

Synergy Times

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CALIFORNIA DREAMING

A Synergy Founder Recounts The School's Long Journey Of Growth

By Russ Messing

It all began with a few idealists and activists, some dreaming, some ideas, some faith, and lots and lots of hard work. For 27 years Synergy has grown in many tremendous ways, and continues to grow even now, with an expansive community of idealists and activists, a lot of dreaming, a lot of ideas, a lot of faith, and, still, lots and lots of hard work.

Twenty-seven years ago I met Katherine (then Kathy), Jill, and Arlene. I had started a bilingual elementary school in the Mission district of San Francisco called The Mission Neighborhood School. It was two years old and was

lodged in one room in a community center. Katherine was a disaffected public school teacher in Vallejo. Jill, an ex-teacher, was a street artist, selling her macramé at fairs. Arlene was a graphic artist painting super murals on and in buildings. Together, synergistically, we dared to dream of a school that would support teachers, parents, and children in new and exciting ways.

To support teachers, our vision was of a place where they would feel empowered to do the work that they lived for and were trained for. That meant eliminating the administrative layer of the educational bureaucracy and putting it in the hands of the teachers. The spirit of the times –

the early '70s—and the spirit of the place—San Francisco—suggested the model of a teacher collective in which philosophical, educational, and financial decisions would be made by consensus.

To support parents, our vision was to create an environment in which parents would be asked to take an active role in their children's education and where a



community of concerned adults – teachers and parents – would work together to teach and model ideas of cooperation, empowerment, appreciation, responsibility, and inclusion. Additionally, the vision was to create a private school for people who historically had been unable to send their children to private schools. This meant that tuition had to be low and scholarships had to be available to many.

To support children, our vision was to foster an environment where learning was valued beyond clichés, where each child's individual learning styles and needs would be attended to, where respect would flow from and to each child, where ideas of taking personal responsibility for

one's own behavior and learning were just as important as the three Rs, and where the community was just as important as the individual.

During the summer of 1971, I went to England to study the schools there, and Katherine, Jill, and Arlene built a booth to advertise the soon-to-be-birthed Synergy at an educational fair. Near the end of the summer, we met by candlelight (there being no electricity) in our first home, the "bombed out" former office of a diaper service laundry, with 12 brave parents willing to put their faith and their children in our hands.

Those first years saw the introduction of elements that endure at Synergy to this day: the agreement system, the morning meeting, no grades, the endowment fund, themes for learning, hands-on learning, and individual parent-teacher conferences twice a year.

At the end of our fourth year, Synergy was "established" and we were already outgrowing our site at 1420 Castro. The decision

was made to expand, and we established another 1st-6th grade school with three new teachers added to our staff. Space was temporarily rented from the Jamestown Community Center while we searched for a new, permanent site.

In June of 1978, we purchased 975 Grove Street, and for the next five years Synergy operated at two sites. But this arrangement eventually proved unwieldy for the teachers' and the collective's decision-making needs, and so the Castro site was sold, and the two schools merged in 1983.

This "merger" was a success, and between 1983 and 1999 the school expanded to a

(Continued on page 2)

CALIFORNIA DREAMING (Continued from page 1)

size of 100 students, added a kindergarten, renovated the building, added Farm School, streamlined the agreement system, added staff, and continued to grow in a myriad of ways.

And now, four years in the searching, planning, and implementation, we are at last living our latest dream.

The new site at 1387 Valencia is fantastic. It is light, airy, large, comfortable, and oh so inviting. We are no longer "making do." We have now added 50 students, a 7th grade, and six new teachers and aides, and have grappled with the difficult decision to give grades in the new middle school. Next year we will add 25 more students, more staff, and an 8th grade. To make this latest dream come true required the vision and hard work of literally hundreds of people. *(Ed. note: For a glimpse of some of those people, please see Judy Minton's piece on page 11.)*



What next? What new dreams, new ideas? First, we need to reach our ambitious fundraising goal of \$3,000,000 (we are almost at \$2,500,000!). Second, we need to consolidate and digest the huge expansion in students and staff and Board. And third (and this is just my idea), we need to get more public; that is, to write about what Synergy is, how it works, how it could be replicated by others.

Daring to dream, taking calculated risks, sometimes forging ahead with the pure certainty borne of innocence, naiveté, and the ability to do hard work have contributed to what and where Synergy is today. But without the people—the teachers, the parents and the children—who dared to take a stand on behalf of their beliefs, ideas, and dreams, nothing would have happened. So, on behalf of, and to, 27 years of incredible people, thank you for the then, the now, and the what will be. ☺

NEWS FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

As we enter the next millennium, Synergy is growing and expanding in every arena—we've tripled our physical space, increased our student body by 50 %, and doubled our staff. Our Board of Directors is also growing. As a teacher cooperative, teaching members of the staff have always been members of the Board. Comprised of just three teachers in 1973, Synergy's Board of Directors has evolved and expanded over the years to include parents, current teachers, and the school's three co-founders. This year the Board has experienced unprecedented growth; eight slots were filled as newly-hired teachers, and a number of parents, joined. The Board now stands at 25 members and counting; next year, membership may swell to 30 or more.

In September, when we gathered for our first meeting of the academic year around a huge expanse of table in one of our luxuriously large new classrooms, the room was filled with both awe and excitement. Having reaffirmed our commitment to the teachers' cooperative as a fundamental part of Synergy, we knew that the Board would expand dramatically with the growth of the student—and thus the teaching -- body. (Under federal law, every teacher

that joins the Board must be matched by a non-Synergy employee). But truthfully, until we all sat down together, the real power and impact of the numbers could not be imagined.

Growth at all levels brings with it assessments of long-standing structures and policies. Questioning the status quo is an important part of this process, at some times affirming where we are, and at other times leading to change. The Board's agenda for this year calls for an examination of a variety of issues relating to personnel, Board membership, and budgetary policies. With the bricks and mortar of our new school finally in place, it is very gratifying to be turning our attention to Synergy's culture, and our leadership in furthering the diversity and excellence of our school.

Despite the Board's rapid growth, it will maintain structural continuity, keeping its well-established working committees and a steering committee of four people. But clearly this is a time to strengthen our committees even further as we learn how to best access the power and effectiveness of our expanding group. With the help of co-founder Katherine Czesak's expertise in organizational development, we have begun the process of evaluating how this larger Board can best function and lead the school at this especially important time.

(Continued on page 3)



Synergy Times

CONTENTS

CALIFORNIA DREAMING: A Founder Recounts the School's Long Journey By Russ Messing	1
News from the Board of Directors..	2
News from the Diversity Committee.....	3
Kindergarten News	4
Grade 1-2 News	4
Grade 2-3 News	5
Grade 4-5 News	5
Kids' Pages	6 and 7
Middle School News.....	8
Synergy Interview: Three students query Spanish teacher Dinorah Alvarez-Bianchi.....	9
News from the Library Committee.....	10
News from the Capital Campaign Committee.....	10
Neighborhood Watch: Meet our next door neighbor.....	11
We All Made Synergy School.....	11
Alumni Notes	12

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