Think of What They Could Be Learning!

THE HISTORY OF GREEN ACRES SCHOOL, FROM 1934 TO THE PRESENT

BY LISA NEVANS LOCKE
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In 1933 Alice began raising funds for scholarships to the school she would found, and in 1934 she opened a small progressive day and boarding school for boys and girls, who ranged in age from 2 to 11, at her home on Greenwood Farm in Brookeville, Maryland. The original brochure describes a school “situated on a real farm in a charming old stone house.” The curriculum would center around the care of farm animals, using children’s “actual experiences” to teach arithmetic, geography, natural and social history, biology and physiology.

“Expect to have ample time for out-of-door play, work on the farm, music, rhythm, shop and crafts,” the brochure says. In its first year, the school

Section I: Founding a School

Alice Mendham Powell

Alice wanted to change the world. John Dewey, the ground-breaking educator, had had a profound influence on Alice’s thinking about progressive education, and she was persuaded that education was the engine of social change. Alice earned two master’s degrees related to education and child development, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and eventually decided to found a school in the Washington area, where the nation’s leaders were shockingly ignorant about progressive education, says Gail Powell Perry ’41. “Think of what they could be learning!”

Like her Barnard College classmate, Margaret Mead, Alice became the school’s biggest export.

Section II: The 1930s

In its first year, the school...
The image in the official photo of the school’s founder looks just like the proper older lady one might expect to open a school: white hair pulled back in a bun, neat collar jacket, line of hair growing white. But the energetic educator who founded Green Acres School was anything but conventional. A independent woman who studied and traveled abroad, Alice Coe Mendham was as classmate of Margaret Mead at Barnard College, earned two master’s degrees and fought for the rights of minority domestic workers in the 1920s and ’30s—all before she founded a school.

A woman who studied and traveled abroad, Alice decided to found an integrated school after she was married, and eventually taught at a Reconstruction-era historically black college. When she became legally blind in the last five years of her life, Alice taught at the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, the second-oldest school of its kind in the world. “Nothing stopped her,” her younger daughter, Gail Powell Perry, “45, said in a recent interview in which she discussed her mother’s life and accomplishments.

Alice spoke little of her childhood in New York; her parents were killed in an accident when she was about 12. She expected to become a sociologist when she graduated from Barnard, then did graduate work in education, anthropology and child development at the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota in the 1920s.

Next, Alice studied at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), because, Gail says, “she felt you were not educated if you didn’t know about other cultures around the world.” It was a turning point. Alice learned Russian from her French teacher and traveled in Russia. There, she met Webster Powell, a Dartmouth political science professor who was leading a group of students. Webster’s Russian was awful, and Alice offered to serve as an interpreter. The couple fell in love, returned to New York and married, then honeymooned in Russia. Back in New York, Alice worked at the Library of Congress and Bank Street School, progressive schools the forefront of progressive education in the 1920s and today.

During a 1928 trip, the couple met John Dewey, the leading proponent of progressive education (who was lecturing in Russia at the time). Alice traveled with Dewey in Russia and gained insight into and passion for his theories, Gail says.

“My parents ran a dual operation. Father also supported the progressive education movement, but mother always used [the name] Alice Coe Mendham in association with Green Acres. One night the Progressive Education Association was meeting at the school.... After the speeches someone came to my father and said, ‘You must be Mr. Mendham.’ He smiled and said, ‘No, I’m happy to meet you, but I’m Mr. Powell. I kept my maiden name too.’”

When Webster was posted to the U.S. embassy in Aus-

tralia in 1944, Alice took her husband’s name to open an Australian bank account; when she returned to the U.S. in 1949 she used the name Alice Mendham Powell, according to press accounts and school documents. The couple moved to Philadelphia, where their first child was born in 1929. Sadly, he died four years later, but not before Alice realized she was known so-

cially as Mrs. Webster Powell. At “The Spirit of Macsfolly Farm,” a 1995 celebration of the school’s 60th anniversary, Gail told this story: “You must be Mr. Mendham.”
Above: The school’s first brochures, including the first reference to “Green Acres School.” Right: One of the few remaining photos of the Old Georgetown Road campus.

**Directors and Heads of Green Acres School**

- **1938–1940** Alice Coe Mendham (later Alice Mendham Powell), Founder
- **1942–1949** Alice Allen, Director
- **1949–1950** Ruth Hoge, Director
- **1964–1968** Anne Goodrich, Director
- **1968–1970** Gabriel H.L. Jacobs, Director
- **1970–1972** Anna Jones, Director
- **1972–1973** Alice Coe Mendham (later Alice Anne Goodrich), Director
- **1973–1979** Ruth Hoge, Acting Director
- **1979–1993** Ann Martin, Director
- **1993–1995** Costa J. Leodas, Director
- **1995–2003** Neal Brown, Head of School
- **2003–2008** Louis Silvano, Head of School
- **2008–2010** Neal Brown, Head of School

much of the early curriculum. Teacher Alice Coe Mendham (see sidebar) and students tracked animal footprints in the snow and observed animal habitats, the animals inspired student stories, poems, and songs, according to an early scrapbook about the school.

Another tradition that began early was students’ use of teachers’ first names. Teachers were expected not as all-knowing authorities, but as friends, coaches, and advisors to their students, and the use of first names underscored that relationship. In a 1938 interview, Alice recalled, “Everyone called me Alice. It was part of our school philosophy.”

A brochure produced in 1937 described a country day school with 30 students and six teachers, including a well-known children’s author, Eva Knox Evans. The brochure touts trips to museums, libraries, markets, and government institutions “to give meaning to the children’s study,” and stresses learning based on actual experiences.

“The facts of arithmetic, for example, have more meaning when used in concrete experiences such as making and selling cookies,” the brochure explains. “It is important to write well when invitations to a party are to be sent. Thus the children’s own activities serve as incentives to learn the tools subjects: reading, writing, and arithmetic.” The brochure also emphasizes the school’s extensive use of the outdoors.

In spite of the ambitious program, money was tight. In the early years, especially during the Great Depression, the teachers, too, “attended performances and lectures, and sometimes brought home as a snack or snack.” The school provided the children with books and other materials, and they were encouraged to use their own devices, as well as those of friends and family.

The school brochure notes that during Ruth’s eight-year tenure, the school nearly doubled in size. Photos from the 1940s show Mary McKenney Green, a teacher, wearing a flowered apron over her polka-dotted dress and her hair tied in a close for a close look as boys and girls scrabbled potatoes around a small table in the kitchen. A 1946 school scrapbook describes students gathering walnuts and drying them to use in experiments. They counted them, put the meat into cookies, and boiled the shells to make ink. A photo shows students writing with walnut ink and hunkled quills. Also pictured in the scrapbook is Thelma Moore, described as the school’s first African-American teacher.

