Harmony

A school like no other

By Elisabeth Andrews
Photography by Adam Reynolds

You can learn a lot about Harmony School just by glancing at the lockers. Where in other schools there are uniform rows of monochromatic metal, here each individual locker is painted with the unique artistic expressions of its student user. Bright colors and bold patterns jump alongside detailed renderings

of creatures and landscapes and carefully lettered phrases. If you stayed a moment, rather than witnessing the frenzied exchanges that mark passing periods in a traditional school, you would find students taking up residence in the hallway to strum guitars, enjoy slices of pizza, or cuddle with classmates. You may also notice—if you could tear your eyes from the intriguing outfits and hairstyles—that there are no locks on these lockers. Like so much else at Harmony, the very definition of this familiar object has been upended, replaced by a looser, freer concept possible only in such an atmosphere of intimacy and trust.

(left) Spencer Kobylka, tenth grade, and Brittany Luman, eighth grade, harmonize in the hallway.

(right) High school students Whitney Blake and Cassidy Molin help Early Childhood Program students climb the rhino sculpture outside.

A family affair

This harmonious ambience was the goal that Steve "Roc" Bonchek first had in 1974, when he and his wife Barbara founded the school. Having worked as a student teacher after graduating from Indiana University, Roc observed that many young people in Bloomington have few nearby relatives because their parents had relocated to study or work at IU. Coming from a large and tight-knit Cleveland clan, he felt these children were missing out on the social and emotional benefits of bonding with a number of adults and children of different ages. He decided to build a school that would function as a large family, providing what he calls "whole-person support"—not only for academics, but also personal growth.

"I thought, 'Why not take full advantage of the teaching opportunity and not fragment students' development, but instead have the school be the institution that really works with the whole person?'" he explains.

So, at 25, newly married and with a baby on the way, Roc and Barbara invited children ages 12 to 18 to attend school on their farm, drawing on the expertise of their friends and students' parents to provide instruction in core fields like math and English as well as practical subjects such as gardening and child care.

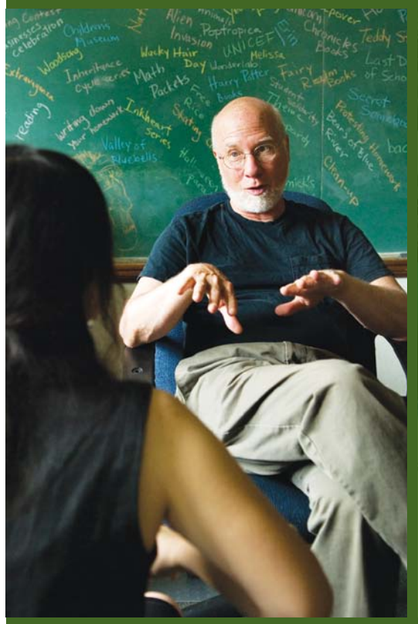
"We didn't sit down and plan this whole thing out and then wait until it was time to do it," Barbara says. "We just started and it evolved."

Thirty-five years later, Harmony fills what was once the Elm Heights Elementary School with 200 students and 22 staff members. It serves children from preschool to the completion of high school. Students come not only from Bloomington but also Bedford, Spencer, Martinsville, and beyond, traveling as much as an hour each way, each day.

Among those lucky enough to be enrolled are some children of the original group of students who participated in Roc's great experiment in the '70s. The school has a waiting list of some 300, although only 30 students or so are accepted each year.

Despite its growth, the school has maintained its commitment to hands-on, individualized learning, hallmarked by interaction among the grade levels and close relationships between students and teachers. And if you talk with the kids who now call Harmony home—and they do speak of it in such terms—most will tell you that they are astonishingly happy.

"In a way it is too good to be true, but it is true," Roc says.



(top) Middle-school students enjoy a game of soccer in front of the historic Elm Heights school building that houses Harmony.

(bottom left) School director Steve "Roc" Bonchek chats with graduating senior Seung-Mi Sun.

(bottom right) High school students Annie Dill, Avery Street, and Tosh Lewis-Young enjoy a cup of tea in the office of high school director Sallyann Murphey.

That 'hippie school' rap

While there is clearly great demand for a school like Harmony, which allows each student to work at his or her own pace rather than following strict lesson plans, there is no denying a flip side to its reputation for flexibility and emotional support.

