



On the Tuesday before winter break, a spirited debate has broken out in Jamie Knorr's sixth-grade history class at Village School, the all-girls middle school he and Proal Heartwell founded two decades ago. A few of Knorr's students have just delivered their soliloquy, a dramatic discourse based on a character from Rosemary Wells' *Red Moon at Sharpsburg*, which they spent several weeks preparing.

"One thing I've been thinking about," Knorr says, "is I'm not clear why we have grades. The deal is, if everyone does what's asked of them, and does the best she can do, why, on this assignment, is there anyone here who would be upset by not receiving a grade?"

Several hands shoot up, and Knorr points to Ella. "I kind of want to get a grade," she says. "I know everyone would get an A, so it wouldn't be meaningful, but I still want to get one."

"The grade itself doesn't matter," counters Penelope. "But I would like to talk to you and get an idea of how I did."

"It would be awful if you didn't put a grade on our report card!" an outraged Kayleigh says.

"But you'd have my comments," Knorr says.

"On this we should have a grade," insists Julia. "I like your comments, but I feel like it would be so annoying if this didn't count for more."

"But you've accomplished so much, and you did a good job," Knorr says. "You have that internal gratification. You did a great job. You feel great. Isn't that the reward?"

"I understand that," says Laurel. "But on our report cards, it's nice to have something that shows our achievement. Even with your comments, we don't know if we would have gotten an A or a B."

On it goes—until a bell signaling the end of class rings. But instead of gathering their belongings and heading for the door, the 11- and 12-year-olds continue to make their cases for why grades do or do not matter. Finally, with a broad smile, Knorr tells the girls it's time to get a move on: "I don't want you to be late for math class."

### **Wanna be startin' somethin'**

Knorr and Heartwell met more than 20 years ago when both were teachers at Charlottesville High School. Heartwell had been teaching English for a decade, but says he wanted "to be in an environment that I had a little more control over." A place, he adds, where the decisions weren't made by people who were the furthest removed from the classroom. He and Knorr both enjoyed—and wanted to continue—teaching, but they envisioned doing it at a school that was run by teachers.

# School of

The pair's research showed most families were happy with their elementary and high school experiences, but middle school was another story. It "felt like a forgotten area, and when [students] came to CHS, there were a lot of bright kids who lacked certain skills," Knorr says. "Many were not strong writers or critical thinkers. They sometimes weren't able to express themselves verbally." Knorr and Heartwell thought they might be able to fix this if they opened a school where every teacher had the same children for grades five through eight. Not only would students develop academically, the pair reasoned, but teachers would instill in them confidence, self-reliance and the ability to speak up in class.

The initial reaction to Knorr and Heartwell's plan was lukewarm. There were already plenty of good schools in Charlottesville and Albemarle, friends and colleagues reminded them.

"That's why teachers don't start schools," Knorr says with a laugh. "People rolled their eyeballs at us." But it was 1994, and Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* had just been published. In the book, which would sell millions of copies and spend more than three years on the New York Times bestseller list, Pipher, a psychologist, claimed we were living in a culture that "limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized."

"On a pragmatic level, we needed a niche, something unique to Charlottesville," Heartwell recalls. "There was a lot of discussion then about gender inequality in the classroom, and we had the opportunity to address that by being a single-sex school. We were convinced that a single-sex environment would allow [girls] to be who they are and focus on learning and risk-taking. We wanted to create an environment where kids could be most successful."

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**"It all starts with teachers,"** says Jamie Knorr (previous page). **"Learning is personal: It's a personal relationship, and you have to love what you do."** **"A lot of what I try to do is just get the kids to relax and trust in themselves and their instincts because they are talented and creative,"** says Proal Heartwell (this page).



It took two men  
with a vision  
to create an  
all-girls village

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Head of School Eliza O'Connell is also Village's P.E. teacher. "So much of what is important in life can be learned pushing yourself and participating on a team," she says.

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For the school to succeed, the two men determined they needed 30 students in fifth and sixth grades in the first year. "We opened with 15," Heartwell says with a smile. Their operating budget was \$60,000, but enrollment doubled each year for the first four years, and the school has been fully enrolled since.

"The kids who came that first year were the pioneers who helped us create the traditions and the rules," Heartwell says. "They taught [two former high school teachers] what a reasonable amount of homework is."

For their part, Heartwell taught English, Knorr history, and both men taught P.E. They hired part-time math, science, music and drama teachers. They also hired a Latin teacher, and, to this day, some parents ask them, "Why Latin? Why not a modern language?"

"It's not just about learning Latin," Knorr explains. "Latin is something that reflects the spirit of the school—they're both about challenging the girls and allowing them to experience their own power of thought. Latin is not easy, but everyone is in the same boat, everyone has to do it."

Laurie Duncan, in her 11th year as Village's Latin teacher, says learning the language "gives the students a key to their own language and unlocks doors to others. That all the students share this language also en-

gages them more deeply in this intellectually rigorous, culturally enriching project."