Alumni remember the Old Georgetown Road campus fondly, but trustees at the time were “utterly inadequate.” The school officials told parents that during Ruth’s eight-year tenure, the school nearly doubled in size. Photos from the 1940s show Mary McKenney Green, a teacher, wearing a flowered apron over her polka-dotted dress and her hair tied in a close for a close look as boys and girls scrabbled potatoes around a small table in the kitchen. A 1946 school scrapbook describes students gathering walnuts and drying them to use in experiments. They counted them, put the meat into cookies, and boiled the shells to make ink. A photo shows students writing with walnut ink and hunkled quills. Also pictured in the scrapbook is Thelma Moore, described as the school’s first African-American teacher.

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Ruth Crawford Seeger

Walk past Nan Shapiro’s music room in the Main Building and you might hear students singing “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain” or “Skip to My Lou”—beloved songs performed by folk musician Peter Seeger and his musical half-siblings Mike and Peggy Seeger. Few Green Acres families know that the woman who brought those folk songs to American schoolchildren—the mother and stepmother of the famous trio—was a Green Acres music teacher in the 1940s.

Ruth Crawford Seeger, who attended Green Acres’ nursery program in 1945, still remembers singing “John Henry” at age 4 at the top of her lungs, complete with the original North Carolina dialect.

Today, fifth graders sing “John Henry” as part of their American folk music unit, says Nan, Green Acres’ current music teacher, who uses Ruth’s book extensively, “Skip to My Lou” is a favorite of first and second grade students in their insect unit; “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain” is a common part of the kindergarten curriculum.

Ruth’s work in schools led her to write a booklet with simple songs that mothers or teachers could play on the piano at home or in school, which expanded into a major book project. In November 1948 she published her ground-breaking book to national acclaim.

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The 50th anniversary notes also indicate that some bigger animal stories were spun during Jane’s time school and camp director. In particular, horses had become a part of the camp that Alice Mendham Powell had started in 1935.

The equines were a constant source of problems—even after they were sold during Jane’s time as director. One night, the police called Jane to say the school’s horses were out on the street. When Jane was up dressing and before she realized…we no longer had horses. (After the move to Danville Drive, the facilities were rented in the summer of 1959 to a community center, which operated its own camp.)

Worries about facilities had been put to rest now that Green Acres owned its sight-see campus—but by 1954 zoning regulations had evolved, expansion of the Rockville Pike was beginning, and the school was eying expansion to sixth grade. Again Green Acres faced insurmountable circumstances. And again the school would seek a new home.

In July 1954, “in view of the growing student population of the area,” school leaders deemed it wise to build a larger facility on the Rockville Pike property. Instead they sold the property, and in April 1955 purchased 14 wooded acres on unpaved Danville Drive, about a mile and a-half away. Construction began on a new school building, at an approximate cost of $200,000.

At that cost, the school could afford to build only a shell, and would let future generations take care of the inside, Jane said. It was “a commitment to the future,” Jane added in notes from the 50th anniversary meeting. The challenge was to find an architect who would embrace that building philosophy.

Through the school’s first decades, pets remained a strong part of Green Acres lore and tradition. In 1948, the school’s 50th anniversary, meeting notes from Green Acres trustees and staff included a discussion of Trixie, a noisy straw dog that spent most of her time under Jane Beals’ desk. One can imagine the chuckles over the discussion of Trixie stories, such as her helping Jane make admissions decisions, and the regret that uneasy prospective parents who brushed Trixie’s hair away might not have their children accepted.

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Section II: Building Traditions

H E S P R IN G F A I R. The book, A baker’s dozen folktales, meets the needs of the school’s Colonial-style nursery program.

Enrollment growth from the school’s 1934 founding to the present

Notice to all parents:

The more things change, the more they stay the same from the “Green acres School News;” October 1958.

Architect Sam Brodie took the job and designed what is now the Main Building, with its central chimney and porches around which all 12 classrooms were located. Each classroom featured sliding glass doors opening onto covered, paved terraces. The building’s four corners opened onto gardens that were later converted to closed rooms, and the surrounding woods reflected the school’s emphasis on outdoor play. Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, governor of Maryland during the 1940s, sealed the Green Acres School sign to a tree during the March 25, 1956 groundbreaking ceremony.

There was just one rub: construction wasn’t complete when it was time to move. Jane told eighth graders Stephanie Dimond and Jenny Fleisher in a 1984 interview for a 50th anniversary oral history project. “They brought all the furniture to the new location and had class outdoors for the last few weeks of school,” Stephanie and Jenny wrote.

At the 50th anniversary meeting, Jane remembered that “the entire school up and walked to the new Danville Drive campus from Rockville Pike.” There were no telephones, and someone put a fake phone on Jane’s desk.

The building was complete for the 1956–1957 school year. And in 1956, enrolling the unusual architectural approach, the American Institute of Architects, through its Metropolitan Valley Chapter of Maryland, awarded Green Acres first prize in architecture for schools in Montgomery County.
As Green Acres worked to establish itself as an elementary school, adding grades 3 through 6 from 1954–1957, it found itself having to defend its not-as-traditional approach to education. In 1955 the conservative tide of the moment even found some parents wondering if the school should close. Jane Beals and other school leaders understood that action was needed. As noted in the 50th anniversary meeting notes, Jane declared, “We have to change our image.”

In a brochure from the late 1950s, the school portrayed itself as straddling the line between progressive and more traditional education, combining the best advantages of the 20th century with the tried and true. The school’s “unusual, highly experienced” staff was highlighted, as was the school’s role as a teacher training center. (Students majoring in child study at the University of Maryland trained at Green Acres as part of their requirements for a degree, the brochure notes.) Indeed, the school revealed in modern advances in an October 1958 newsletter celebrating the start of its 25th year. “This year, 4th, 5th and 6th grades have added televised instruction to the science curriculum.” Students watched half-hour lessons three mornings a week on the two television sets that had been donated to the school by parents. The televised course was prepared by a National Academy of Sciences Committee in cooperation with area school officials and the Greater Washington Educational Television Association. “Outdoor space” was the topic of the first program.

The newsletter explains that the school’s televisions would be used mainly for science, though “the 6th grade may see an occasional World Series game or tune in on special events.”

But perhaps the most famous Green Acres pet was Pedro, a Mexican burro who was the unofficial mascot of the school in the 1950s. An Oct. 26, 1953 Washington Post story recounts that Pedro and a second burro, Jose, were given to the school’s televisions would be used mainly for science, though “the 6th grade may see an occasional World Series game or tune in on special events.”

But perhaps the most famous Green Acres pet was Pedro, a Mexican burro who was the unofficial mascot of the school in the 1950s. An Oct. 26, 1953 Washington Post story recounts that Pedro and a second burro, Jose, were given to the school.

