

BEAVERTON VALLEYTIMES

Arbor School founder stresses small community, interaction with land

BY KRISTEN FORBES

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The Arbor School of Arts and Sciences in Tualatin is 21 years old, thanks in large part to founder and director Kit Hawkins. A long and personal dream for Hawkins, starting the school meant offering students an opportunity she didn't feel they were getting under the traditional school system.

The year 1988, says Hawkins, "really seemed like the right time in my career and very much the right time in Portland's history. There was a big bulge of little children and not very many alternatives in the metro area."

She originally secured five acres of land to start with a group of 16 fourth- and fifth-graders in 1989.

"What I hoped to do was found a school that was small, and the community was intimate enough that the children really felt known by one another. We could work on matters of character in the context of that smaller community," says Hawkins of her vision for the school.

"I wanted the intellectual goals of the school to be wider and broader and deeper than those that are commonly held for children. My belief is that they could do much more than they were commonly asked to do. I wanted them to tackle the biggest ideas that the world has to offer. And any school that is focusing on preparing children for the future needs to focus on creativity and problem solving.

"It's not possible to know everything there is to know, but it is possible to learn how to face situations in new ways. So, I wanted to construct a school where, from the ground up, all of the goals were well integrated into the structures that put the school together," she says.

In part, this means accessibility – Arbor School of Arts and Sciences has a modest tuition structure and attempts to always match the per-student expenditure of the public schools. And in part, this means allowing students to live under an umbrella of large, broad, important thematic ideas.

"The kids spiral through a curriculum of important science concepts, historical periods and cultural ideas," she says. "Reading and writing and mathematics are often used in service of these studies."

In addition to lots of research, reading and writing, direct and hands-on involvement with the land is stressed.

"That means really being natural historians as well as pretend anthropologists," Hawkins says of the relationships students foster with the land.

The youngest students enact the Lewis and Clark expedition and archeological studies; the older students practice field research techniques by collecting and examining as many terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates on campus as they can find. Last fall they found more than 1,000.

"The kids are deeply involved in hands-on, minds-on work, and there's a great deal of attention given to research and strength in writing," says Hawkins. "And mathematics is seen as not only a study in its own right, which is certainly is, but also as a tool in understanding science and understanding culture."

What started with 16 fourth- and fifth-graders in 1989 is now a full-fledged K-8 school on 26.7 acres. In their eighth-grade year, students take on a senior project in a field of interest. They find a mentor in the field and work for a year. The work produced during this time, Hawkins says, is always impressive.

Before founding Arbor School, Hawkins worked for 18 years in nearly every aspect of the school system – library, kindergarten, third grade, sixth grade, on the board of trustees, on head searches, as an

evaluator on the finance committee, etc.

“I really had an opportunity to see into the institutional life of a school,” says Hawkins. “That was really wonderful training.”

Working with children and their families, then watching them grow and develop – often over a period of nine years – is her favorite part of the job.

“The oldest of our graduates is only 30, so they’re still young people,” says Hawkins. “But they’re already doing amazing things in the world.”

The Arbor School of Arts and Sciences is located at 4201 S.W. Borland Road in Tualatin. The Web site is www.arborschool.org.

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