Asked about the school's name, Knorr says, "We were way ahead of Hillary Clinton. We liked the linkage to the Jeffersonian idea of the academical village. And within a village, we take care of each other."

In starting their Village, now the oldest all-girls middle school in the country, "it wasn't just Proal and me," Knorr says. A lawyer in Heartwell's family stepped up, and Knorr's wife, Nancy, is a CPA. A sister-in-law is a graphic artist and there's a brother-in-law who's a contractor. Knorr's friends and family lent the pair \$400,000 so they could buy the building the school now occupies at 215 E. High St.

"We watched our expenses, and we went year-to-year," Knorr says of the early days. "Instead of saving money, we paid our teachers as much as we could possibly afford. It was always a concern that we did not have any fall-back."

What they did have, though, was downtown Charlottesville: Village School didn't need a library because a fine public one was two blocks away. McGuffey Park, Lane Field and the Key Recreation Center all served as the school's gym, and students took art classes in the Old Michie Building, a former printing plant that was turned into a community arts space in the late 1980s. They

volunteered every Tuesday at Christ Episcopal Church's Loaves & Fishes and learned to dance at a studio above Hamiltons' at First & Main. "Our location was attractive, and it continues to be," Heartwell says. "I find it odd when schools don't have a direct connection with their neighborhoods. Charlottesville is so rich in resources."

In February 2015, the school paid \$737,500 for the building next door on Third Street, which, when renovations were completed last fall, gave them another 3,300 square feet of space that is used for math, English and enrichment classes.

## The 'it' factor

Casey Kerrigan, the mother of two Village School grads and a current sixth-grader, calls Knorr and Heartwell "true visionaries." She says the time her older daughters—one in college at Oxford, the other recently accepted early action to Yale—spent at Village School "will always be the most significant four years of formal education they'll ever have in their lives. We've witnessed that Village School gives its graduates this 'it' that's hard to quantify, or even verbalize."

Kerrigan says an all-girls middle school was appealing because research showed "that in mixed-gender schools, girls are called on less, receive less feedback and gen-

erally display lower self-esteem. We had been hearing the mantra that the middle school years are difficult for either gender, and that just getting through those years was sufficient. Then we met the Village School faculty, who are devoted to turning [that time] into a thrilling, once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity."

"Middle school can be a really awkward and difficult time for girls," says Claire Wiley, a Village School alum who's now a senior at Northwestern University. "Looking back, I feel like being around other girls I was close with, who were also going through the same things, made the whole experience much more comfortable. ... I think my time in middle school was much easier than it would have been if I hadn't attended Village School. I've had conversations with people my age who say that middle school was the worst time of their life, and I was lucky to have this not be the case."

Eleanor V. Wilson, a professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, says the middle school years are when girls—and boys—are especially vulnerable as they are developing their sense of self-worth during these years. "In many ways," she says, "if students aren't given chances to develop their sense of self during this age span,

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## VILLAGE PEOPLE

**\$4,500**

Tuition for the 1995-1996 academic year

**99**

Percent of girls who start in fifth grade and graduate in eighth grade

**16**

Number of years the school has published *Jambalaya*, its student literary journal

problems may follow them into high school and beyond. Self-confidence that is encouraged at this critical time for both boys and girls is central to their becoming successful adults, no matter what path they may follow.”

And although many educators agree that girls tend to be overshadowed academically by boys in the classroom, Wilson says there can be drawbacks to same-sex education because separating boys and girls may “slightly influence social interaction with others. Also, some studies have shown that girls actually strengthen their sense of self-confidence when placed in academic dialogue with boys.”

In 2014, *The Atlantic* ran a piece titled “The Never-Ending Controversy Over All-Girls Education,” which quoted a *Science* piece co-authored by eight scholars who claim single-sex schools might actually reinforce cultural attitudes about gender differences and abilities, and leave both sexes unprepared to negotiate egalitarian relationships. Co-education, they say, gives girls and boys the opportunity to learn positive skills from each other. The authors also wrote that success at single-sex schools may have nothing to do with gender makeup, but rather with the characteristics of the students who enroll: Are they academically advanced to begin with? Does their socioeconomic status give them an educational leg up?

Eliza O’Connell, who was hired last summer as Village’s first head of school, has little time for questions like these. “Our goal is to give girls a voice, to engage curious learners and graduate students of the highest character who have a deep love of learning,” she says. The mother of three daughters, O’Connell says the school offers two things: a strong academic program and a single-sex academic and social experience “that just isn’t found in many schools. These are some of the most impressionable and vulnerable years of a girl’s life,” she says. “If girls come out of middle school confident and well-prepared, the sky’s the limit.”

Today Village School has 78 students enrolled in grades five through eight. They arrived from 14 different elementary schools, and the majority of them will go on to a public high school. There are between 32 and 38 “qualified” applicants for 20 places in each year’s fifth grade class, O’Connell says. All prospective students and their parents are interviewed, and every applicant takes the Woodcock-Johnson intelligence test. Following the end-of-January application deadline, the school’s entire full-time faculty of eight meets to “figure out” the incoming class, O’Connell says. “It isn’t about 20 girls who are exceptional at one thing; it’s about the strengths and weaknesses of 20 girls who will thrive together.”

