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Let Down the Barriers

By BOB HERBERT
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More than 30 years ago, in one of the many nasty fights over integrating the New York City schools, there was a huge march in a snowstorm across the Brooklyn Bridge. Fifteen thousand boisterous protesters, most of them women and all of them white, marched from the Board of Education in Brooklyn to City Hall in lower Manhattan. What they wanted was no change in their mostly white neighborhood schools. Integration may or may not have been O.K. as a concept, but steps to make it a reality got those parents out of their homes and onto the bridge in a hurry.

The protesters, singing "We got troubles of our own," were anxious not to be seen as racists. When a black man named Walker Williams was spotted on the bridge, a protest leader yelled through a megaphone: "Put him in the middle! Put him in the middle!"

Mr. Williams was given a placard and hustled into the line of march. He was not a parent but that didn't matter; he was black. Almost certainly he was confused. A reporter for The Times wrote, "After a few minutes, he disappeared."

That was in March 1964. Thirty-three years later real integration is still a radical notion, still rare. But it's not dead. The Manhattan Country School, to cite one example, has long attracted parents who want their children to grow and learn in an atmosphere far removed from the destructive rhythms of racial isolation, prejudice and hate.

There are other examples, but fewer than you might imagine as we near the close of a century that delivered so much in terms of science and technology and so little in the way of tolerance and human understanding.

Now comes a tiny experimental effort in the Hamptons that is bringing together families from breathtakingly different backgrounds. At the Hayground School, housed for the moment in the Bridgehampton Methodist Church, small children can be found chattering easily and knowledgeably about a Passover seder, a traditional Native American snake dance, the life of Fannie Lou Hamer, or Dickens.

The school was founded a year ago by a group of parents and educators who felt that in addition to a rigorous academic environment, children should have the opportunity to interact normally and regularly with youngsters from a variety of backgrounds. The idea is to try to resolve, at least to some degree, the perpetual conflict between the ideals of equality and brotherhood on which this country was founded and the relentless hostility and suspicion that saturate our daily lives.

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There are fewer than 60 pupils, ages 5 to 14, at Hayground. They come from very wealthy families and families that are not quite sure how next month's rent will be paid. Some are white and some are black. Some are Latino and some are from the 300-acre Shinnecock Reservation in Southampton.

"It's great to watch the kids interact with such freedom, such abandon and such joy," said Roy Scheider, the actor, who is one of the founding parents of the school. "This is normal for them. I wish that we adults could have the same feeling."


Mr. Scheider, who recently did a benefit performance for the school with the actor Danny Glover, recalled the atmosphere of prejudice within his own family when he was growing up. "My father, who had a service station in New Jersey, would always spew out this venom about black people. Just the worst kind of stuff. But there was this guy who worked for him with the unlikely name of Friend Avery, who was black. And he was crucial to my life."

Friend Avery became a mentor to Roy Scheider, filling emotional and other needs that Mr. Scheider's father did not. At Hayground, the relationship between Mr. Avery and Mr. Scheider is reflected in myriad ways. When an effort is made to discard prejudices and stereotypes, mentors can come from many directions, and unusual friendships can become the norm.

Hayground is privately financed and two-thirds of the youngsters receive some form of tuition assistance. The school, which has a waiting list of applicants, will move into a new building in September. It is far too early to tell if Hayground will be a success. But for people who think the nation's ideals should be something more than a cynical sound bite, its splendid and courageous mission is tremendously important.

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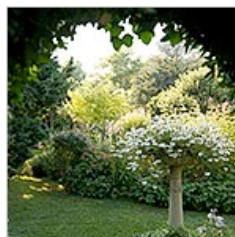


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