

# Revisiting Summerhill

Remember Summerhill? After decades of interest in the school, Ms. Cassebaum finally realized her wish to see it firsthand. She was not disappointed.

BY ANNE CASSEBAUM

**I**MAGINE a school that has no grades or required classes, a school that posts or boasts no scores, a school that measures its success by the happiness of its students. A day's visit to Summerhill convinced me that A. S. Neill's school represents a reality that is quite different from the academic ones most of us live in.



Although Summerhill was founded 80 years ago, the belief that children can best guide their own development is still radical. At Summerhill, this core tenet is put into action by allowing students the freedom not to attend classes and by giving them a voice in running the school. Indeed, children's votes in the weekly meetings are equal to those of adults.

I have wanted to visit the school ever since, decades ago, my students and I first embroiled ourselves in debate over Neill's *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. What

would giving children such freedom lead to? Would an environment based on such equality actually work? Since I teach on a campus that is quite conventional in its power structure, I continued to feel the pull of Neill's ideas.

Over the years, I had done Web searches on "Summerhill" and come up with nothing. Had the school dwindled and gone under? Had it been destroyed by a drug crisis? Had it been unable to survive without Neill's presence?

When teaching in London, I found that [www.s-hill.demon.co.uk](http://www.s-hill.demon.co.uk) will get you there and that the school indeed survives. In fact, Summerhill triumphs, you might say, if you visit the website and learn about the drama of Summerhill's vindication in court on 23

March 2000, following a decade of intense inspection. With all of the Summerhill community in court arguing for the defense, the school won the right to carry on without requiring students to attend their lessons and without being inspected for four years.

My e-mail asking to visit the school received a positive response. So on the morning of March 9, I walked to Summerhill with a heart full of hope. A cheery, white-haired woman riding a bicycle to the Leiston market passed me as I turned onto the street named Westward Ho.

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The entrance to the school grounds appears: the two stone sculptures and

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“Summerhill” painted in white on the low curve of a brick wall. Familiar and expected, the brick Victorian house that is the main building sprawls below, and huts, trailers, and buildings of all sorts form a village in front of acres of fields. Two other visitors — Julia and Andy — and I are escorted into the general meeting room, past Zoë Readhead (Neill’s daughter and the school’s current principal), and down the hallway to find our student guide, Jesse.<sup>1</sup>

“Did you see Zoë?” I ask Andy excitedly.

“Who’s Zoë?” he asks. Just the kind of visitor Neill would have loved. This is no earnest teacher and disciple. Instead, he is just a man beginning as a teacher and curious about this place that someone has told him he ought to check out. So he is here, toting a whole lot less baggage than I’ve brought with me.

Jesse obliges by taking pictures for me as he shows us around. With the students’ permission, we enter the art and woodwork rooms, where the creativity outshines the chaos and the children seem intent and satisfied. In other, empty rooms, we can see the generous proportions of the windows, feel the expanse of space, and still notice the grubbiness — this is, after all, a kids’ community with a healthy, funky sense of what is important.

Jesse lingers longest outside at the great beech, the oldest in Suffolk. Its elephantine branches beckon toward the sky, and Jesse talks of those who have climbed to the top. But the students make the rules here, and no one is allowed to pursue that mossy climb today, when it is rainy.

Back inside, Jesse explains the bulletin boards to us. The schedule shows flexible class times and wonderfully small classes; eight students would be a large class. Committee lists make it clear that kids are responsible for get-

ting kids to bed, for supervising housing, for giving tours to visitors, for planning social events, for organizing snack foods, and for working on sweatshop protests.

Soon, Jesse leaves us to rejoin his friends, and Molly, a chatty gamine with pink hair, takes over. “What’s best about Summerhill is poc” — the

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pocket money — £10 for the oldest children, sliding down to about £4 for the youngest. This is handed out on “slobbering day” — Saturday — the one day when Summerhill kids have decided that everyone can sleep in. Some other students nearby remind her that she is not supposed to chat up visitors.