Smith had telephoned the zoo for advice: he and his five-year-old son Timothy looped the lead under Pedro’s neck, whose hair was “a little too long,” and they walked to the school’s entrance, where the bear boy, Jose, was waiting. “I imagine,” the author concluded, “Pedro was quite happy with his new home and new job.”

In the 1950s, amid a more conservative political atmosphere, the school’s ostensibly liberal philosophy fell out of vogue. As Green Acres worked to establish itself as an elementary school, adding grades 3 through 6 from 1954–1957, it found itself having to defend its not-as-traditional approach to education. In 1955 the conservative tide of the moment even found some parents wondering if the school should close. Jane Beals and other school leaders understood that action was needed. As noted in the 50th anniversary meeting notes, Jane declared, “We have to change our image.”

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That summer Pedro lived at the farm of Board President Osborne Webb. In the fall, Green Acres preschool students wrote to Aubrey Graves, a Post columnist who had adopted Jose, asking how to make Pedro more cooperative. “He won’t go when we try to ride him,” the letter said. “Your burro, Jose, seems friendly. How can we win Pedro over? How can we make him carry us?”

Graves was unable to offer any sage advice in his Nov. 14, 1954 column, and Pedro remained strong-willed, eventually biting a child on the ear. An unsigned, handwritten note in the Green Acres archives states that “Pedro was the terror of the barnyard so a new home had to be found for him. A nearby farmer asked Jane if he could have him for preschool students, he had horses, and the offspring were mules.” “I imagine,” the author concluded, “Pedro was quite happy with his new home and new job.”

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From the minutes of the Green Acres Corporation Meeting, April 22, 1963

“[Director Gabriel] Jacobs expressed considerable concern over the tremendous pressures to prepare students to meet college admission requirements, because of the harmful effects of these pressures on both elementary and high school education.”

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Day at about noon. The Post reported that Smith, dressed in his Sunday best, arrived at the Railway Express Agency a few minutes after Folland, “and so he had to be content with the, well, more moth-eaten of the pair.”

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Animals have enjoyed favored status on campus, from the school’s beginnings as a farm to the present day. For left: 1950s students learn from caring for a bunny in science. Near left: Independence-minded—and perhaps therefore, perfect for Green Acres—the infamous Pedro, was the school’s unofficial mascot from the same time.
Green Acres has always been “Going Places”

SIGNATURE GUIDE, NOW IN ITS 17TH EDITION, BECOMES THE SCHOOL’S BIGGEST EXPORT

Parents often say they first learned about Green Acres School, with its penchant for field trips and experiential learning, thanks to Going Places in Children in Washington, D.C., the guidebook the school has published for more than 50 years. Of that run, more than 150,000 copies of the book praised by The New York Times and the Washington Post have circulated; the Post called it “the definitive book of its kind.” That’s an impressive pedigree for what began as a typed pamphlet compiled by parents in 1958 to sell at the school’s book fair—an outgrowth of the school’s and parents’ expertise about trips with children.

“When I arrived in D.C. 25 years ago with two kids under the age of four, one of the first books I bought was Going Places,” says Liz Hemming, who taught technology at the school for nearly two decades. “I figured a school that produced that book was worth looking at.” Both children enrolled at Green Acres and later graduated.

Originally titled Going Places, Doing Things with Children in and Around Washington, the 42-page booklet focused on activities for children under 12. The introduction to the 1958 booklet, edited by Cozette Barker and Elizabeth Friedman, with the original idea credited to teacher and parent Shirley Kessler, says it aims to “acquaint readers with some little-known activities in Washington and its immediate suburbs.

These “little-known activities” included trips to the not-so-obscure White House and the National Zoo—but even the first edition offers the kid-friendly, parent-savvy advice for which the book has become known. At the Washington Monument, “Take the elevator to the top for 10 cents, or, if your children wish, they can walk up the 898 steps,” the book advises. Lesser-known sites highlighted in the booklet included the Islamic Center and its mosque, on Massachusetts Ave., the only such center of its kind in the U.S. at that time; lists of Washington bakery and dairies where visitors were welcome; and 10 cent pony rides offered at Circle N Pony Ranch on New Hampshire Avenue.

Extra copies of the first edition of the book were remade to Sullivant’s Toy Store in Washing- ton, says Joan Karasik, mother of Michael ‘63, Judy ‘65, and Paul ‘68 and widow of former board president Monroe Karasik. A steady stream of customers came into the store asking to buy copies, she says. “People kept asking for more; that’s why we decided to go on with it,” Karasik says. In 1961, the format was expanded to 64 pages; 10,000 copies were printed and priced at $1 each. A legacy was born.

Since then, scores of Green Acres parents, students, and staff have collaborated on updated editions published every three to five years. The fourth edition was termed “imvaluable” by the Post, and the seventh edition was reviewed enthusiastically by the Post’s Judith Martin in 1974, before she became syndicated (and famous) as “Miss Manners.”

The 50th anniversary edition, pictured, was published in 2008. It runs 372 pages covering more than 400 outings, and is sold in bookstores, toy stores and on Amazon.com. This, the 17th edition of the book, features a new section listing teachers’ favorite field trips, harkening back to the book’s beginnings.

But child-centered wisdom remains the book’s hallmark, and though in today’s more professionally published, its information would be at home in that first mimeographed version. Writing about the tiny National Aquarium in the basement of the U.S. Department of Commerce building.

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Quilting

PATCHING TOGETHER A SCHOOL’S RECENT HISTORY

When Louis Silvanova completed his eighth year as Head of School in 2008, the staff presented him a handmade quilt that included a square depicting his Beatle’s Halloween costume, a square with an Olympic torch, and a square with the birthday cards he loved handing to students. Louis was one of the most recent recipients of Green Acres quilt, creating such quilts has been part of the fabric of Green Acres School since teachers Virginia ‘Gimmy‘ Spevak and Nan Shapiro first started a quilting group among the staff in the early 1980s.

Quilting has become an integral part of the school’s culture: third graders stitch quilts each year as part of their study of Colonial America, eighth graders sew decorative banners commemorating their Green Acres experience, and faculty and staff create quilts for retiring colleagues, marriages, and birth anniversaries. Quilts and quilted banners hang on the walls, in the 3-4 Building and in the Woods Building, and have been sold at the school’s fund-raising auction each year since it was first held in the early 1980s.

Gimmy and Nan organized a group of teachers to quilt when some accomplished quilters could be found among the community. Three hand-stitched quilts were among the items sold at the first live Green Acres auction, as part of the Corporation Meeting in October 1980. Gimmy donated a hand-stitched quilt for the first Green Acres Dinner and Auction, held May 1, 1982, according to a history of quilting at Green Acres written by Elie Gretz Froebel. Parents and staff began making quilts for the auction each year after that.

