

Chapter Four
Woodlawn: The Middle Years

William "Billy" Holesburg - Billy was a custodian at Woodlawn when it was still an elementary school. He then became an important figure at the alternative high school until he transferred to retain his job security. Before he left, the Woodlawn Yearbook Staff asked him this question:

Q: Do you remember your first impression of "The New School?"

A: Yes. I was working in the building and in came Ray and his wife. I took one look at him in his beard and sandals and all and called my supervisor to tell him I wasn't working with any h'ppies. He didn't transfer me. Now when folks ask me how it was working at Woodlawn, I tell them that those aren't hippies, those are good people. Working at Woodlawn was the finest privilege in my career with the county.¹²⁸

A Woodlawn identity was recognizable immediately. Students walked around the school in bare feet and torn jeans, they did not go to class every day, and they, together with their teachers, were the governing body of the school. There were no bells, no hall passes, no tardy slips. There was not even a cafeteria. Woodlawn did not have a National Honor Society, there was no Woodlawn football team, and the students did not have a Junior/Senior Prom. There was no on-campus policy, and students were free to come and go as they pleased. There was no principal, and the head teacher who supervised the school wore sandals and blue-jeans and drove a Volkswagen 'Magic' Bus to school. The Woodlawn Program was not traditional, and in Arlington many referred to it as 'Hippie High.'

To a degree that stereotype was true. Woodlawn did oppose and reject conventional standards. Aside from Town Meeting there was no set structure at the school. "The teachers did not police the halls to make sure that students were in a classroom, and there were no unauthorized areas of the school to keep students out of. [The structure] found in traditional schools simply did not exist at Woodlawn."¹²⁹ There was no dress code or rule prohibiting male students to wear their hair long, and perhaps the most obvious reason

¹²⁸William "Billy" Holesberg, interview by Woodlawn Yearbook Staff, Arlington, Virginia, Spring 1978, page 5.

¹²⁹Adelaide Rusch, (art teacher at Woodlawn), interviewer unknown, "Quotes for a Book," page 1.

Woodlawners were called hippies was because students looked like them. The art teacher, Ma Rusch, once had some of those male students pose for a picture as Christ and his disciples in the famous Last Supper. Indeed, "one thing you could say about the school, is that [it] put all of the barbers in town out of business."¹³⁰

Student relationships with the home school did not change from the first year. The 1975-1976 Student Guide Book warned Woodlawn students who did visit their home schools "to act like one of the crowd - wear shoes, smoke in the smoking courts, and be 'courteous,' because home school administrators had the right to give Woodlawn students detention, deny them entry, or dream up any other punishment if the 'outsiders' broke their rules."¹³¹ Therefore when students returned to their home schools for honor societies, sports teams, or chemistry class they behaved according to the traditional schools' rules. The "us" and "them" dichotomy never ceased to exist. Though some Woodlawn students were in advanced chemistry classes and on varsity track teams they were still labeled hippies because they were not mainstream kids.

Two thousand students attended the traditional high schools, but Woodlawn never had more than two hundred and forty. The small size of the school therefore fostered a friendly and informal atmosphere. Teachers were not antagonistic, they were approachable. In part this was because each served as an academic advisor, Woodlawn's adaptation of the guidance counselor, to approximately twenty students. Students chose their advisors and talked with them about "report cards, grades, the weather, SAT's [their] state of mind, or anything else that came up."¹³² Advisor-advisee relationships were casual. They allowed teachers to get to know their students, and they allowed student to get "know not only the teacher, but the person behind the teacher

¹³⁰Ray Anderson, "Quotes for a Book," page 3.

¹³¹Student publication. Student Guide Book, Arlington, Virginia, 1975, page 2.

¹³²Ibid.

as well."¹³³ The staff liked the students. They ate lunch with them, they had discussions with them, Ray Anderson even let students borrow his car. At the alternative students were not just another number. Classroom doors were always open and teachers had time "to deal with their students as persons, on a one-to-one basis." Though each student chose one teacher as his/her personal academic advisor, every teacher offered guidance to every student. If a student was having personal, family, or relationship problems in most cases he/she would talk with a teacher about what was troubling him/her. The Woodlawn staff provided a sympathetic ear, and "a number of students who went through traumas got genuine benefit from speaking with some of their teachers."¹³⁴ The small size of Woodlawn then, created an intimate environment which allowed students and teachers to get beyond formalities and forge actual friendships.

