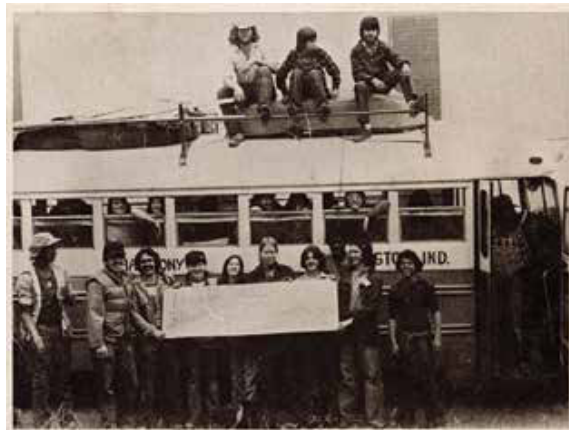
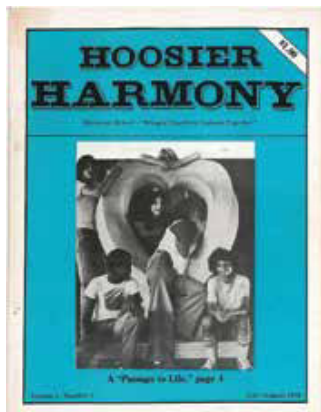


Harmony School Marks 50 Years Of Independent Education

by Susan M. Brackney

Tumultuous times have a way of spawning real change—change that at least in some cases has staying power. Just ask Harmony School Executive Director Steve “Roc” Bonchek. “There were a lot of [independent] schools started in the late ’60s and early ’70s throughout the country ... in relationship to the Civil Rights Movement and Watergate and the Vietnam War,” he says. “But you could count on one or two hands the number of those schools that still exist today.”

Now celebrating its 50th anniversary, Bloomington’s Harmony School happens to be one of them. What started with just four students in an old house on Grant Street has since served thousands of kids from preschool to high school at what would become Harmony’s permanent location at 909 E. 2nd St. The historic building once housed the Elm Heights School and is Indiana’s oldest, still-operational school site. (In 1985, Harmony’s 90 students and 10 teachers paid 10 cents each to purchase the place for \$10 from the Monroe County Community School Corporation.) ▶



(above left) The first issue of the student-run *Hoosier Harmony* bi-monthly general interest magazine was published in 1978; (left) Harmony students paint lockers at the beginning of the 2024 school year. *Courtesy photos*

(top) The tradition of the first three days of the school year beginning at McCormick’s Creek State Park started in 1980 with overnight stays and many kids bringing their bikes; (above) on a 1977 Harmony School flood relief trip, students hold a “Thank You” banner from the Williamson, West Virginia, community.



Harmony’s annual May Day Celebration in 2025 with Bloomington’s Morris Dancers.



In 1992, Harmony youth started the Rhino’s All Ages Music Club and Youth Center.



(l-r) Harmony Director Steve Bonchek with the youngest current Harmony student, Ozzie, and the oldest, Shefar Rafuil. Photo by Kathryn Coers Rossman

Harmony graduates 10 to 12 high schoolers annually. “We have a graduate who’s a first violinist for the Berlin Orchestra,” Bonchek says. “Another is a young woman who’s a principal of a school in the Himalayas.” Other Harmony alumni now work in public radio, film, fashion, and even the Secret Service.

“All [Harmony attendees] are, in my opinion, sort of famous for taking a chance on a different kind of school,” Bonchek says. He and his wife, Barbara, began their experimental school with an emphasis on social justice issues and a democratic school environment. There are no traditional letter grades, students and teachers are on a first-name basis, and seniors must complete in-depth, exploratory projects. (One student’s endeavor involved training for and attempting a swim across the English Channel. Thwarted by inclement weather, he regrouped and swam the same distance—this time across Lake Monroe—instead.)

Much of the nonprofit’s funding comes from corporate and individual donations, so Harmony is able to assist most students with tuition. “People come here regardless of their socioeconomic background,” Bonchek says. “Eighty percent of our kids are on scholarship, so nobody should hesitate to apply.”

Special 50th anniversary events will be held from June 20–22. See harmonyschool.org for details. ✱



NEXT ISSUE

As we begin our 20th year publishing *Bloom Magazine*, we wish to thank all the local businesses who have advertised with us since our inaugural issue. With your support, we survived the great recession and a devastating pandemic, and never missed an issue. At a gala on September 19, we will show our appreciation.

Personally, it is the honor of my life to live in this wonderful community and be able to tell its many stories.

Thank you.