Molly reluctantly takes us inside for break in a large, empty, yellow cafeteria. I try to get the day’s schedule to fit on a grid and ask Molly what time lunch is. The question confuses her, but she finds an answer: “Later.” As I check out the bulletin boards to choose the classes that I will request permission to visit, the cafeteria fills with first one child, then three or four, pots of hot tea, a plastic bin of cookies, a pitcher of milk, and noise, talk, and laughter that overwhelm the questions of earnest visitors. Visitors who want tea are brought cups and asked offhandedly to pour their own and clean up afterward.

Hearing all conversations and none, I am loving this moment. The room seems alive with happy chatter and

music. Then I realize that there really is music playing. At the far end of the room, a student or young teacher is rocking the room with ragtime. Across from me, two young guys pick up the beat and rock and roll their table in synch. The milk pitcher and tea cups catch the waves, and the milk begins to climb toward the rim, but the seas quiet when a slightly older girl comes back to her teacup and tells them to “sod off.”

Another piano player takes over, and the room moves to another beat. Then a third player works out chords and rhythms as the room slowly clears. More visitors have mingled together to chat, and Zoë stops by to say she will be back after break to answer questions.

Slowly, it emerges that there is a plan for the day, and it is a wonderful one: tour with students, break time, talk with Zoë, lunch off in town or on the grounds, and then back for a general meeting.

Zoë comes in with three students who are ready to talk to the collected visitors, who now include a prospective teacher and a family. She speaks in a practical way about how things work out, without any sense of superiority. The most passion shows through when she discusses adults’ pressuring about morality. She calls this the “*Lord of the Flies* mentality” — the notion that children won’t be good unless someone is pestering them about morals and telling them what to do.

The need to keep adults and their demands at a safe distance comes up. Are parents involved in the school? Zoë has presented requests from parents to participate, but it is the students who decide. “This is a kids’ community; it’s not a boarding school,” she reminds us.

Sam tells us how he has had to fight off his dad’s plans for him. His

father is successful in computers but hates the work. "The most I promised him is that I will test video games," Sam says. He goes on to comment on one of the practical dilemmas of the school. The cost is approximately £7,000 a year, cheap in boarding school terms but to many a barrier that everyone wishes away. "Usually one parent pays for Summerhill, and one approves of it," he explains.

Another barrier for some is that children need to come to Summerhill while they are young. The youngest are just 4 years old and local, as are about half the students. Fourteen is late because it can take years for a student to get over attitudes and behaviors formed elsewhere, and Summerhill relies on its older students to do much of the running of the school. Children are housed by age groups, depending on how much looking after they need. The small size of the school, just 67 students at present, allows for this.

New students and others whom staff members are concerned about are put on a "special attention" list that is reviewed weekly. Not attending lessons is no cause for concern, unless the child is new and is not attending because of fear of teachers or shyness. In such cases a private tutor is arranged. "Students really are free not to go to lessons," Zoë assures a delighted mother.

Relations with the town? Zoë tells us that they are still seen as quite odd and apart, although the kids from Summerhill may be less of a problem than those from local schools. In fact, in the court defense, Summerhill students and staff members questioned why anyone would want to close down a school in which pregnancy, drugs, violence, and bullying were not problems.

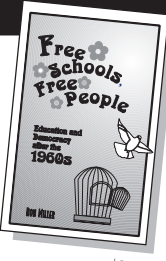
Our session with Zoë ends at lunch time. At 2 p.m., we reassemble for

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the general meeting. Only after visitors are voted permission to attend do we settle on the floor for a glimpse into the heart of Summerhill.

The young man who is conducting the meeting seems to be about 17 and has a crisp, focused style, with occasional "fuck offs" directed toward those whose chatter is getting in the way of his efficiency. No one seems offended, as everyone is eager to keep business moving. Little kids bail out early, sometimes even missing the opportunity to defend themselves from fines.

There's no electricity on, but the cloudy light of a March afternoon comes through tall windows that face west. Kids lounge, all ages mixed, against the dark paneling. Zoë is huddled over paper, recording minutes. Two lovers, a blond Anglo-Saxon boy and a Japanese girl, offer ideas as she

sits folded in his loose embrace. Above this scene, the walls are smeared and pocked; scrambled cables and wires hang from a ceiling corner.

The day's agenda presents challenges to the community; here's a sampling:

- Zoë mentions that she had to spend two hours in the police station last night because Dean was caught shoplifting a yogurt. A characteristic lack of moralizing follows.