Hallways were not full of nameless faces and cold shoulders. At Woodlawn "everyone knew each other," and that made the school a friendlier place.¹³⁵ "At Yorktown if you asked somebody for a slug of their milk at lunch, they would crack your eyes out. But at Woodlawn, Joe Blow walks up to person X and says 'I'm thirsty,' and immediately he gets a frosty cold ten ounce coke in his face."¹³⁶ No one was better than anyone else at Woodlawn. If a trashcan fell over, "students helped [Billy] clean up. [Whereas] at other schools students would laugh at [the custodian] if [he] asked for help."¹³⁷ A sense of community pervaded the school building. Woodlawners could easily discern all visitors and new students. Despite efforts to remain an

¹³³Kevin Macelhorn - student, "Quotes for a Book," page 1.

¹³⁴Kallen interview, 26 March 1996, page 2.

¹³⁵Blair Reischer, interview by Christy Mach, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 11 March 1996, page 4.

¹³⁶Kevin Macelhone, (student), "Quotes for a Book," page 1.

¹³⁷William "Billy" Holseberg, (Woodlawn Custodian), "Quotes for a Book," page 2.

"inconspicuous 'student,'" one reporter was "repeatedly asked: 'you're new here aren't you?'"¹³⁸ Similarly, if you were a participant in the Woodlawn Program and "you were walking down the hall after being absent a day several people would ask: 'where have ya been?'"¹³⁹ Students took an active interest in their school. They created it, they shaped it, and they managed it.

Town Meeting gave every member of Woodlawn an equal voice in running the program. Discussions centered on policy decisions, allocation of funds, and new ideas. If students wanted to change the grading system, they would take it to TM. If they wanted someone to come in and teach them basket weaving, TM would vote on the budget available to pay the craftsman. Or, if a teacher wanted a water-balloon-fight day (WB Day) , TM would decide if and when to have it. Not all issues were passed by Town Meeting, but all were discussed, and all decisions were made by both the staff and the students.¹⁴⁰ A teacher's opinion was valued no more than that of a student. A teacher's argument was listened to no more closely than a student's argument, and the head teacher's vote weighed no more heavily than that of the student sitting beside him. At Town Meeting students and teachers were equals. That sense of equality did not disappear once the meeting was adjourned. At Woodlawn, students and teachers were equals in all circumstances, all classrooms, and all contests.

Students were treated as adults and they lived up to what was expected of them. There were no discipline problems at Woodlawn. Students did not vandalize the bathrooms or write on school walls. When their janitor needed help in the hallway they helped him, and students worked with their teachers

¹³⁸Mark Osmun. "Experimental school under way." *Arlington News*, November 23, 1971.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰Technically parents had a vote at TM as well, however, since Town Meeting met in the middle of the day when most parents were at work, they generally abstained.

to develop a relevant curriculum that met necessary requirements. "Rather than being told what it was they were going to study, students had a say in directing their education."¹⁴¹ Sometimes students wanted specialized classes that Woodlawn teachers did not feel qualified to teach. To make those classes available, a portion of the budget was set aside for the purpose of hiring specialists. Students interested in a specific course would search out the prospective teacher and present the course and the teacher to the town meeting for approval and allocation of funds. Some courses included: anthropology taught by a professor from American University, Latin American history taught by a retired foreign service officer, inside broadcasting taught by a local radio station sales manager, and pottery taught by a professional potter.¹⁴² Many students did volunteer work or had internships in the D.C. area for which they received credit in a related course. "An enormous number of students worked on independent study projects."¹⁴³ For example, a student would receive psychology credit for volunteering to work with the mentally retarded, or a student would work in a Mexican grocery store and earn Spanish credit.

Outsiders accused the Woodlawn community of having no academic standards. They called it the "druggie school, and claimed that the students were stupid."¹⁴⁴ "People were prone to make statements that students and teachers did no work and that they just sat around all day goofing off."¹⁴⁵ To the contrary, "what went on inside the classrooms was not all that different at Woodlawn than it was at the traditional schools."¹⁴⁶ Students at Woodlawn had

¹⁴¹Adelaide Rusch, "Quotes for a Book," page 1.