Meanwhile, teacher Nelle Campbell created commemorative quilts with first and second graders when the Center for the Performing Arts and Physical Education opened in 1985. Students used fabric crayons to draw their squares, which were then stitched together by staff. Also in the mid-Eighties, seventh- and eighth-grade teacher Brenda Robinson continued a tradition from her alma mater, Springfield College in Massachusetts, and had graduating eighth graders make commemorative banners as part of a culminating project.

“I had a lot of staff kids. Board kids, ‘lifers who were really attached to this place,” says Brenda, now the school’s Business Manager. She gave each student a square to decorate and some fuzzy paint—which were hard to sew with, she laughs.

“So most of the [banners] were very primitive,” Nan says, also laughing. “One was put together with duct tape. We’ve gotten more proficient on how we make them.”

That’s thanks in part to parents Nancy Smith and Donna Middelhurst, who taught teachers more professional quilting methods in the mid-1980s. By 1999 most of the children whose parents quilted had graduated, and the families had moved on. Technology teacher Liz Hemming, who became a raffle quilt as a parent new to the school, has been a regular at the auction.

Cook Like Eva

“Gee, Mom, why can’t you cook like Eva? How many maternal egos were shattered by this question from tiny lips?

‘Green Acres mothers need no longer shake with dread as they put dinner on the table. With this little cookbook, any mother can now cook like Eva. In her 13 years as Green Acres dietician, Mrs. Grooms has modified many everyday dishes into sure-fire hits with even fussy young eaters.”

Thus opens the “Cook Like Eva Cookbook,” a mimeographed booklet that offers 23 favorite recipes selected by Green Acres students, as prepared by school dietician Eva Grooms, adapted for family-size meals. The cookbook was created in the early 1970s for sale at the Spring Fair. Some students had a hard time choosing their favorite recipes—including one girl, the booklet’s introduction explains, who wrote down everything she had eaten since Christmas.

Recipes include fried chicken, marked “The ABSOLUTE favorite for lunch,” along with baked pork chops, beef stroganoff, Hungarian goulash, macaronis with cheese and bacon, scrambled eggs with bacon, fish sticks, spaghetti with meat sauce, and sausage pizza with dough made using Eva’s biscuits recipe. Desserts included brownies, chocolate pudding, apple pie, and peanut butter cookies.

Don also remembered a cul- vert under Danville Drive that possessed mysterious “care” paintings that the walkers later discovered to be the work of “the giants” (sixth graders). Paul Karasik ’68 remembered painting the inside of those underground pipes when his grade studied cave paintings and ancient civilizations, and finding remnants of his work years later as a Green Acres camp counselor, according to a school newsletter.

It was sixth graders in Sally Nash’s class who studied cave-men and their civilization. In the June 1965 newsletter, Sally wrote: “We have pretended to be everything from cave-men to kings, we have read Egyptian medicine rolls, which prescribe opium for children. We have written archaeological accounts of wastelands, and dialogues between Greek and Egyptian deities.”

Sally brought history alive, but wasn’t all fun and games. A well loved teacher and staff representative to the Board of Trustees, Sally was known for drawing up a separate contract each week with each student in her class. The contracts summarized each student’s assignments and obligations, and students signed their agreement on small yellow cards. “We avoided brambles and poison ivy,” a decade later photos confirm that bell-bottom jeans were becoming de rigueur for both girls and boys.

The school was experiencing other cultural changes as well. Now that seventh and eighth grades were included, teachers and administrators looked for ways to give older students new and unique experiences. In the spring of 1971, the seventh and eighth grades performed A Man for All Seasons; by 1973, according to invitations to the annual Corporation Meeting, the new tradition of a spring musical was born when the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades performed Don Quixote.

In 1971, the school sold the rented building in Danville and moved to a U-shaped building on the Danville Drive campus.

From the school’s founding in 1934, the community has dedicated itself to advancing social justice as a primary tenant of progressive education.

Above: An early child-care class from the 1940s.

Left: Students gather around Arthur Jippini, the school newsletter’s editor, also in the 1960s.

Below left: Students in class—arrayed in a U-shape rather than rows and columns— circa 1956, shortly after the school’s move to the Danville Drive campus.

The production has included The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1960s), A Raisin in the Sun (1970s), Our Town (1980s), and one-act plays with a nursery school student in order to do a child development experiment was very cook,” writes Greg Kaufmann ’82, now a reporter for The Nation.

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"The joy for me at Green Acres is how much fun the kids have. I remember on Monday, 1974 to head the new physical education program for older students. P.E. was focused on to board meeting minutes. The scenes from the 1970s: a Greek play in the Gully in 1971; ceramicist Doug Rivlin '77; students and maintenance crew workers planting outside the bathhouse above: Green acres students in the 1970s. (could it be any other time?)

According to a 50th anniversary history, Green Acres lunches were loved by students. A 1970 fund-raising brochure to the 1980s, remembers an evening meeting with parents and Shirley said, 'Well, I wanted to teach you about Portuguese and Shirley plugged in an electric frying pan. Sparks shot up, and Shirley said, 'Well, I wanted to teach you about electricity?"

Cocktails in the Kitchen
Along with caring for pets (see sidebar), cooking is one of the oldest hands-on activities at Green Acres. Photos from the 1940s show boys and girls busy at work in the kitchen, and early brochures explain how measuring ingredients helps teach fractions. Classes were unable to cook for several years in the early 2000s because of county health regulations, but a new, professional kitchen was installed in 2006, once again allowing Lower School math classes to bake cupcakes for birthday celebrations or pancakes for breakfast, and second grade language arts classes to make tortillas as part of their study of Mexico.

Book Fair
Along with parent workdays and the Spring Fair, the Book Fair is mentioned in a late 1970s brochure as an example of parental support that allowed Green Acres to maintain its high standards on a moderate budget. In 1959, school officials decided to use Book Fair money to establish a collection of art at school, and the preschool library with more than 100 books was set up in the teachers’ room. The Book Fair has remained the major source of funding for the library (now over 22,000 volumes) and is a popular community-building event.

Corporation Dinners
The Corporation Dinners in the 1970s and 80s helped foster the school’s warm community feeling. Parents filled the All Purpose Room and later the Center, vying to bring the most ethnically tantalizing dinners and scumptious desserts, says Development Director Joan Adler, who has worked at the school since the 1970s, when her children were students here. Corporation business was cheered but full bellies. The tradition was lost in the 1990s when both parents (or guardians) in families were more likely to be working and cooking time became limited. Today, the Corporation Meeting continues to offer news of the budget and election of trustees, but in recent years the most compelling feature has been panels of alumni—high school students—who describe their college and career paths.

