We were refugees -- exiles, artists, lost souls, drifters, geniuses, each cast away or run away from a school system that had been manufactured for other things and other kinds of people. The New Program offered new hope for a more human-centered path to learning, one that took strength in our uniqueness. And yet the program's very nature provoked opposition. Its unkempt respect for differences and its wide-open embrace of unconventional learning styles stirred deep fears. It is hard to remember how bitterly the school's enemies hated alternative education. They had buried Markles Flats and were putting East Hill School out to pasture when proposals for the New Junior High Program emerged. It was a moment that called for deft diplomacy -- not exactly leadership in the old-fashioned hierarchical way of kings, generals, or prophets, but rather the encouragement and guidance of a skilled listener who valued a rich ecology of voices.

Enter Dr. Dave. Since that moment there has been a deep spirit in the principal's office. Or more accurately, out of the office. As the school took shape at the NJHP on Plain Street, became the Alternative Community School under the roof of Ithaca High, and then found its own home on West Hill, Dr. Dave has been an essential presence. From the classroom to the campfire, he has helped build participatory community by fully participating in that community. In modeling science not only as an exacting and exciting discipline but also as a holistic and spiritual quest for meaning, in convening community-wide discussions of curriculum and process in which all participants counted, in reconciling the needs of our school with the rules and resources of the school district and state boards, and in conversing about the lessons learned at our school with others who share his passion for engaged, individualized, and open education, he has shown us the individual transcendence that is possible in a gathering of learners. Joyful, reflective, and visionary, Dr. Dave has succeeded in getting us to dig more deeply into our own hearts and minds than any of us thought possible.

Above all, Dr. Dave has shown us the virtue of respecting a plurality of visions. Even the school's harshest critics have learned how carefully Dr. Dave listens to their views, and the rest of us have thrived on the diversity of ideas and practices that he has helped incorporate into the process of teaching and learning. The vignettes and snapshots in this album are part of that celebration of the dignity of individual stories and fruitfulness of shared conversations. We hope they are a fitting tribute to the excitement and wisdom that Dr. Dave has given us these last thirty years.
A proposal for “The Muka School”, a substitute for NJHP that was never implemented.
In the Beginning . . . 1974 . . .

Now, if I was like Dr. Dave, I’d be able to go to my files and look up my tiny notebook pages with my even tinier handwritten notes, and I’d be able to report on exactly what happened in 1974 when Dr. Dave was hired as the first principal of what was subsequently called the New Junior High Program (much later, ACS). If I was more like Dr. Dave, I would have started writing this last January, and checked with other sources to make sure everything I’m about to write is true. But, alas, I’m not enough like Dr. Dave, so I have no notes and have checked with no sources. Thus, this is purely from 30 years’ memory and of doubtful accuracy. It is not a realist’s portrait, but an impressionist’s canvas. Here’s how I recall it.

I guess it was spring of 1974, and I must have been 24. Of course, 24 years olds were older back then. I had been the math teacher at Markles Flats, the radical experiment in alternative education that had preceded NJHP/ACS. Started by some idealists at Cornell, and progressive members of the community, Markles had broken all the rules, and had angered the more conservative members of the community, folks who at the time we thought were on the far right, but from the vantage point of the Bush-era, now seem like moderates. But they were able to close Markles on the technicality that it was never a licensed school. Oops! Jon Daitch, the popular principal of Markles, and all the teachers except me (and later Ivl) were gone.

While working at Moosewood in its nascent period, I was part of a group of people in the community, who put together a proposal for a new school, which would actually be a “program” of one of the established schools (I can’t recall which one – was it Dewitt?), and would be an alternative, but would follow the basic rules. For example, the teachers would actually be certified! Somehow, the school board approved the new program and a group of us began the process of creating a new school program. The first and most important task was hiring a principal.

Now think of how difficult it would be to be principal of this new program. You would have to be credentialed and substantial enough to be acceptable to the School Board and educational establishment; and you would have to be “alternative” enough to be able to win the confidence of the idealistic, progressive, out-on-the-fringe element that had so much at stake with this new experiment.