¹⁴²Blair Reischer. Student Guidebook, Arlington, Virginia, June 1975, page 10.

¹⁴³Ellen Kurcis, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia 23 February, 1996.

¹⁴⁴Nancy Ensley - student, "Quotes for a Book," page 2.

¹⁴⁵Kevin Macelhorn, "Quotes for a Book," page 1.

¹⁴⁶Ellen Kurcis interview.

to meet all state requirements for graduation. They had to take all of the necessary English, math, and science courses just as everybody else. Students went to class, studied the material, had tests, and turned in papers just like other high school students. The difference at Woodlawn was that every class did not meet every day, students were allowed to work independently, and they were not punished for working creatively.

Interdisciplinary classes and electives kept classes new and exciting.¹⁴⁷ Instead of studying American literature for an entire school year, students and teachers worked together to develop English electives such as folklore or utopian communities. The teachers and students who were criticized as 'doing nothing all day long' felt that actually they were doing more work. "It was difficult" not only to "come up with new and creative elective courses" but also to keep up with the independent study projects.¹⁴⁸ The flexible schedule and innovative electives made the school "alternative" and it kept the school exciting, but it was also a lot of work.

Just because it was an alternative program did not mean Woodlawn was any easier than the traditional schools. Students worked hard, and they did so for two reasons. First, they had to perform equally well as the rest of the high school students in the county for the program to continue. Secondly, and more importantly, students at Woodlawn worked hard because they "were genuinely interested in learning for the sake of learning."¹⁴⁹ They were excited about the classes that they took, and they wanted to share what they learned with other students. Lillian Shorb never took a photography class, but she learned how to take pictures and develop film from students who did. Learning at Woodlawn worked in an unstructured way.

¹⁴⁷Interdisciplinary classes combine two or more subjects into one comprehensive course. An elective class is one that lasted for one quarter of the school year.

¹⁴⁸Ellen Kurcis interview.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

The school did gradually adopt 'traditional' practices into its Program. In the Fall of the 1972-1973 school year Advanced Placement (AP) classes were offered for the first time. AP classes operated very traditionally. They required more classroom hours, teachers lectured, and because AP courses lasted the entire academic year, students in those classes could not take elective courses or do independent study. They chose a more regimented course, and consequently they chose more structure and less freedom in their education.

Tenth grade students were also added to Woodlawn during its second year of operation. The addition inevitably increased the structure of the program. Woodlawn remained small, and the addition was hardly detrimental, but more students meant more structure. Tenth grade students had more required courses, and the program had to meet their needs. Many of the first year students resented the changes made to their program. "They complained that the second year was nothing like the first."¹⁵⁰ During its first year Woodlawn was experimental precisely because it was the school's first year of operation. Old-timers wanted the program to "continue to be experimental. [They] wanted to try different things, prove they worked, and then move on to new things," whereas the newcomers who outnumbered the old-timers 4:1 had a different vision of Woodlawn.¹⁵¹ "They had heard how great the school was and they wanted it to be the same -- an alternative."¹⁵² Woodlawn catered to its students, and for many who had participated in the first year of the program the second year was a disappointment. However, those students were a minority, and the majority of the school did remain enthusiastic about the program.

¹⁵⁰Anderson interview, page 38.

¹⁵¹Blair Reischer interview, page 2.

¹⁵²Ibid.

The addition of tenth grade students also brought Woodlawn's first appointed teacher to the program. Ray Anderson hired all of the first year teachers himself. He would not be entitled that authority after the program began. During the first year, town meeting voted that all new staff members be interviewed by a committee of students, teachers and parents, and not just the head teacher. It was a shrewd decision on the part of town meeting, one that would ensure a teaching staff that the Woodlawn community believed would live up to the ideals of the school. However, Arlington County did have rules of seniority from which Woodlawn staff was not exempt. If the school budget was cut, the teachers with the least experience in the county were fired so that senior staff would not lose their jobs. Similarly, if a school offered a new course and needed a new teacher, someone with seniority in the county would be appointed to the job before a school like Woodlawn would be allowed to interview applicants for the position.