Green Acres teachers have long been talented improvisers. Natalie Getelman, who taught nursery school from the 1960s to the 1980s, remembers an evening meeting with parents for which everyone was to bring a potluck dish.

"I taught with Shirley Kessler, who had five children of her own and didn’t have time to prepare her potluck dish," Natalie says. "She brought all the ingredients and told the kids, ‘We’re going to cook a stew.’ The kids cut up vegetables, and Shirley plugged in an electric frying pan. Sparks shot up, and Shirley said, ‘Well, I wanted to teach you about electricity.’"

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Green Acres in the 1970s. (Could it be any other time?)

"Sue Eckhart’s News Bowls—sort of like ‘Jeopardy’ with teams—we made it part of the school’s budget and election of trustees. The bottom floor contained science and art rooms and storage space, while the upper level housed the “quad,” which originally included grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The “Primary Unit” comprising grades 1 and 2 was formed the following year: 2nd grade teacher Elise Greer remembers creating the Mexico and Japan units that remain part of the curriculum.

In the mid-70s, dual-unit groupings (grades 1 and 2, 3 and 4, etc.) were established for all grades. While remaining loyal to Alice Mendlow-Powell’s founding principles, the 1970s ushered in a new era of Green Acres as a pre-K through grade 8 school, resembling more closely the school it would become over the next 40 years, a decade into the next century.

"A big thank you to all of the volunteers who have worked so hard over the years to make Green Acres a special place for our children," writes Greg Kaufmann, a Green Acres graduate from the 1970s. The School is so much better at school than at home."

— Pat Wilson, Green Acres teacher in the 1970s

"When did that start? The definitive guide to (some) Green Acres traditions and their origins

Ask former students, faculty and staff about their memories of Green Acres, and many will point to the school’s cherished traditions. Some, such as vigorous parent participation and parent work days, date back to the earliest days of the school. Others, such as outdoor education, are newer, dating to the 1970s. Here are a few of the most recognizable and fondly remembered Green Acres traditions:

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Green Acres in the 1970s. (Could it be any other time?)
**Section III: The Modern Era**

**The 1980s**

In 1981 Green Acres opened its doors to students ages 3 to 14. The school featured a busy all-purpose room, a large wood gymnasium, and some expanded outdoor play areas—but still no gymnastics. P.E. classes often had to travel off campus, which meant, according to one of Director Anne Goodrich’s reports to the board of trustees in the early 1980s, weekly trips to gymnastics venues, games with basketball courts, and bowling alleys. In 1980 board members identified the two major fiscal priorities for the school as enhancing faculty salaries (a common theme throughout Green Acres’ history) and building a Center for the Performing Arts and Physical Education (CPAPE, or, more simply, “the Center”), according to Development Office notes from the time.

To achieve these goals—and to build the Center in time for the school's 50th anniversary in 1984—Green Acres began to undertake a more professional approach to fund-raising. The Fifty Fund was established, but the $800,000 necessary to build, equip, and maintain the Center, and the school’s first dinner auction was held in 1980. Joan Adler, hired as an administrative assistant in 1979, was named the school’s first Director of Development in 1983. She continued to hold a position as director of development even though, to hold more than a quarter-century later as the school celebrates its 75th anniversary, the 1980s involved “a lot of direction-setting,” says Jim Phang, Board President from 1985 to 1990. One direction was the continuing decreased emphasis on preschool. Following a study of several aspects of the curriculum, Anne Goodrich in 1982 announced a restructuring preschool program that would eliminate the all-day four-year-old (“fours”) program and instead offer a half-day nursery unit for ages three and four, and a full-day kindergarten for ages five and six.

While the school was further shifting its emphasis from the younger children who were its earliest pupils, it was re-emphasizing its progressive roots. Jim says he knew little about the history of Green Acres until he and five other school leaders attended the first progressive education conference in 30 years, held at Miquon School in Pennsylvania. They returned with a renewed commitment to progressive education, including all the quirks and challenges it presented the school in terms of governance. For example, Green Acres was one of the few private schools that included staff members on the board of trustees, and consensus was stressed in decision-making, according to former trustee Joe Mayne. “The structure that could make things harder for a board, it also helped create a tremendous sense of collegiality among the staff, say former trustees.” You worked as a team,” says Susan (Fritz) Gress, a former teacher, alumni parent and capital campaign chair. Teachers were part of the decision-making process. One year someone said, “Let’s go to Epcot Center,” and the administration’s response was, “Okay, we can raise the money."

And raise money they did. Eighth graders traveled to Florida to visit Epcot in the 1980s; a nearly completed Center was ready for the school’s 50th anniversary celebration, which began Oct. 13, 1984. Maryland Attorney General Stephen H. Sachs, uncle of two Green Acres students, and Gressie Neuberg were featured speakers. The yearlong celebration included student-produced assemblies depicting Green Acres lore across the decades, a history of the school, written by Susan Pott and Jill Winchler Nelson, and an anniversary cookbook, Cooking with Green Acers, which featured recipes related to curricular units, such as the Primary Unit’s “Roots,” the third- and fourth-grade Colonial study, and the fifth- and sixth-grade state banquets.

The 11th edition of Going Places with Children in Washington, D.C. was published and was hailed by the New York Times. The celebration culminated in a two-day event held May 31 and June 1, 1989, attended by many alumni and former faculty, including Gail Powell Perry ’45 and former Director Ruth Hoge. Ninety-eight-four-year-old also included the start of a photography program that 25 years later remains a jewel in the crown of the seventeenth and eighteenth grade experience. The darkroom was “nothing more than a large janitorial closet” with no circulation system, which “emanated the strong odors of Dektol and fixer,” teacher and professional photographer Victor Stekoll wrote in a June 1994 school newsletter. In the quarter-century since the program’s founding, students have regularly won top honors in Montgomery County and regional photography contests.

Many, perhaps even most, have furthered their studies in high school and beyond.

In other academic ventures, field trips remained important. Nurse teacher Margaret Dimond wrote in a March 1983 school newsletter that when the program’s founding, students have regularly won top honors in Montgomery County and.

In 1983, the school's own self-study, of the first schools to participate in that arduous process. The school's own self-study, itself a part of the accreditation, was published in 1986, and was one of the first schools to participate in that arduous process. The school's own self-study, itself a part of the accreditation, combined with the report by a team of independent school evaluators, helped Green Acres leaders identify the school’s
did in 1964. For a Thanksgiving later in the 70s teachers wanted to cook an enormous Hubbard squash from Nelle’s farm’s field but couldn’t figure out how to cut it. Nelle’s solution was described in the December 1995 newsletter. While her students had been estimating how many people would be counted when it was split open, Nelle climbed to the top of a stepladder and dropped it. The squash was then cooked, and everyone had a taste, says teacher Nan Shapiro. (See sidebar.) In 1974 the discontinuation of hot lunch at former cook Eva Groom’s direction led alumni parent Alva Harvey to spend three days cooking the meal. The 1995 newsletter explains that in the years after Alva’s Herculean effort, it took a whole group

In 4th grade, two kids wrote for the class asking (author) William Mayne to write a follow-up to “Skilly,” (a book) which Kate Carlson had read to the class. The whole class signed the letter. A couple weeks later he sent a letter back in rhyme that said we had inspired him to write a sequel.