"We've got a bad enough rep as it is and get followed around just because we're from Summerhill."

"Bastards like Dean don't make that any easier."

Someone points out that this is the second time Dean has been caught. "You are one of the richer kids in the community, you know."

"They [Dean and his cohorts] are not the only ones to get affected.

We're a community."

Someone proposes that Dean be gated for a week and banned from town until further appeal.

"Chris should have said something." The point is made that those with Dean had an obligation to stop him.

Finally, Dean speaks. "I think what I did was utter shit, and I want to completely apologize." And then he goes on to request that there be a one-week limit — until the end of the term — on his ban from town.

"You say you're sorry every time you do it."

"It's like hearing a machine talking."

"I was hungry," he offers in defense.

Molly, swinging out from her alcove near the chair, asks for a clarification. "Was it a yogurt or a chicken you nicked? A yogurt, I see. Well, I was going to say a chicken for 29 pence would be a very good deal."

The chair cuts her off and gets a quick decision on the punishment: gated for a week and banned from town pending further appeal.

• Sean gave a friend a Lego set for his birthday today and wants it back. He has put this item on the agenda. The comments make clear that you can't ask for a present back. One Summerhillian suggests that money from the fines budget be used to buy Sean a Lego set; then another fills in the fact that Sean has a duplicate Lego set that he was planning to give to his brother. Sean says nothing, but then asks to drop the case.

• An 8-year-old is up for fines for playing on computers during lesson time. His teacher raises her hand for a while before getting the chance to explain that she was confused about the time, since the lessons for young kids are done earlier; she would like them to skip the fine. Others argue

that he knew the times he could play. The vote goes against the teacher, and the fine stays.

• George reports that 10 quid had been nicked from his room. As he is questioned on the details, a boy next to him reports that he did it. The confession is met with applause; everyone is grateful for the time saved and the clear solution. The boy will repay the theft and be allowed no purchases until he has done so. "Well done for owning up," the chair concludes.

• William, who is from the local community, had an overnight ruined when he found "chucked up crisps" in his sleeping bag, "thousands of little bits." He is hurt and mad.

"Can we get lucky and someone own up?" asks the chair.

A series of denials follow.

The boy explains further. "Someone went to the effort of buying crisps just to annoy me, and I want to give them shit for it."

The older kids offer sympathetic responses. One tells him that they had crisps for dinner and not to imagine someone had planned this out. Another supports his concern and complains about bullying and the way they have seen William treated. "This shows a lack of respect, and we ought to sort it out," one comforter offers. But that doesn't happen at this meeting. Still, the support William has gotten seems to mean something to him.

After a few more quick items, the meeting is over. The room clears as the day brightens outside. Visitors comment that the meeting ran better than the ones they endure. Egos are given less room here, and, as Zoë says, the kids keep each other in touch with reality. After all, you aren't allowed to take presents back, and that, she feels, got across clearly. I am struck by the honest feelings that emerge when moralizing recedes.

Outside, Julia and I talk. She is impressed, but unconvinced. I don't worry about being convinced in any absolute way. The inspectors admitted in 1949 that an important educational experiment was taking place here. The courts reconfirmed this in March of 2000. Is it the answer? It's certainly one of them.

In the end, it is the community at Summerhill that stands out for me as much as the freedom. Members of a real community, from the youngest kids to the teachers and administrators, iron out their problems together in democratic ways. This shouldn't have surprised me so much. After all, freedom, at Summerhill, means being responsible for yourself. Being part of such a community is a powerful education in itself. How can we bring this democracy to our own schools and classes?

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Back with my college classes, I try to comment more on papers and grade less, offering students the chance to do self-evaluation and consulting with them more about the running of the class. Making such minor changes in a still conventional frame, I notice especially how controlling the grading system is, even as we lose control of grades. If inflated grades flood our honor rolls — and National Public Radio has reported that 41% of high school seniors have averages in the 90s — what larger purpose are they serving? If we use grades to bolster morale and spark motivation, as well as to control who is learning what, are we working against the building of a community of independent learners?

At the very least, Summerhill is one impressive answer to the question of how we build such a community.

1. All the names I use in this article are pseudonyms. 