We decided to do a national search. We called an alternative school newsletter out in the Midwest (was it Ohio?). A man answered the phone and we dictated an ad describing this unique person we were looking for. The man had a very comforting, folksy, yet intelligent voice. He listened carefully to our ad. Then he said he might be interested in the job. “Great, what’s your name?” The nice man said “I’m Dave Lehman”. At least it went something like that. We probably asked for a resume; and saw that he was a PhD, certified science teacher and experienced
administrator who had already run a school somewhere out west (was it Texas?). He sounded pretty cool too. Back then it was cool to say “cool”.

Soon after that, Dr. Dave came to Ithaca with Judy to check it out and for us to check him out. We sure liked what we saw. He had all the credentials we needed. He was smart and knowledgeable, yet warm and wise. And he seemed hip enough to pass muster. I guess he liked Ithaca and us too.

Dr. Dave got the job. I was fortunate to be hired as the first “math, et cetera” teacher. In the beginning, we were all “et cetera” teachers. Then, Dave took out his tiny little notebook and in his tiny little handwriting we began to create a school. It was a simple enough task. All we had to do was to develop a warm, exciting, creative, innovative, progressive, intimate community of learners and teachers, where each child’s needs were met, everyone was accountable for his/her behavior, and we satisfied all the state guidelines. Nothing to it! Meanwhile, the same folks who had closed Markles would be looking over our shoulders trying to shut the new program down too. Just to enhance the challenge, the administration kicked us around town a bit – we were in the old Markles building, over in one of the junior high schools, then up in a wing of the high school, before settling in the current location.

But with Dave’s strength, talent and calm, but certain leadership the new school was successful. After a few years of NJHP, we expanded to form the Alternative Community High School; then the two became ACS. At least, that’s how I remember it.

Dave was as adept in the science classroom as in the principal’s office; as comfortable dealing with the bureaucracy as playing his guitar and singing around the campfire. He cared about every kid, every parent, and every teacher. We met and talked endlessly. We tried things out and made whatever adjustments were necessary. And Dr. Dave succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, as now ACS is a model public alternative school that others try to emulate.

As for me, after 5 years, hundreds of meetings, thousands of decisions, and a lifetime of memories, I was gone – to law school in NYC. Now I live in Brooklyn with my family and have a significant job with a very powerful labor union and am certainly proud of what I do. But I’m equally proud of working with Dave and being part of such a wonderful place as ACS. I don’t pretend to be as extraordinary as Dave, but a bit of him rubbed off on me and has helped me through the years to remain an innovative, idealistic and progressive person, while navigating the rules and demands of the establishment. No one did that better than Dave Lehman.

- Jeff Stein, June 2004
The New Junior High Program is a humanistic approach through alternative education. Basic skills are presented to the student by creative methods and tailored to individual needs.

Students have a major input in choosing a course of study and proceed at their own pace. The grading system is non-competitive; the students are evaluated on their progress toward their educational goals. One main objective of this program is to develop students who are socially and intellectually self-reliant and who have experience with making responsible choices.

This booklet is designed to familiarize the reader with the objectives of the program and the manner in which they are implemented.
New Program students frequently work in tutorials as well as alone and in groups. In this math classroom are, from left to right: Chris Owens, parent tutor Marilyn Williams, student teacher Lynn Moskowitz, Jim Barry, Terry Owens, Scott McPherson, math teacher Jeff Stein, Ted Woodard, and Heather Burke. Photos by George Clay.
Inside the New Program Junior High

For Them, ‘Small’ School Makes the Difference

By SUE BERNSTEIN

"We consider it our school more and more every day," said New Program Junior High School student Gregor Broun. His statement is just one of several cautious, modest claims to success from pupils and teachers at the New Program as the year comes to a close.

Although the informal atmosphere in the school reminds the visitor of a youthful clubhouse, the "club" or sense of community is just emerging.