"Before we applied to Harmony, I thought, 'It's this hippie-dippy school and no one learns anything of substance,'" admits Berta Medicus-Moore, whose son Martin graduated this year.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this perception: There are no hard-and-fast curriculum requirements, no letter grades, and no prescribed qualifications to teach at the school. Students call their teachers by their first names, take days off when they feel like it, and often go barefoot. A significant portion of the school year is spent off-site, whether it be conducting research, participating in community service missions, or enjoying extended trips that can last several days or months, depending on the student's age and interests.

At every grade level, students are encouraged to pursue their individual passions. Much of the time, they design their own homework projects, from selecting their reading material in first grade to planning a two- to four-month graduation project as high school seniors. They can also feel comfortable working at a level appropriate to their abilities. In a middle-school math class, for example, some students may be mastering advanced algebra while others are just beginning work on fractions.

"Our philosophy is 'Curb Your Dogma,'" Roc says, of the "child-centered" approach he espouses for all grade levels. "We hire teachers who are not coming in with a strict educational method. We want them to be adaptable enough to modify their approach for each particular young person; to figure out the trigger and key to getting them excited about learning."

The grade levels themselves are a far looser concept at Harmony than elsewhere: Multiple ages are grouped into classrooms, with one combined room for 3- to 6-year-olds, one room each for first and second graders, for third and fourth graders, and for fifth and sixth graders. Each of these classrooms is headed by a pair of teachers, one male and one female, whom first- and second-grade teacher Michele Mattoon describes as "the mom and dad of the classroom." In middle school and high school, students continue to have mostly mixed-age classes, with teachers assigned to a specific subject area rather than to a designated group of students.

Throughout the year, in addition to more traditional classes like science and history, K-12 students have the opportunity to take "Creation and Exploration" classes that are taught by parents and guests as well as Harmony

teachers, covering topics from dream analysis to drumming, and jewelry making to Japanese. Students choose their class schedule at the beginning of each year during an all-school retreat at McCormick's Creek State Park.

Achievement test results

If all this sounds too touchy-feely to result in any measurable learning, the numbers say otherwise. Students take nationally standardized California Achievement Tests in third, fifth, seventh, and eighth grades, and consistently perform at least as well as those in public schools. "The standardized tests are helpful because they reassure parents and grandparents that we are teaching basic skills," says Harmony Assistant Director Libby Gwynn. High School Coordinator Sallyann Murphey adds that the most recent Harmony SAT scores were actually higher, on average, than those of students in Bloomington's public high schools.

Moreover, Harmony graduates pursue higher education at many prestigious institutions, from Indiana University and Purdue University to such schools as the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, and the Rhode Island School of Design. Over the past ten years, 97 percent of Harmony students have graduated from high school, and each year between 80 and 90 percent of them enroll in four-year colleges, with most others starting or remaining at two-year institutions. Graduates have gone on to become doctors and mathematicians, librarians and teachers, entrepreneurs and Secret Service agents.

"I wish that people knew how well our students do in the 'real world,'" says Gwynn. "Harmony really does prepare them because they come out of here with a confidence and a self-knowledge and an ability to pursue things they are interested in and [to] find what they need."

Prepping for life on the outside

The students at Harmony argue that they are, in fact, better prepared for adulthood than their traditionally schooled counterparts, because of the school's focus on life skills.

"Here they teach you more what you need to know as an adult, as opposed to what you need to know to pass a test," says eighth-grader Adam Berndt. Harmony's curriculum includes coursework on problem solving, forming new habits, and navigating social dynamics. Students also learn about participating in a democracy, both through formal classes and through the structure of school governance, which relies on student votes to determine any number of outcomes from where to purchase pizza to whether a senior receives his or her diploma (really!). They may also gain practical experience through projects on the school grounds: The bike shed, greenhouse, and the rhino sculpture outside were all student-initiated additions.

Even in more traditional arenas of education, like high school English class, Harmony teachers view their role less as familiarizing students with a particular canon than as enabling them to become independent.

"I'm a language-arts teacher trying to teach kids how to manipulate their words so they can get what they want," explains high school teacher Tom Hastings.

The final project that each senior undertakes prior to graduation is intended as the ultimate preparation for life outside of school, Hastings says. He describes this two- to four-month project, which can take a student anywhere on the globe to pursue a topic of interest, as an experimental field experience to help determine whether to pursue a particular vocation.