The Woodlawn community did not resist county mandates, such as the addition of the tenth grade, or the staff seniority rule, but they did not let the county directives be a detriment to their program. Maryann Schwab was the physical education teacher assigned to Woodlawn in the Fall of 1972. She had seniority in the county, but she was not a good match for the school. Schwab was not comfortable with the informal atmosphere at Woodlawn, and she left the program halfway through the year. For months, tenth grade students had no physical education instruction. This was not a problem until the end of the school year when the county administration strongly suggested that "students spend a certain amount of time doing P.E."¹⁵³ In response, Anderson opened the Woodlawn building one weekend, and all of the tenth grade students went to school and played basketball and volleyball, cramming the entire year's worth of P.E. into a two day period. Similar physical education weekends were

¹⁵³Anderson interview, page 45.

held other years, and some students even received credit for the course by walking to school.

The staff occasionally used unorthodox teaching methods at Woodlawn. Once a year they lured the juniors into taking state competency tests. Three weeks before the tests were given, teachers of history, government, and social studies worked to prepare the students for the exam. All eleventh grade students were told that if they did not know what the "Emancipation Proclamation was, or what a Yellow Dog contract was, or the Teller Amendment," that they had better come to the seminar review sessions. "Of course [teachers] would throw out some stuff that students had never heard of just to scare them a little," but it worked.¹⁵⁴ The students came, the teachers drilled them, and they always did fine on the tests. The test scores satisfied the school board, and Woodlawn was allowed to continue with its alternative teaching methods.

Over the years critics did complain about the school. Conservatives argued that its image reflected badly on the Arlington community, and that the school chased off good teachers like Maryann Schwab. "They shook their heads and disagreed," but they never did much more than that, and they did not have reason to.¹⁵⁵ There were no discipline problems at Woodlawn, the program appeared to be educating people, and the school was small enough that it did not threaten the traditional programs. There were no valid reason to close down the alternative.

Support within the county administration also kept critics at bay. Associate Superintendent Wilson, who was greatly respected throughout the community, supported alternative education in Arlington. He was "an advocate for all children," and he recognized that not all students performed

¹⁵⁴Anderson interview, page 48.

¹⁵⁵Harold Wilson interview.

well or enjoyed the traditional school setting.¹⁵⁶ Wilson afforded Woodlawn the flexibility and protection it needed to establish itself as a legitimate alternative to traditional education in the county.

The participants in the Woodlawn Program were equally remarkable. They were the people who made the program work. Over the years "Ray Anderson did an amazing job."¹⁵⁷ County administrators afforded him flexibility, but only because Anderson proved himself capable of successfully juggling the roles of teacher and administrator. Harold Wilson "trusted Ray Anderson implicitly," and the administrator stated that Anderson "was primarily responsible for the success of the school."¹⁵⁸ The teachers at Woodlawn also deserve a tremendous amount of credit for making the program work. They brought life to learning in the relaxed atmospheres of their classrooms. Woodlawn's teachers were dedicated educators, and they worked hard to meet the changing needs of their students.

As is to be expected, the student body changed over the years. Politically active students stood out in the first few years, and then political activism gave way to art. In the mid-seventies, students at Woodlawn became very active in drama and then photography. They were the "artistic, non-conventional folks,"¹⁵⁹ and they wrote, directed, and starred in their own productions. Certainly the traditional schools produced future playwrights and actresses as well, but at Woodlawn creativity was unrestricted. One did not find plays with the title 'A Virgin to the Grave' at Wakefield, Washington-Lee, and Yorktown, and students at those schools did not publish uncensored books of their own photographs, or school annuals. At Woodlawn students were all very 'in tune' with their feelings and the feelings of others, as their various

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Ellen Kurcis interview.

¹⁵⁸Wilson interview.

¹⁵⁹Anderson interview, page 24.

projects reflect. As an independent study project for English, one student went to the county welfare office and researched the amount of food money allotted to someone on welfare. For three months she only ate what she could buy with food stamps. She "read books on the subject and kept a diary of how it felt to live that way."¹⁶⁰ The students did not abuse the liberties given them at Woodlawn. Instead, they used their time constructively, which proved yet another strength of the program.