Tuition for the 2016-2017 school year is \$14,214, plus an annual \$1,000 book, tech-

nology and activity fee. The school has a “very modest scholarship program,” says O’Connell, who has worked in development and marketing and sat on a variety of local boards, including the Virginia Discovery Museum, Charlottesville-Albemarle SPCA and the Senior Center.

“In a perfect world, our tuition would never increase,” she says, adding that creating a stronger scholarship program is “an absolute priority” for her.

Asked how the girls transition from the school’s small, nurturing environment to larger public and private high schools, O’Connell says the academic part is relatively easy, but socially, it’s a big change. “Honestly, most of the girls are ready and excited for the opportunity and diversity that awaits them. They are not afraid to ask for help or get involved.”

For Claire Wiley, the transition to Albemarle High School, with an enrollment of nearly 2,000 students, “wasn’t exactly easy, but it was one I wanted to make. After spending four years in a small school, I felt ready to make the leap.”

Heartwell says feedback from high school teachers is positive. “They tell us our kids

are good writers, they’re organized and they’re comfortable with adults because they’re so used to the give-and-take and interaction with adults here.”

## The next generation

Knorr and Heartwell are both in their 60s (66 and 61 years old, respectively), which means they’ve begun to think about the future of Village when they retire. Hiring O’Connell, who spearheaded the purchase of and fundraising for the new building, allows them to do less administrative work and focus on teaching.

Twenty years in is “a natural time for the school to consider the next chapter,” says O’Connell, who, in addition to serving as head of school, has taught physical education classes at Village for two years.

“Nobody can imagine [Knorr and Heartwell] not being here,” she adds. But stepping back from administration “gives them the energy to stay and teach longer.” She sees her role as “remaining true to the pillars that Jamie and Proal created, which includes giving teachers freedom to teach what they are

passionate about—real learning comes from having a passionate teacher.” O’Connell also does not “want to change the fundamentals of the school. I want to expand and go deeper where we have already been successful [as well as] create a network for our alumnae to promote each other and to be a voice for girls schools nationwide.”

It’s a chilly, gray January morning, and the girls in Heartwell’s seventh-grade English class are printing out final versions of their five-page “essay of inquiry,” which requires them to ask a question that doesn’t have a definitive answer and come up with their own conclusions. Heartwell tells his students that each of them will read aloud the first paragraph of her essay today. The student-selected topics range from “Where do superstitions come from?” and “What is art?” to “Can we really trust our brains when making a split-second decision?” and “What are the next steps in artificial intelligence—will robots one day take over the world?”

When it’s Libby’s turn to speak, she tells the class that her essay looks at how the stereotypes of princesses have changed our perceptions of girls. “The blue and pink divide,” she says.

“Are there any Disney princesses that are good role models?” Heartwell asks. “What about Belle? She likes to read books!”

“And Snow White is very kind,” says Libby, adding that her essay deals primarily with the physical proportions of princesses and how they affect young girls’ body images.

Heartwell points to Cordelia, who says her paper looks at the advantages and disadvantages of Title IX, the 1972 law that required gender equity for girls and boys in all education programs—including athletics—that were federally funded.

“The point you make about coaching,” Heartwell says. “What did you find out?”

“Before Title IX there were more coaching opportunities for women,” Cordelia says. “After Title IX, pay went up, and a lot of the coaching jobs went to men. Women were allowed to play sports but not coach.”

Now in his 31st year of teaching, Heartwell credits the energy and the age of his students for his longevity in the classroom. “They’re at a nice age and are not necessarily jaundiced about school,” he says. “I also have the opportunity to teach them for four years, so I get to know them well and I can challenge them in a non-threatening way that you have when you have a good rapport with your students.”

Heartwell says the girls are also willing to try things and take chances, “and they understand that things don’t always work out. Sometimes you fail, and this is a good environment for that to happen.” He likens what he does to something poet Wallace Stevens said: “You never write the perfect poem, only the poem that’s less wrong,” Heartwell quotes. “Well, we’re just trying to be less wrong.” ☺



Laurie Duncan, in her 11th year of teaching Latin at Village, says one of the best things about the school is that it “builds this amazing, supportive camaraderie” among the girls.

### VILLAGE PEOPLE

**1** Number of Village School grads to win the \$30,000 Emily Couric Leadership Scholarship

**0** Number of girls who have been turned down by the Math Engineering and Science; Environmental Studies; and Health Sciences academies at Albemarle, Western and Monticello high schools, respectively

**13** Number of colleges and universities that students from the class of 2010 attend: UVA: 4; Bates: 2; Yale: 2; Cornell: 1; Middlebury: 1; New York University: 1; Oxford: 1; Stanford: 1; UCLA: 1; Vassar: 1; Virginia Tech: 1; Williams: 1; William & Mary: 1