

Harmony School celebrates milestone

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In more ways than one, Harmony School seems like a place untethered from time.

It's not just the historic, 1920s era brick school building. Harmony School has no fence, no padlocks on its lockers. At lunchtime, middle and high schoolers freely leave campus and walk to restaurants on Kirkwood Avenue. Near the end of their time at



Painted lockers at Harmony School on Sept. 10 . RICH JANZARUK/HERALD-TIMES

Harmony, high school seniors take off classes for three months to work at their own pace on a final graduation project.

For the 50 years it's operated, Harmony has been a school that goes against the grain of traditional educational conventions, emphasizing respect and autonomy in the studentteacher relationship and subverting traditional notions of hierarchies from an early age.

"This is a place where teachers and principals treat students like people, not like lesser people," said Sierra Walden, a recent Harmony graduate who's been at the school since kindergarten.

In many ways, it's a sort of antithesis to the discipline-heavy, "whipping them into shape" model of a military or boarding academy. Students call teachers and administrators by their first names, are expected to show up to classes without bells or attendance records, and aside from subjects like math, forgo tests and quizzes for presentations and projectbased learning.

It's a model that places a great deal of faith in the students' ability to behave themselves and take responsibility for their own academic and social development. And at 50 years of operation, founder and principal Steve "Roc" Bonchek says it's hard to argue the model doesn't work.

"I think there's luck involved, obviously," Bonchek said. "But we believed you could have a school where kids are successful academically, socially and emotionally, and that you could do those things at the same time."

From operating out of a bedroom to taking over the historic Elm Heights Elementary School

Harmony began in 1975, when founder Bonchek was just 25 years old. Inspired by his time in Indiana University's new Individualized Major Program and the "free school movement" that was cropping up countercultural independent schools across the country at the time, Bonchek wanted to build a school that encouraged teenagers to become active participants in society through critical thinking and robust debate.

"The school came around during an era of a lot of misleading information during the Vietnam War, and a lot of misleading information around Watergate," Bonchek said. "We were really trying to create an environment where kids could gain confidence in a democracy, or at least a mini-democracy."

Harmony first opened in a historic building on Grant Street — now part of the Grant Street Inn — that allowed the school to operate rent-free in exchange for help with refurbishing. It served middle and high schoolers upon opening, and from the beginning, it stood out. Bonchek said teenagers hanging out on Kirkwood noticed the school's unconventional structure; students called teachers by their first names, assisted with cleaning duties and routinely went on unconventional field trips.

Within its first two years, Harmony achieved two major milestones. First, in 1976, a Harmony senior was admitted to Indiana University, lending credibility to a school that, at the time, had no formal accreditation. Then, in 1977, Harmony received a grant from the state to hire five recently unemployed elementary school teachers, expanding Harmony's educational offerings to kindergarten through high school.

"All of a sudden, we had strong commitments to entire families," Bonchek said.

Over the next 10 years, Harmony grew to about 90 students, with a strong contingent of townie activists and IU professors among the first parents to take the gamble on the new school.

“Bloomington, right from the beginning, was really supportive of Harmony,” Bonchek said.

An opportunity to better fit the school’s growing student population came in 1985, when the Monroe County Community School Corp. offered Harmony the opportunity to buy the former Elm Heights Elementary School building — a neighborhood school built in the 1920s that the corporation vacated years before — for just \$10.

The new location served as a sort of walking billboard for the school, piquing the interest of residents in the neighborhood and allowing a more central pickup location for parents who worked on IU’s campus. And, in a fitting nod to Harmony’s democratic spirit, some 100 students and parents involved in the school each contributed a dime toward the \$10 price tag, placing a stake in the building that would serve Harmony for decades to come.

Bonchek: Commitment to affordability, teacher-student relationships helped Harmony survive for 50 years

Harmony may have emerged out of an era where hundreds of schools like it were opening across the U.S., but a majority of them folded in the late 1970s and early 1980s amidst budgetary issues and cultural shifts toward conservatism.

Bonchek credits Harmony’s survival to its central location, a strong sense of community support from Bloomington, and the school’s commitment to serving families of all economic backgrounds. Bonchek says Harmony has a proud history of providing robust financial aid to Harmony families. Today, he says almost 90% of Harmony students are on some form of scholarship and families can enroll their children for as little as \$50 a month based on their income.

“From the beginning, we made a commitment to be accessible to people regardless of what they could pay,” Bonchek said.

For as long as they’ve existed, schools like Harmony have been under fire for their democratic, alternative method, which critics argue makes it easier for children to fall behind.

Martin Medicus, Harmony’s high school math teacher and a Spencer native who attended Harmony in the early 2000s, admits that Harmony’s education approach might not work for everyone.

“There are some students who really struggle academically and need a lot of structure, and that can be a real learning curve both for the students and the teachers,” Medicus said.

Still, Medicus said Harmony students have a tendency to sort themselves out in taking responsibility for their academics, a model he argues made Harmony an effective college preparatory school long before such schools became common. Bonchek said over 90% of Harmony seniors get into their top college choice.

‘It’s so human’

As Harmony celebrates its 50th anniversary, Bonchek, now 75, is grappling with how to ensure its success for the next 50 years. Though he has no plans of retiring soon, Bonchek said he wants to start having discussions early about who will take his job when the time comes.

“Succession is always a scary thing to talk about,” Bonchek said. “But I have confidence that Harmony will be in good hands. I think the community will respond creatively and that we’ll be able to continue to attract really vibrant, passionate teachers and kids.”

Because of the close-knit, familial nature of the school, Harmony is particularly well equipped with an intimate network of alumni who tend to stay connected years after they’re gone. Shefar Rafiul, a recent Harmony graduate from Bangladesh who’s now headed to St. John’s College in Maryland, said he believes Harmony’s sense of community and shared responsibility is its biggest strength — one that will ensure it continues to be cared for for the next half century.

“That type of community is very rare to find,” Rafiul said. “That’s the thing I love about Harmony. It’s so human.”

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A 1985 Harmony Elementary class picture on the wall at Harmony School on Sept. 10. PHOTOS BY RICH JANZARUK/ HERALD-TIMES



Executive Director Steve Bonchek speaks at a convocation at Harmony School on Sept. 10.



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