or struggling against each other is good. I believe it is extremely important for people to have physical contact with each other, and rough-housing is a healthy and enjoyable way to do it.

A similar problem to fighting was the kids' desire to destroy things. I see this as a perfectly natural and healthy expression of anger, hostility, or sometimes just energy. It's an urge which should be channeled rather than suppressed. In other words, it really won't do to destroy things which have value to anyone, but we should provide things for the kids to break and tear apart, and a place in which they can do it.

Gail: I think the biggest single reason for the problems we had in the fall was the inability of many of the adults involved to put aside our preconceived standards of what children should be doing in "school". As Lleni previously mentioned, many of the children who had attended public school balked at doing school-type work in what they thought should be a freer situation; but we felt uncomfortable

allowing them to "get away with" just playing all the time. But not wanting to force them to work, we were unsure and inconsistent about our expectations for them, and the older children found the situation too confusing to handle. They constantly tested the situation in various ways, and finally concluded that the adults were not to be trusted. In their frustration and confusion the older children resorted to physical and verbal violence and to destructiveness of property. I'd like to emphasize that this behavior was not caused by too much freedom, but by our inconsistent attitudes. After Christmas when we finally started trying to respond to each child's needs instead of worrying about adult standards for what children should be doing, good and relaxed relationships began to grow between the children and adults, and the hostilities in the children were greatly reduced. And, in fact, more learning activities began to take place.

Bobi: Well, that makes sense really. As we began to trust the children more and accept their own feelings and choices as valid, they could trust us more and stop exerting so much of their energy to defend their very personhood against adult encroachments. Many adults, even adults with good intentions, do not treat children as persons with rights and feelings which deserve respect, but more as objects subject to any sort of physical or psychological manipulation. And the kids know it - don't think they aren't aware; even very young children can tell when they are being used in ways which deny their personhood. But when their right to exist is acknowledged and respected, then they are really free to turn their attention to exploring the world around them and enjoying it. Naturally more learning will take place then. We found that they became more responsible and cooperative too - even about tasks like cleaning things up, which they had previously refused to help with at all.

#### OUR FEELINGS OF SUCCESS, AND OUR PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR

Gail: By the end of the year, when we were in the country, we really had a situation that was enjoyable for the children and the adults, as I mentioned earlier. Each day was completely unstructured, and the children were free to do what they felt like as long as they weren't hurting other people or damaging things that others cared about.

We had some arts and crafts materials, a number of library books that were changed frequently according to the interests of the children, many games and puzzles, a camera

and film, fishing equipment, some sports equipment, a guitar and some recorders, a record player and records, and some school textbooks and workbooks, mostly in the areas of reading and arithmetic. The boys spent most of their time fishing, hiking, playing games (we went through a Chess fad, a Rummy 500 fad, and a Monopoly fad), talking to each other and to the teachers, drawing, listening to books read by the teachers, and sometimes reading books themselves. The girls (who happened to be younger than the boys) spent most of their time doing art projects, listening to teachers read aloud, talking to each other and to the teachers, dictating stories for the teachers to record, playing imaginative games, and learning about nature. There was constant interaction among children and adults; the children discussed all sorts of topics with the teachers, and obviously valued their friendship and help. I felt my role to be that of a helper and encourager in the things the children wanted to do. As long as the children were happily and busily occupied on their own, I did not interfere, but I frequently would suggest, initiate or enter into an activity when it seemed that such actions would be helpful.

A lot of learning was going on about the outdoors: snakes, fish, frogs, plants; about many topics of current interest; and about people's feelings and how to deal in an honest, open way with other people. This latter learning applied as much to the adults as to the children.

And after observing the younger children, I am convinced that in a setting which has many activities and learnings for them to take advantage of at their own tempo, and with adults available to give help and encouragement, the children will find intense pleasure in learning - really nothing will be able to stop them from learning of all kinds. Children who come into an unstructured setting such as this after several years in public school will take awhile to adjust to it, but if no pressures are placed on them to conform to adult expectations about learning, I feel that they too will eventually adapt to the situation and begin to "learn" a great deal, in the academic sense of that word.

Next year, it would be nice to have more materials for the children to work with than we had last year: puppets and puppet stage; costumes and masks for plays; more craft materials and scraps of all kinds; more musical instruments, including a piano. (While we were in our second building in town, we had a piano, and almost all the children were enthusiastic about learning to play.) I would like to see us search out some interesting and intelligently-conceived materials for reading and math,



and set up some better math games and puzzles. We should also try to find many resource people to come to the school once or twice a week to give special help in a variety of activities. During the end of our in-town phase, we had people coming in to work with the children in drawing, French, German, ballet, photography, algebra and piano, and the children looked forward to working with them a great deal.

