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HAYGROUND

Seventh Graders' Research

By Kate Maier

(05/24/2007) Last Thursday afternoon children, parents, and teachers gathered in Jeff's Kitchen, an open space with couches and screened skylights at the Hayground School, to hear seventh-grade students give presentations on what are called "senior learner's projects." As other children lounged barefoot on comfy-looking chairs or in patches of sunlight that streamed through the windows onto the floor, the young presenters used poster boards as visual aids as they spoke about immigration, serial killers, and the politics of black hair.

The presentation of senior projects is an annual tradition at Hayground, which has about 60 children enrolled between prekindergarten and seventh grade. But this year the excitement was palpable, because this is the first time the graduating class includes students who were enrolled in the prekindergarten class when the school was started in 1996.

Hayground is a private school with an unusually creative approach to learning that has earned it a reputation as a relaxed, "hippie" school, but the students there take their studies very seriously. The senior projects are the culmination of lengthy studies on topics of each student's personal choice. The seventh graders prepare a research paper under the guidance of a mentor, and then present their projects to the school. Recent themes included "How Atom Bombs Work," "Water Photography," and "Tarrant Folkdance."

This day, a handful of parents and relatives, along with teachers, and children



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Tembe Denton-Hurst, Luis Alfaro, and Abby Pawlick presented senior projects on the politics of hair braiding, immigration stories, and "nature versus nurture in the serial killer" at the Hayground School in Bridgehampton last Thursday.

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from the younger grades, had gathered in Jeff's Kitchen — among other things, a state-of-the-art cooking space, adjacent to the school's main building, named for one of the school's founders, Jeff Salaway, who died in 2001 — to hear three students make short presentations on “The Politics of Hair Braiding,” “Immigration Stories,” and “Nature vs. Nurture in the Serial Killer.”

Next door, a circle of younger students played handmade instruments and beat on drums with the school's visiting artist, Tiye Giraud. (They were practicing for a performance that is scheduled for tonight at 6 p.m.)

Tembe Denton-Hurst spoke frankly to the audience about media representation of the hair of black women. She answered questions from curious peers who had never had their scalps burned by a perm, and never had their mother iron their hair before a party. She told the story of the first time she had her hair straightened, and cited her research, which included reading a book called “Black Rage” by William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, and studying photo essays by Lorna Simpson.

“Black hair in its natural state isn't really represented,” she said of American media, and talking about cultural and climate differences between Africa and North America. “Black women failed to achieve female narcissism, like the original Barbie doll,” she said, citing something she learned in the book. “This has been a very big learning experience for me, and I will continue to research this area.”

“Before I did my senior learner's I had no intentions of trying to make a book, but I'd like to make it a book,” said Luis Alfaro, who brought some in the audience to tears with his presentation on his family's escape from political persecution in Guatemala and El Salvador. “I was born here, I didn't have to suffer,” he said. “But my family had passed through immigration, and I was interested in illegal immigration.” Although he is only in seventh grade, Luis said he is leaning towards social sciences in his college studies.

The younger children were brought out to the playground during a presentation on serial killers. Abby Pawlick gave a poster-board presentation on chromosomes and other biological factors that might explain the phenomenon of serial killers. Then she opened the floor, prepared to answer some heavy questions from the dozen or so adults in the room about her research. In violent personalities, there are themes of “manipulation, domination, and control,” she said.

“Is there always a sexual component?” she said in reply to a question from Toni Ross, one of the school's founders. “I think the pleasure that's gotten from it is akin to heightened sexuality.”

For Ms. Ross, this year's graduation will be an emotional one. Her daughter, Sara Salaway, is one of five students in a class of ten who have been at Hayground since about the age of two. Sara, whose parents were both founders, decided to do her project on the history of the school. She interviewed teachers, founders, and parents about the evolution of Hayground over the past 11 years.

“My daughter took the notion of the independent project really seriously,” Ms. Ross said. “She's always done something that's really important for her.” She recalled another project that Sara did on the Holocaust and how it related to her own family.

The difference between Hayground and other local schools is clear. And, according to Ms. Ross, it's constantly evolving. Parent involvement is encouraged: During a recent "helping hands" day, parents and students got together to paint and clean up different areas of the campus.

"Kids aren't coming here with tests, with traditional qualitative reports," she said. "When you come to something like this, you really see what's happening with these kids."

But with graduation drawing closer, the seventh graders are going to have to get used to some changes. Soren Hope and Lucie Kessler both left the school and came back, and are wary of educational experiences elsewhere.

"When I was first leaving Hayground to go to Ross, I'd never been in a class with subjects, grades, or tests," said Lucie, who spent three years at the Ross School and will return there next year, after graduation, under the stipulation that she learn a foreign language and get a math tutor. "It was just different," she recalled, "the uniform, the workload, and the classes."

According to Soren, leaving the school for Friends Seminary in Manhattan wasn't difficult on an academic level — but the adjustment to having homework and a structured schedule was difficult, which is why she chose to do her senior project on "The Homework Myth." Soren said she will most likely return to Friends when she graduates.

Sara, meanwhile, is headed off to the Ross School, where her brother is graduating this year. Other graduates are going to public schools, including East Hampton, and one might attend a boarding school in California.

"When I tell people I don't have grades, or tests, or subjects they look at me like I'm crazy; they don't think you can learn without having formal subject areas of study and tests," said Sara in her final research paper. But, she wrote, "I will always and forever have a place in my heart for the wonderful place that Hayground is. It has made me the person I am today."