Two months later we received the manuscript. Kate and Karen Day read it to us and sent comments back. Now, two years later, look what came in a letter: a story on the cover of the book: "Skilly and the Twin Planets" by William Mayne. The dedication goes to: The Fourth Grade, 1980, at Green Acres School, Rockville, Maryland, U.S.A., who reminded me that this story had to be told.

— Sixth grade reporter in the Green Acres Newsletter, 1982

school, recalls Alumni Director Sue Eckhart. Such workdays dropped off in later years, but that same spirit was recalled in the three-day “playground raising” held in 1995 in memory of Andrew David Levens '02 (see sidebar). When the Middle School building was completed in 2006, more than 100 parents, students and staff wielded spades, hoes and rakes when they planted trees and pachysandra, spread mulch and planted flowers during a day-long “plant-in.”

**Thanksgiving Lunch** Teacher Nelle Campbell began this all-school celebration in 1964, when hot lunch was served every day. Since that time all students have contributed each year to the celebration-making placemats, centerpieces or napkin rings, serving meals, or cleaning up. A school leader shares a cherished Thanksgiving memory at the beginning of the meal as Nelle did in 1964. For a Thanksgiving later in the 70s teachers wanted to cook an enormous Hubbard squash from Nelle’s farm’s field, but couldn’t figure out how to cut it. Nelle’s solution was described in the December 1995 newsletter. While her students had been estimating how many people would be counted when it was split open, Nelle climbed to the top of a stepladder and dropped it. The squash was then cooked, and everyone had a taste, says teacher Nan Shapiro. (See sidebar.) In 1974 the discontinuation of hot lunch at former cook Eva Groom’s direction led alumni parent Alva Harvey to spend three days cooking the meal. The 1995 newsletter explains that in the years after Alva’s Herculean effort, it took a whole group

of parent volunteers to bake turkeys and bring them in carved and ready to serve. The morning of the event, mothers and fathers would appear in the kitchen to make boxed stuffing mix, heat corn and gravy, slice pre-baked pies and help young students put apple sauce and cranberry relish in serving bowls. After the county Health Department mixed that system, the school began catering the lunch, at which faculty and students of all ages share tables. A final treat is the annual staff-vs.-eighth grade soccer game (right, in 2008), in which the adults find themselves, remarkably, undefeated over the seven years the game has been played.
The campus went up again. The teachers couldn’t sleep either. Says Dale: “Around 9:30 p.m., but awakened an hour later, asking, “Is it time to get up?” They couldn’t tell because they were so disoriented. I probably became a writer because I was so disoriented.”

Jennifer Gorham Ackerman ’72

The campus is now a state-of-the-art campus that continues to grow and evolve. In 1993, Arnie took the position of Head of School. He continued to oversee the growth of the school and ensure that it remained financially sound. Arnie remained in the post for more than ten years, working tirelessly to ensure that the school had the resources it needed to continue to thrive.

The original construction of the school was completed in 1995. In 1995, the school launched a capital campaign that would fund the most comprehensive building project since the school was constructed on its current site in 1995. The campaign was successful, and the school was able to improve its facilities and provide a more modern learning environment for its students.

The school continues to thrive today, with a focus on providing a challenging and supportive learning environment for all students. The school’s commitment to diversity and inclusivity is evident in its strong alumni network and the support it provides to students from all backgrounds.

One memorable early outdoor Education trip involved camping in a West Virginia cave—so, in a way, I was a primitive Allen, the seventh grade teacher who founded the program. “It was so eerie, to be in an environment so removed from sound and light,” he remembers. “The kids fell asleep in their sleeping bags in the cave at about 9:30 p.m., but awakened later at 3 a.m., asking, ‘Is it time to get up?’ They couldn’t tell because they were so disoriented.”

The students went back to sleep, but an hour later, they were up again. “Our guides couldn’t sleep either,” he remembers. “The guides kept coming inside, saying, ‘I’m going to get up’ and ‘I’m going to get up’ and ‘I’m going to get up’ and ‘I’m going to get up.’”

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Mainly, there was a renewed commitment to diversity, which had long been a priority for the school.

When Arnie arrived at Green Acres in 1993, only five percent of professional staff members were people of color, while 16 percent of the students were from under-represented populations.

Arnie worked to recruit faculty and staff of color, and at the end of the decade, 14 percent of the staff and 25 percent of the students were from groups representing diversity.

Because of his vision, Arnie and six other local school heads were honored with the first-ever Black Student Fund Award in 1999, celebrating school leaders who “demonstrate leadership in moving their schools toward a more equitable and inclusive environment for all.”

Another strong proponent of diversity was Ursula Ferro, the school’s assistant director, who “demonstrated leadership while resigning at the end of the 1999-2000 school year. Green Acres, meanwhile, prepared to enter the 21st century.

Meanwhile, there was an anti-bias review of the curriculum in which materials from brochures to textbooks were revised or weeded out. For example, in the Primary Unit, a unit on “Castles, Kings and Queens” became a unit on “Shelters,” in which students do this day explore human and animal habitats from around the world.

By the start of the 1999-2000 school year, the campus had been transformed and so had the curriculum. The school now boasted new buildings for first and second grades and for third and fourth grades, newly designed playground areas, renovated spaces for the Early Childhood Unit and Business Office, ADA compliant facilities, and a new system of driveways.

Arnie Cohen arrived at Green Acres committed to campus renovation, reinvigoration of the school’s dedication to diversity, staff development, and fresh views of the curriculum during an era of rapid cultural change. Having achieved what he had prepared for, Arnie looked for new opportunities, resigning at the end of the 1999-2000 school year.

Green Acres, meanwhile, prepared to enter the 21st century.

To gain the neighborhood’s assent, the school in 1997 agreed to several concessions: It agreed to the enrollment cap of 300, limited events on the campus to functions involving the school community, and required every student to ride the bus in the afternoon or to be carpool of at least two students. That last change, Arnie says, was “not well-received.”

The agreement to stop using buses related to the school mission was acceptable to Arnie; but in recent years school leaders have chafed at the rules, as the school has sought ways to generate additional income.