Bobi: I am really enthusiastic about starting the second year of the school next fall using what we have learned from doing it this year. For one thing, if at all possible we will have a place in the country from the beginning, and be able to keep the same place all year. I'd like to get several acres about five or ten miles from Bloomington where some of us could live and begin a community which could grow with the interests of the children and adults involved in the school. We could raise some of our own food together as a way of experiencing and increasing our natural relationship and harmony with the earth, as well as a form of scientific study. Perhaps we could even raise some animals such as goats and chickens. Maybe we could also begin a free high school if there are enough people in the area who would be interested. Anyone who might like to work with us, or might be interested in sending a child to the school next year can call one of us: Lleni Jeffrey or Alicia Merel (9-7788), Bobi Meyer (332-7477) or Gail Weaver (336-7238).

If you would like to do more reading on free schools or open classroom methods of teaching in public school, you might want to look at some of the books we have enjoyed: Teacher by Sylvia Ashton-Warner; The Lives of Children by George Dennison; How Children Fail and How Children Learn by John Holt; The Open Classroom and 36 Children by Herbert Kohl; Death at an Early Age by Jonathan Kozol; Education and Ecstasy by George Leonard; Summerhill by A.S. Neill; The Raspberry Exercises: How to Start Your Own School (and make a book) by Raspberry and Greenway; and Freedom to Learn by Carl Rogers.

BLOOMINGTON WOMEN'S LIBERATION SPRING 1971  
Basic information is important to you

The Women's Liberation House, is located at 414 N. Park. It is open to all women at all times. The phone no. is 6-8691.

Weekly Openhouse at the WL House is held each week on Thursday evening except on Thursdays of the General Meeting. Come and meet your sisters.

Phone and address list. There is no membership list as such in Women's Liberation, but we do keep an up-to-date file of names, addresses, & phone numbers of involved and/or interested women, so that we can get in touch with each other more easily. If you would like to be included on this list, call or stop by the WL house and add yourself to the file box. Additions and revisions of the current list will be duplicated and distributed at the general meetings. If you change your name, address, or phone no., please have your file card changed.

Work at the WL House such as filing articles, keeping bulletin boards and calendars up to date, telephoning, keeping library books and pamphlets straight, etc., is done by volunteers from among us. One woman should be working each evening at least to handle telephone calls. Sign up for an evening's work at the House. There is a calendar there to sign.

Dues of 50¢ per month can be paid every month or in larger amounts (2.50 per semester) or \$1 for summer, \$3 for year. The treasurer is Helen DePree (2-8644). She will take dues at the General Meetings or they can be left with your name in the Dues box at the House. Dues money is used for part of the rent and phone bills for the house, general mailings such as this one, and purchasing of literature, etc.

Monthly General Meetings, are held one Thursday of each month (usually the 3rd Thurs). Time, place, and topic of discussion (or program to be presented) are announced in the newsletter, will be publicized by the maintenance committee and may also be obtained by calling the WL House.

Newsletter, published monthly, contains articles, letters, poems, and graphics contributed by Bloomington women or found in publications of other women's groups: subscribe, send your name and address with \$1 (per semester) marked for Newsletter sub. to the House, or leave it there in the Newsletter box. Newsletters are usually compiled about two weeks before the monthly General Meetings. Articles or announcements for publication may be left in the Newsletter box also.

House Library and Literature Tables, Books, papers, pamphlets, and articles concerning women and the WL movement are available on the WL House library shelves. Any interested woman may borrow these or read them at the House. Some literature is also for sale. Literature Tables are set up on campus (at various locations and eventually will be set up in the town community as well). These tables distribute and sell WL and WL related literature. If you are interested in sitting at a literature table, call Marilyn Meuninck 9-6013

Support Groups, Small groups of women meet regularly and provide a place for women to be friends, exchange ideas, and give their sisters moral support. After a period of group consciousness-raising some groups move into direct actions; others remain primarily talk groups and/or study groups; still others develop along both lines. If you are interested in joining a support group call Karen (6-8691) or Heather 7-1879.

Action Groups, are groups which are a part of or related to WL. These groups deal with specific areas of importance in our liberation. Current groups, and names of the people you can contact for info. are:

Abortion Law Repeal Group--Helen 2-8644	Women's Studies--Pricilla 6-8691 or Clarene 7-4342
Self-Defense Classes--Ann 6-8691	
Cooperative Day Care Council--Jan 2-8216	Gay Women--Cindy 2-4915
Support Group co-ordinator--Karen 6-8691	High-School Group--Viv 9-60
Comm. to Defend Right to Live(End the War)--Allyne 2-2479	
Free Wheeling Women's Press--Susan 9-4916	Literature Collective--Marilyn 9-6013
Legal Counseling (To be formed)	
Job Discrimination (To be formed)	

If you are interested in participating in these or other new groups or wish to form a group, call the person listed above or Heather 7-1879

Problem pregnancy counseling Call Suzy (6-0903)

Contraception Information Nancy (6-0747)