There is a lot of diversity among the students, according to Principal David Lehnman. Consequently there hasn't been "as much cohesiveness" in the student body as he had hoped for, he said.

Lehnman is nevertheless optimistic: A recent camping trip and a drama presentation by New Program students have given them a sudden spurt of pride and school identity, he said.

"You have people who come here for varied reasons," continued Lehnman. "Some come with a progressive educational philosophy and others come who have been in real difficulty. We have others who basically come from a small school and are looking for that kind of closeness."

All in all, however, Lehnman said students "seem to find their own place and yet work together."  

And students seem to like the school most for its intimacy. As Marty Reddy put it, "Everybody knows everybody else. All the faculty are really nice. They care."

The "caring" that students apparently feel turns out to be a 40-hour-a-day job for teachers, not unlike that of a camp counselor, who must be something of a friend as well as a teacher. In fact, each teacher at the New Program Junior High serves as a counselor to a number of pupils.

"The faculty has worked so hard since last fall," said teacher Colista Smith. "They're trying hard to make things work out."

Staffers seem to agree with the students that the smaller school has made a "difference" to many students who would founder in the larger waters of Ithaca's two junior high schools, Boynton and DeWitt.

"I've had a lot of kids here that I've had elsewhere," said Ms. Smith. "There's been a marvelous change for the better."

Lehnman said, "We've seen one young, 14-year-old student who was totally terrified of school and now he looks for months who is a happy joystick person here. There are others who are fine students but who have felt frustrated or stifled, and given the opportunities here have taken off."

The New Program Junior High offers five-week courses. Mandated subjects may continue through several five-week "cycles" with variations suggested by students themselves. For example, some students elected during the year to study edible wild foods as part of their science courses.

The five-week cycle also provides a chance for "mini-courses." One course on Native American studies was very successful, according to Lehnman.

Students also do projects on their own or in groups - at school or even outside the community. One student went to the Cornell University barns to work with pigs. Another has worked with a silversmith in Trumansburg one afternoon a week.

Student Shawn Nelson commented that with the alternate school program, "Life is just as complicated, but you get more attention."

Teacher Linda Winters said she is very proud of the school's diverse curriculum and flexibility.

"We're in a unique situation as an alternate school. We've been an alternate for everything - for the enriched student, for the student who needs tutorial work, for discipline problems. We've tried very hard to meet all those alternatives," she said.

While students have had a crack at pre-vocational activities such as printing, photography, and woodshop work, they get some drilling in the language arts and math departments too.

The communication arts program has three types of activities: reading groups, groups which drill two times a week on spelling and vocabulary, and a writing skills group which meets three times the community. One student went to the Cornell University barns to work with pigs. Another has worked with a silversmith in Trumansburg one afternoon a week.

Mathematics is taught at three different levels of difficulty which includes the regents' course - ninth grade algebra. According to Lehnman, two students have even been studying second-year algebra.

The emphasis is on the student going at his own pace, said the principal. In math, for example, "the student works essentially independently, although he may meet with teachers three or four times a week. He has his own folder with tests and exercise sheets. When ready, he'll take a mini-quiz.

Lehnman added, however, that there are "clear sequential requirements," so that students cannot simply gerrymander their education as they please.

How does a school offer such variety? There is a core teaching staff of eight people. The school also gets help from student teachers, parent aids, and staff from the Greater Ithaca Activities Center where students go for physical education and specialty courses. The New Program is formally an adjunct of Boynton Junior High and may take advantage of some of that school's resources.

The staffing is designed to maximize the use of teacher talents. Some do administrative work as well.

"Several of us have degrees in several areas," said Ms. Winters, "and we're able to pinch hit just about anywhere."
One of the New Program's unique features is the all-school meeting which takes place at noon every Monday. Principal Lehman presents an agenda to students and staff, then works his way through the business at hand, fielding suggestions, comments and cracks that pour out from the students. At one recent meeting, last-minute decisions were made about the upcoming camping trip and students got a demonstration on how to use their snake bite kits. Next came a report from Ms. Winters on the ski's:

"One of the reasons we were doing this as you recall was recruiting. Diwitt and Boynton have already done most of their PR work. Most of them (the elementary school children) didn't even know we existed."