Once construction was approved, however, Green Acres began to gain a sexier law allowing schools to finance construction by offering tax-free bonds. Parent trustee Richard Perlmuter, a real estate developer with expertise in loan financing, encouraged the school to take advantage of the new law, and on the urging of Green Acres students, the school made use of the opportunity.

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The agreement to stop using buses related to the school mission was acceptable to Arnie; but in recent years school leaders have chafed at the rules, as the school has sought ways to generate additional income.

Once construction was approved, however, Green Acres was able to use a recent law allowing schools to finance construction by offering tax-free bonds. Parent trustee Richard Perlmuter, a real estate developer with expertise in loan financing, encouraged the school to take advantage of the new law, and on the urging of Green Acres students, the school made use of the opportunity.

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Green Acres students today continue to engage in learning activities that would make the school’s founders proud. Left: sixth graders work to “mummify” a chicken in conjunction with their Egyptian study. Center: an eighth grader holds on for dear life to the hovercraft students built from scratch in science class. Right: an eighth grade class holds up a multi-ton boulder on the annual class trip to climb nearby Old Rag Mountain.

appointment at the hairdresser. She came tearing around the corner to greet us faster than any wailer was meant to travel. Her energy was incredible. She was sharp as a tack.”

Many of Ruth’s philosophies apply at Green Acres today. According to notes from an interview, she looked for flexibility and innovation when she hired teachers. She thought teachers needed to “use their environment,” to “help students figure out how to learn” and “love to teach.” She described teachers as facilitators, and said teaching was like putting ingredients in a pot and stirring it up—it was so exciting to see what you got! Her greatest pleasure was to see children develop over time.

Ruth was also proud that Harvard had asked to study her brain when she died, along with that of her co-founder sister, Joan Adler, who first met Ruth when planning the school’s 50th anniversary celebration in 1984. Louis Silvano, an accomplished marketing consultant to hone the school’s image, and more clearly identified Green Acres students in those scenes have greeted the end of the school year, and you’ll probably hear about the Olympics. The Head of School dresses in a toga and laurel wreath. Students spray their hair green or purple. Others dress in blue from head to toe or wave red banners. The whole school—students, teachers, staff, and some parents—cheer as the torch is lit in the Gully, the school’s outdoor amphitheater. Those scenes have greeted the end of the school year for four decades, as Green Acres celebrates its annual Olympics.

The first Olympics were held in 1966, a joint endeavor with sixth graders at Georgetown Day School who had also focused on Greek culture and its foundations in social studies. Green Acres teacher E. GraysonMattingly and a GDS teacher created the “First Greek Olympic Games Festival” as the culmination of their study.

The three-day event, held at Green Acres, opened with a torch run and opening ceremony, closed with a banquet, and included a host of events such as a tug-of-war, a play in the amphitheater, shot-put, discus, javelin, quoits, wrestling and more. John Nicoloupoulos, press attaché from the Greek Embassy, “laid the mazer from the torch carried by the last runner,” and the flame burned for the duration of the games. The first Olympics are commemorated by a flyer and program from the event.

Today, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders compete in the Olympics during the final 1½ days of school. Lighting the torch and running the oaths remain important parts of the opening ceremony. For weeks in advance, lower school students make banners and debate which teams will win their loyalty, often because of siblings, older students they might know from the bus, or siblings of friends in the after-school Extended Day Program.

“A Sk Green Acres middle school students (and some lower schoolers as well) are getting ready for their annual event of the year, and you’ll probably hear about the Olympics. The Head of School dresses in a toga and laurel wreath. Students spray their hair green or purple. Others dress in blue from head to toe or wave red banners. The whole school—students, teachers, staff, and some parents—cheer as the torch is lit in the Gully, the school’s outdoor amphitheater. Those scenes have greeted the end of the school year for four decades, as Green Acres celebrates its annual Olympics.

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Students cheer on the Athenians (blue), Argonians (red), Megarians (purple) or Spartans (green), and applause for all teams in the closing ceremony. Go Green Acres!

Above, pictures of the 2009 Olympics. Top: Members of the Class of 2010 take a moment from their rigorous preparations. Center left: Fifth-graders were recently appointed Olympic staffs. Center: Lower School students support teams of their choosing. Center right: A successful water balloon toss. Bottom: Two Argonians look to intimidate a Megarian competitor.

“When I was young, I would get upset that my artwork wasn’t ‘good enough.’ Never once did I hear a teacher at Green Acres agree with me. Our art teachers made us understand that mistakes can actually make something magnificent, which is true in all parts of life, not just art.”

—Jeffrey Kopp ‘09
was a fan who attended many of the school’s musical and dramatic performances. Under Louie’s leadership, teachers expanded the school’s instrumen-
tional music program—which had long included recorders and Orff instruments—to include handbells for first through eighth grades in 2000 and guitar for sixth through eighth grades in 2004.

Middle School students involved in the popular after-school sports program enjoyed the new locker rooms adjoining the gym. About 50 percent of Middle School students par-
ticipate in at least one season of after-school sports, which stress skills, fun, sportmanship, and an “everybody plays” mentality fostered by “theGE. guys,” Derek Edwards, Larry Jodrie, and Matt Marchildon. The trio, all of whom have taught at the school for more than a decade, hold a special place in students’ hearts, as they work with all students from pre-K through grade 8.

WITH THE CAMPUS COMPLETE, Louie Silvano resigned effective June 2008, and the Board appointed Neal M. Brown, a lifelong Baltimorian with a his-
tory in the modern progressive education movement, as the current Head of School. Soon after Neal’s arrival, the country was plunged into what many describe as the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression—not a propitious circumstance for independent schools. Across the region, application numbers at inde-
pendent schools have fallen and students are withdrawing because families can no longer afford the high tuition.

However, Green Acres enters its 75th year with an enroll-
ment of about 500, a strong, committed parent community, and talented and dedicated faculty. Tenets of the Green Acres philosophy continue to in-
form the school; Neal and the administration boast that the program remains intact, the budget balances, and no personnel have been laid off despite the troubling economic picture.

Further, at a time when the nation is concerned with childhood health, Green Acres students are outdoors every day. Every student has at least one 30-minute break for outdoor play each day, and P.E. class three or four times a week. Younger students have additional recess and “creative movement.” But that’s just a start. The outdoors is considered a rich classroom; with easy access, students can be found outside trying out the catapults they built in science class, constructing birdhouses for the “shelter” unit, or writing poetry.

At a time when many schools have cut back on the arts, sciences and social studies, Green Acres students enjoy art, music, photography, and ceramics, in addition to choral music, handbells, and instru-
ments from around the world. The hands-on science program takes students on walks to measure the pH balance of the creek that runs along the school’s western edge, through the woods to learn to identify the flora and fauna, and into science labs where even the youngest students regularly design their own experiments.