"We are providing students with the opportunity to explore something—a passion—before getting sucked into training for it for four years," he says.

Many seniors are able to affirm their chosen career path, like Monica Hofstadter, who interned with fashion designer James Coviello in New York; and Martin Medicus, who traveled to Trinidad, Costa Rica, Kenya, and Peru to study conservation. Then there was the would-be teacher who, according to Hastings, learned through her project that she hated spending all day with children and was able to rethink her future before committing to a costly course of study.

Students say they learn another invaluable lesson at Harmony: how to get along with all types of different people.

Junior Nate Holland, who transferred to Harmony in tenth grade, says that at his old school, "Everyone was stereotyping and labeling each other." Students were lumped into categories like "rednecks," "skaters," and "teacher's pets," he says, and the groups rarely interacted socially. At Harmony, such epithets "don't define people at all," he claims. Nate should know—his nickname at Harmony is "H and F" for his hobbies, hunting and fishing, yet "I'm still friends with vegetarians who are against hunting," he says.

Eighth-grader Jordan Bradley, who transferred in seventh grade, agrees. "In public school you have to have some sort of status that defines who you are. Harmony is totally different. You know everybody. There is less judgment."

Diversity in a peaceful community

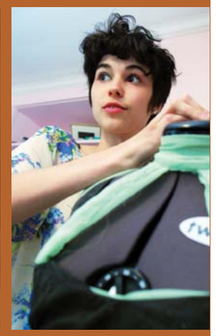
This capacity to bring together different types of students was one of Roc's primary goals in establishing the school. He chose the name "Harmony" to capture the idea of disparate elements forming a congruous whole.

High school history class takes place in a casual, coffeehouse-type setting.

Eighth-grader Adam Berndt works on a math project under Albert Einstein's watchful eye.

Ethan Gerstman, third grade, plants a seedling in the school's gardens.

Early Childhood Program student Maya Szakaly peers around her classroom's terrarium.



Senior Monica Hofstadter works on a dress for her graduation project on fashion design.

"We didn't want to be a school for gifted kids or troubled kids or boys or girls," he says. "We wanted to demonstrate that you could bring kids together from as many different backgrounds as possible in a peaceful community."

Accordingly, diversity is one of the primary factors driving admissions decisions. After accommodating staff children, who get first priority, the school administration aims to bring in an equal number of boys and girls and to enroll children of as many different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, academic abilities, and interests and skill sets as possible.

Nonetheless, there are two common, and seemingly contradictory, trends among the reasons that students come to Harmony.

"Some students come here because, for whatever reason, they feel they are being stifled in more traditional schools," Gwynn says. "Then there are kids on the other end who are falling through the cracks because they need more individual help or encouragement."

Harmony's individualized approach, Adam Berndt explains, offers a solution to both problems.