At the high school level the program prospered in the seventies. Not only did Woodlawners match their mainstream peers, but after the first few years they surpassed them academically. One indicator of the academic achievement is the average SAT scores at each school.

	<u>Woodlawn</u>		<u>Arlington</u>		<u>National</u>	
	Verbal	Math	Verbal	Math	Verbal	Math
1975-76	524	496	473	513	431	472
1976-77	515	505	462	504	429	470
1977-78	520	483	471	505	429	468

These results show the high level of academic achievement of Woodlawn students.¹⁶¹ In 1974 the school boasted that over sixty percent of Woodlawn students went on to college, and that same year, "five of Arlington's 16 National Merit semifinalists were from the Woodlawn senior class."¹⁶² The percentage of Woodlawn graduates to go on to college always matched that of the traditional schools. In fact, the alternative was often a haven for the county's brightest students.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

¹⁶¹Nancy Houghtaling. Report on Alternative Schools, Arlington, Virginia, June 15, 1979, page 20.

¹⁶²Natalie Ganley. "An Experiment in Learning." *The Arlington Journal*, Arlington, Virginia, 14 February 1974.

Students at Woodlawn fit into one of four groups. First, there were the very bright students. Anderson called them the "bright but bored."¹⁶³ Some, like Martha Bozman, had been in the county's 'gifted' seminar program from fifth grade up through high school. When she arrived at Yorktown, she "was bored with the slow pace" at which many of her classes were moving.¹⁶⁴ The idea of choice and self-directed learning at Woodlawn appealed to her, and that is why she came.

The second group of students were those who preferred a smaller school setting. At Woodlawn, students were individuals, not names. "Lots of them just wanted a quiet place to get away from the gigantism of the large traditional schools."¹⁶⁵ The alternative offered an education that was personalized and not cold and impersonal like the traditional high schools. Woodlawn's small size also enabled it to be flexible, which allowed students to exercise control over their education.

The third group of students at Woodlawn "were the non-achievers."¹⁶⁶ These were the kids that the traditional schools labeled as 'troublemakers.' They were not interested in learning, and for them going to Woodlawn was the easiest way to get through school. "They would go to class for a few hours and then go work for the rest of the day."¹⁶⁷ A large percentage of these students would have posed a threat to the program, but they never constituted more than a small minority at Woodlawn.

The last group of students were those whose parents and teachers did not expect to come. "They were the B students, lost in the big schools. They

¹⁶³Anderson interview, page 38.

¹⁶⁴Martha Bozman, interview by Christy Mach, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 11 March 1996.

¹⁶⁵Blair Reischer interview.

¹⁶⁶Ray Anderson quoted in Natalie Ganely's article "An Experiment in Learning." *The Arlington Journal*, February 14, 1974.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

never caused any trouble, but they were often too shy to get to know teachers or other students."¹⁶⁸ Students like Lillian Shorb "hated the big school atmosphere. At Wakefield, there were too many cliques, and if you weren't athletic or really smart it was hard to fit in."¹⁶⁹ To some, Woodlawn was an ideal alternative.

Many people thought that the school would close down after two or three years of operation. They thought that after the politically active original students graduated, there would not be a voice to demand an alternative program in Arlington. The critics, however, were wrong. Woodlawn never suffered from a lack of student interest, and after three years it became apparent to Ray Anderson that Woodlawn would continue. The revelation developed as a student told him a story: when she went to her guidance counselor to get permission to go to Woodlawn, the teacher asked "Why? You are such a good student, why would you want to go there?" The girl did not tell her guidance counselor why, but she did tell Ray Anderson. She said that she was quiet. In the traditional schools she had attended, she sat in the back of the class and did not raise her hand a lot, and so the teachers did not call on her. Half the time she felt that they did not even know her name. The student did not like school that way. She wanted to be part of a group. She wanted to be involved.¹⁷⁰ At Woodlawn she was both, and as long as there were students who preferred the flexible, student-centered, individualized alternative, there would be a demand for Woodlawn. The Program was more than just a school. It was a community committed to equal relationships in life and in learning.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Lillian Shorb, interview by Christy Mach, Arlington, Virginia, 9 March 1996.

¹⁷⁰Anderson interview, page 27-28.