"We don't exist," quipped one student.

Lehman appeared not to hear some of the more sarcastic remarks that emerged from the group until an obscenity slipped out:

"We don't need that," he said, looking hard at one pupil.

The level of hubbub dropped.

Some things we wind up tolerating a little more than the conventional schools," said Lehman, in speaking of school discipline. "There's a certain amount of acting out (by students) that we can see through and not get so personally offended about."

But the same general rules which apply to the large junior highs apply at the new school, according to the principal.

He stated that one factor which is crucial to the school's success with students is 'teaching responsibility,' but "not in a vacuum."

Unless students actually take on real responsibilities with the risk of 'blowing it,' said Lehman, they'll never feel like irreplaceable members of their school and community.

How does the responsibility system work in practice?

"It's up and down," said Lehman. "Anybody who wants to work with junior high-age kids must face an uneven experience. They're emotionally and physically going through a lot of changes. Some have risen to the occasion and others suddenly you because they fall through."

District Superintendent of Instruction Leonard Buyse, the central administrator who oversees the school, is pleased with the year's outcome:

"It has certainly measured up to my expectations," he said.

"When you walk in," continued Buyse, "you see a fairly worn out building — no fancy science lab — but the kids love it. One parent told me she couldn't keep her son home when he was sick. That's the absolute truth.

He praised the staff, especially Lehman.

Buyse reminisced briefly about the school's forerunner, the controversial Marklin Flats Alternate Junior High and concluded that the New Program is a definite contrast.

"I think one of the best signs of progress there this year is a lack of public criticism. The contrast of quiet is unbelievable,” said Lehman.

Lehman said that staffers "feel the pressure of being under the gun or being closely watched."

But he said the supervision has been friendly and supportive.

It can still be uncomfortable to be part of a new alternate school, however.

"One thing we find hard is people wanting to measure us by more conventional standards: with grades and test scores," said the principal.

"Philosophically that's antithetical to what we're about. We just try to live with it."

Students at the new school are offered "credit" for their work without letter grades. Ninth graders, however, are to receive year-end letter grades for transfer into high school records.

Asked whether the grades will be sent home first with the students, Lehman said exact procedures are still being negotiated in the central administration.

What surprises did Lehman and staffers encounter this year?

They had hoped to have more parent participation, according to the principal. Parents have definitely been enthusiastic, he said, but they concluded they must be tired and ready for a break by the time their young children reach junior high school age.

"There have been people who were so low in the remedial area that we didn't have the staff to deal with that. Also I think we have struggled through the year with a few people who've had some pretty difficult emotional problems, and we haven't been all that productive. We've helped them as best we can. But I don't see the other two junior highs being able to respond particularly well, either."

Lehman does not want to close the door to any student if he can help it, however.
Students Ward Puryear and Lloyd Benson work in the print shop.
I was in 6th grade and one of two students on the committee to help create the NJHP (which became ACS). Ritchie Sterns was the other student. We helped come up with the school mission and the committee hired the teachers to start the school. The first person to be hired was the principle - Dave Lehman. What a great choice! He has been there from the beginning and guided the vision of the school with wisdom and humor. I remember that in my graduating class, everyone got an award - including the kid who was commended for fixing all the things he broke. Dave helped bring him around from being an angry juvenile delinquent to a participating member of the school. I remember Dave was really into recycling - way before it was cool. He wanted us to try and recycle our Petri dishes after we grew mold from things around the school in them. We dutifully put them in a pressure cooker to sterilize them - and learned another science lesson:

\[ \text{Plastic melts and forms interesting shapes in a pressure cooker.} \]

I think the main thing that alternative schools taught me is that there is always a way to wire around almost every problem - and Dave was definitely part of teaching all of us that lesson. May the words of the Indian prayers guide you, Dave.

-Leela Fireside