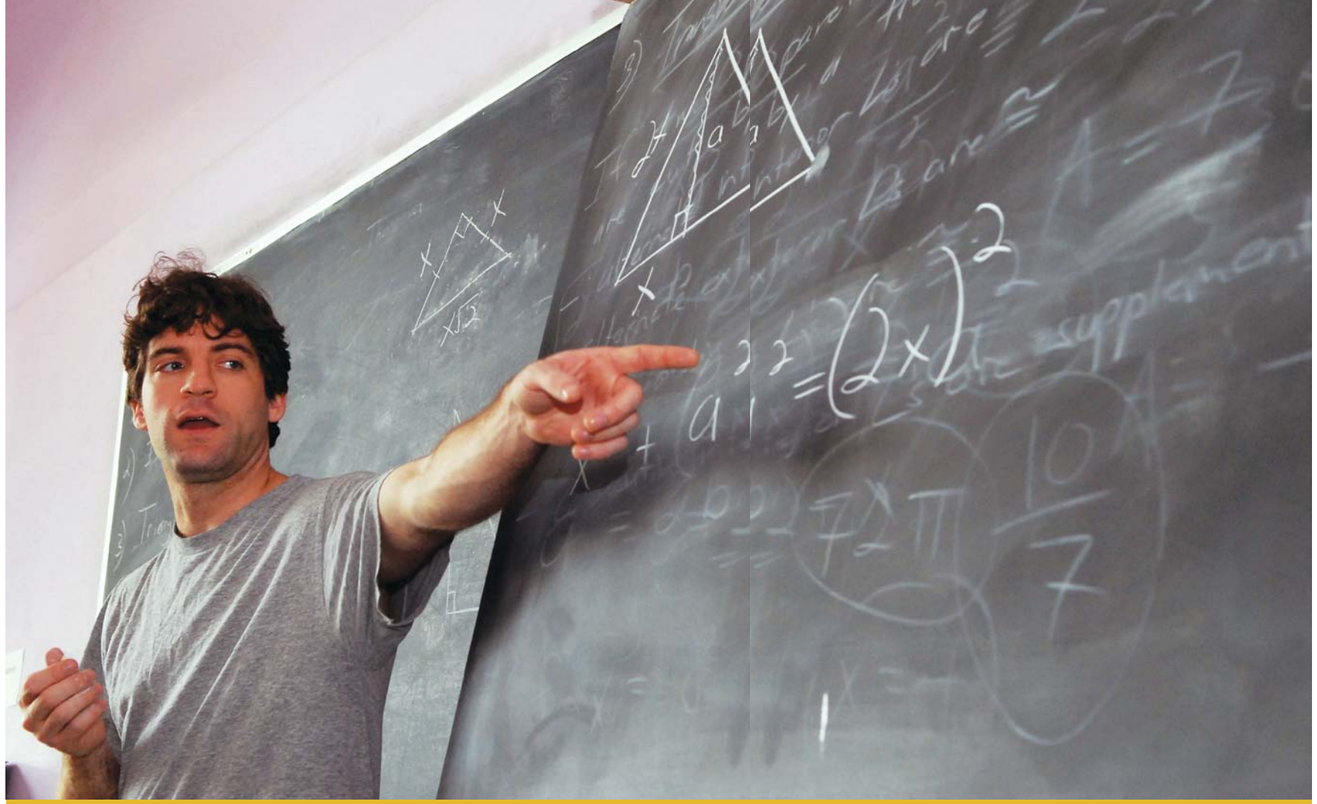
"At Harmony, each student has their individual goals. A textbook will not hold a student back or leave a student behind," he says.

Even a cursory survey of students reveals the spectrum of social, academic, and personal motivators for transferring to Harmony—from 2008 graduate Evan Voss, who "was getting bullied a lot" at his previous school, to eighth-grader Jordan Bradley, who says she "wasn't being challenged enough academically." Senior Martin Medicus had struggled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but was able, with support from his teachers, to discontinue medication after coming to Harmony for middle school.

The most unusual feature of the Harmony admissions system is the process by which new high school students are chosen. With minimal assistance from the staff, elected representatives from the incumbent high-schoolers interview and select their new classmates.

Voss, who now attends IU and served on the student selection committee for three years, says each year the students interviewed between 10 and 30 people to find "perfect fits" for five or six open slots. "I knew what to look for," he says. "People who are not open to other people are not going to do well at Harmony. We were also ruling out people who would pin the blame on everyone but themselves. As an interviewer I would rather see people who were honest about being slackers but were willing to admit that."

The one factor that would categorically exclude a family at any grade level, Roc says, is an unwillingness to share personal information with the school.



(top) Even at Harmony, the chalkboard still comes in handy for high school math teacher Jon Cracraft.

(bottom left) Middle-school math teacher Kelli Debikey gives seventh-grader Eli Skooglund some one-on-one attention.

(bottom right) Early Childhood Program students enjoy outdoor story time with their teacher Martha Werbiansky.

"I say to the parents that the one thing I want to make sure they understand is that if they are a very private family they really won't be comfortable here," he says. "We have a philosophy that every student should be known, and known well, and no one should be anonymous. I can't say I am interested in the student's whole development and then say I'm not interested in what happens to them in the evenings, weekends, and the summertime. If parents don't want a whole school to know a lot about their family, this is not the place for them."

Jordan Bradley explains the rationale for this principle from a student perspective: "There was someone here for a year that was very quiet and very personal. [The family] didn't share and open up, and when that happens here you feel like they are hostile. Really, we felt like they weren't accepting us."

No self-consciousness among teachers

The commitment to knowing students inside school and out demands a great deal from Harmony's teachers, who, Murphey says, "are available to our students and our families seven days a week."

"It takes a special kind of dedication to work here," she says. "I was on the phone all weekend dealing with a student in crisis and her dad, and it took hours. But that's what we do."