Animals still play an im-
portant role, especially in the science rooms; in 2007, Lower School students were inspired to build a “Turtle Ranch” outside their science class-
room. Third graders still make lanterns and square dance at their Colonial overnight trip, and sixth graders write hiero-
glyphics during their study of ancient Egypt.

At a time when schools have reduced time outside the classroom, field trips and outdoor education remain important touchstones at Green Acres. Green Acres students and their teachers can be found anywhere from the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art, where fourth graders go to study geometric shapes, to London Town, in Edgewater, Md., where sixth graders participate in an archaeologi-
cal dig, to Gambrill State Park, where fifth graders spend a “regular” class day playing archery, Spanish, poetry and other subjects outdoors. The seventh grade trip to Chincoteague and eighth grade trip to New York are highlights of those years.

And, as a culminating experi-
ence, Graduation remains a unique Green Acres event: Each eighth grader is asked to share a passion—something that rep-
resents part of—who he or she has become as students reach another year of their life’s milestones. Students give speeches, write and perform skits and songs, make video biographies, display presentations, dance, juggle, and otherwise demonstrate their unique talents and interests.

At his first graduation ceremony, Neal described the performances as “authentic ex-
pressions of meaning produced by our graduates rather than finely polished routines designed or directed by adults.”

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS after Alice Mendham Powell started her small school with a big vision, Green Acres remains com-
mitted to the same founding values and beliefs: That education is not about filling an empty vessel full of facts, but about the quest for lifelong learning. That even the young-

test students have a voice and something to contribute, and that learning should connect to the real world, and that a school should be a community in which parents and teachers together guide students to become responsible adults who collaborate and think creatively. That students will learn through doing—not simply listening to an all-knowing teacher. Neal underscored those values in sending off his first Green Acres graduating class in 2005, when he said: “Your teachers have given you the reading, writing, mathematical, scientific, artistic, and athletic tools that you need, but make no mistake—you have devel-
opped the habits of conviction, cooperation, open-mindedness, perseverance, service, empathy, and as much more. Take these habits with you, as well as the joy that comes from true accomplishment and lifelong learning.”

Thus do Green Acres stu-
dents continue to learn, and to carry their learning with them into the world.

“I urge you to hang on to your curiosity, your thirst for understanding, and your willingness to broaden your thinking. Perhaps the fortune in a fortune cookie that I received last year made this point the best: ‘Read Education is designed not to fill one’s mind, but rather to open it.’ Albert Einstein, who certainly could have rested on his laurels, asserted that ‘The important thing is not to stop questioning.’”

—Neal Brown, Head of School, in his first graduation address, June 2009

Full circle: New head of school Neal Brown found time to catch up with Gold Powell Perry, daughter of Alice Mendham Powell, in his first year.

Neal Brown describes progressive education at Green Acres in the 21st century as “authentic education.” He cites his mentor, Ted Sizer, the former dean of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, who argues that it is “people’s habits that we most value and respect” and that schools must therefore “nurture good habits.”

The school is less about iso-
lated skills and more about “pushing out into the world young citizens who are soaked in habits of thoughtfulness and reflectiveness, joy and commit-
ment,” Neal writes. While schools are responsible for teaching students reading, writing, math, science, and art, “what makes people successful has perhaps more to do with their openness to new ideas—curios-
ity and thirst for understanding—than with the specific knowledge that they carry.”

—Lisa Nevans Locke

Among the constants in any progressive school, one might find: opportunities for collaboration and reflection among students; a deep commitment to the value of the arts; rigorous academic problem-solving; dedication to taking advantage of outdoor resources throughout the year and across the curriculum; and respect for each student, no matter the age, and his or her work.
Progressive education, the core philosophy of Green Acres, is a term that school leaders, at Green Acres and elsewhere, have both embraced and struggled to define over the past century and more. Green Acres founder Alice Mendham Powell worked hard to educate the public about progressive education. In 1937, she helped found the Washington branch of the Progressive education Association, which frequently met at Green Acres. In 1938, the school held an exhibit that showcased the work of students at 12 progressive schools from New York to New Mexico. It featured an operetta score and libretto, carded wool, and a five-foot-square medieval city, all the work of children from these schools.

In a 1941 interview with the Washington Post, Alice explained that training citizens begins in preschool. Her students learned firsthand about community life and democracy by visiting farms, stores, firehouses and police stations. If a child is shown how important it is to have garbage removed from a home and takes part in it himself, “he has a respect for the garbage man as an individual performing a service to the community, rather than as a menial,” Alice told the Post.

The term “progressive” became unfashionable in the 1950s; Green Acres eschewed the label while continuing to offer an arts-rich, hands-on program. A brochure from the time says: “[Green Acres'] founders believed that education should not be identified with either of the two points of view then prevalent: on the one hand, ‘progressive’ methods that often made the child the victim rather than the beneficiary of experiments, and on the other hand, traditionalism, unmodified by the scientific advances of the 20th century…. Green Acres has charted a course between these two extremes. The school is still fusing the best of the new methods with the most valuable of the old traditions.”

Traditional and progressive education are not mutually exclusive, Green Acres Director Gabriel H. L. Jacobs wrote to the Washington Post in 1962: “It is perfectly possible to have good discipline and order and yet have a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in which children perform best. To keep alive the bright enthusiasm of the first grader just starting his first week of school should be the goal of any school regardless of method, for the children who want to learn, learn best.”

Regardless of the label, Green Acres continued to practice an active approach to learning. In a typical week in 1964, sixth grade students in Sally Nash’s class wrote and performed skits on the origins of religion, government, and family groups. A skit on the probable beginnings of human language had two girls crawling on the floor growling at each other, according to a school newsletter. Sally told observers that preparing the skits was a good way to learn facts and understand ideas, and that dance and pantomime taught students how to structure dramatic episodes. Her students created hieroglyphics when they studied Egypt, performed a classical drama when they studied Greece, and wrote a political satire when they studied Rome.

During their study of the Elizabethan era in the 1970s and ‘80s, eighth graders performed Shakespeare, ate food of the period, dressed in elaborate costumes, and played the music and sang songs of the time.

In 1983, six Green Acres representatives attended a progressive education conference in Pennsylvania, the first such gathering in 30 years. Jim Phang, then president of the Green Acres board, says the conference energized Green Acres leaders and re-established commitment to progressive education. He saw some of the ways in which Green Acres’ dedication to progressive education played out daily, such as its governance.

“Very few schools include staff members on their boards,” Jim says. “I thought that had a lot to do with why Green Acres was the way it was.”

In a 1994 newsletter Lower School Head Ursula Ferro described pre-K education at Green Acres.

Strangely, many adults still seem to be skeptical when school seems to be “fun”—surprising, perhaps, given the overwhelming evidence that people, adults as well as children, learn best when they are engaged in their work.