Hastings, the high school language arts teacher, admits these responsibilities are time-consuming, but says it's only natural for his job to flow into his personal life. "If you're an artist, why should there be any separation between your art and everything else you do? Why should teaching be any different?" he asks.

Middle-school math teacher Kelli Debikey agrees that because the personal interest flows both ways—students also get to know their teachers on an intimate level—there is no need to draw boundaries between her life at school and her home life.

"I talk to other people who went into education, and they tend not to live in the district where they teach, because they feel self-conscious about being seen if they go out to have a beer with friends," says Debikey. "But I am myself here as I am outside of school. I don't put on a false persona. I know my families and my students won't judge me for being me."

High school math teacher Jon Cracraft says what drew him to Harmony was this ability to become more deeply involved with his students. "Teaching just the subject matter is not the most rewarding part of the job. Working with students on issues of procrastination and self-control and self-esteem are even more important," he says.

Harmony also offers a unique return on the emotional investment of its teachers, particularly those who work with the younger grades. Early Childhood Program teacher Tim Byers explains that continuing to share the building with his former toddlers is tremendously rewarding. "It's a luxury that few teachers have, to see them go on and grow up," he says.

Reaching out to the community

The students and staff do form, according to eighth-grader Jordan, the "big, mobster family" Roc had envisioned, but stretching beyond Harmony's walls to reach the greater Bloomington community is an equally important goal for the school.

To this end, Rhino's Youth Media Center and All-Ages Club—a collaboration between Harmony, Bloomington's Parks and Recreation Department, and United Way of Monroe County—provides a means of serving greater numbers of young people than can be accommodated at the school. Through free classes in print and broadcast journalism, art, and video production, as well as all-ages music shows, Rhino's reaches some 1,200 young people each month.

"I've always felt it was a way to involve more kids in a Harmony-type experience," Roc says. "In some ways, Rhino's has had a bigger influence than the school itself. Almost any young person you ask in Bloomington has tried out something at Rhino's."

Barbara Bonchek, as Harmony's building coordinator, facilitates additional connections with the community by renting out space to groups that have included everything from start-up churches to trapeze artists. The Bloomington Winter Farmers' Market takes place in Harmony's gymnasium, and after-school dance classes can often be found in the classrooms. Charging a sliding scale that gives a break to fledgling ventures is one way for Harmony to support the local community, she says.

"Right now we are probably the cheapest option for renting space in Bloomington," she says. "There are many groups that flat-out couldn't afford to do what they are doing if they had to pay for other facilities."

Harmony students and staff also participate in a number of community service projects, such as writing public service announcements, and growing produce in their gardens for the Mother Hubbard's Cupboard food pantry. The school is also heavily involved with IU's School of Education, running a research institute there and welcoming a large number of student teachers. Harmony's playground, meanwhile, is open to the public.

In addition, the school extends its influence beyond the city through outreach efforts that include serving as the headquarters for the National School Reform Faculty, forming the regional center for the Coalition of Essential Schools, and operating an AmeriCorps program in Indianapolis.

Community involvement is hardly one-sided, however. The school couldn't run without financial assistance from a number of Bloomington corporations, foundations, and individuals. More than 80 percent of Harmony students are on some kind of scholarship, with about 60 percent of them coming from families that would qualify for free lunches in the public school system. Only about 40 percent of the school's finances come from tuition; the rest is from fundraising, endowments, and grants.

In effect, the school has to operate on a tight budget. One essential element in making ends meet is parental involvement, to the tune of 45 hours per year per household. How they fulfill this obligation "is negotiable, like almost everything else here," explains Roc. "They might do anything from offering classes in the afternoon to helping with maintenance around the building or making phone calls or helping in the office with grant writing."

Fortunately, what's good for the school is also good for the students when it comes to parents' participation. Medicus-Moore, who has worked with Head Start programs, says that "Statistically, the more involved a parent is in the child's education, the more successful the child is."

The happiness factor

Watching Harmony's students stream in and out of classrooms to chat with their teachers, pick bluebells, play with Legos, make pinhole cameras, study geometry, or learn about their country's history, it's clear that if the measure of success is, as Roc believes, a child's happiness, then Harmony has clearly struck the right chord.

"There's just this 'Ahhhhh' feeling," sighs eighth-grader Jack Dill, smiling contentedly at his "family" of friends.

(left to right) Second-grader Willow Aldrich and first-graders Isabel Roberts and Aliya Childers scrub down their classroom during the daily school-wide cleanup period.