

# School Without Walls

## The Walden Project of Vergennes Union High School

by Roberta Nubile

Around the turn of this century, Matt Schlein, a Vergennes Union High School (VUHS) English teacher pursued an idea to learn if some of his students might benefit from receiving their education in the outdoors. He believes that as a species, man is at a critical juncture, and in finding solutions to today's problems it is imperative that we develop a profound connection to the natural world and all of its inhabitants. Schlein thought this might be accomplished by what is known as place-based learning, and that the program might have strong components of gardening, wilderness appreciation, outdoor skills and social responsibility discourse. He also thought of the man to inspire his students, the 19th century American philosopher and author of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, who once went into the woods to "live deliberately." This way Thoreau sought to answer questions about his relationship to self, the natural world and society.

Now in its seventh year of operation, the Walden Project is a fully implemented alternative high school choice for VUHS students in grades 10-12. Currently 18 students ranging from ages 15-18 are enrolled in the program. They are actively engaged in the process of learning, in preparation for college and beyond. The program effectively provides students with all the course work necessary to obtain a high school diploma.

On this frigid Monday morning, at 8:45 a.m., the rather groggy group gathers at a clearing in a cedar stand around an unmade fire pit. "The fire won't be built until everyone helps," says Matt. Slowly the fire comes to life, hot beverages are passed, and the students settle in. Matt pulls out "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau's essay, written in 1846. He begins to read, "I heartily accept the motto—'That government is best which governs least; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—'That government is best which governs not at all; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.'" He closes the book and gently coaxes a conversation out of the

students. The conversation is thoughtful and earnest, and travels from the Russian revolution to My Space to the civil rights movements to Jimi Hendrix playing the national anthem to having compassion for President Bush. Matt asks if they think American people have "checked out," some students agree and some disagree. They debate whether Thoreau was a concerned citizen possessing national pride or whether he was an anarchist wanting to overthrow government and live in chaos. The students strive to consider this complex topic courageously and, with varying degrees of skill, hone their speaking and debating skills. But everyone is engaged; no one is looking out the window because they are already outside.

Today a guest lecturer is Ethan Mitchell, agriforester, stonemason and educator. He is talking about the history and evolution of government-run postal systems, a fascinating, humorous and, at times, poignant story. He holds the students' attention, as he moves around the fire to avoid the smoke and embers. Listening to the lecture in a gathering around a fire made me long to be having this high school experience.

The students are graded based on effort and participation. The students spend 3 days a week outdoors on the Willowell Foundations land in Monkton. In the winter there is course work, political discourse, poetry reading, and current events discussions. In the spring the work is centered on planting the garden, and in the fall there is much harvest work to be done, and delicious stone soups to be made. Another day of the school week is spent in individually chosen, professional apprenticeships. And the fifth day is spent observing, reflecting and writing in Burlington, thus closing Thoreau's loop of questioning - who am I in respect to the natural world, to self and society? The students have research papers to complete. They are encouraged to use a wide variety of resources, and all their work goes into a portfolio.

As Founder and President of the Willowell Foundation (a Monkton non-profit dedicated to supporting local and global initiatives for sustainable ecological land use and supporting educational programs that integrate the sciences and humanities into place-

students and the Walden Project students, and to build bridges between both schools and selected farms. Ferrisburgh's third grade hosts an annual Local Producers Fair held in May, to which other schools will be invited.

In the woods there is a shelter—a makeshift tarp covered wooden structure with an antiquated woodstove in the center and a dirt floor. In his book, *Walden*, Thoreau details his materials, labor and expenses for the house he built at Walden Pond and lived in for two years, totaling \$28.12. Adjusting for inflation, the students and teachers built this equivalent. And just as I was starting to freeze my toes outdoors, we move inside. This shelter is perhaps the most palatial place I have ever been in! A student brings in a pot of snow and sets it to melt on the stove. We settle



Walden students with their instructors at a mid-morning break.

based and outdoors education), Schlein worked with the Vergennes High school to develop and fund the start up of the program. The Walden Project is now funded by VUHS, with two faculty members - Schlein and his co-teacher Julia Bunting. Willowell supplies the program with staff member and VISTA volunteer Emily Watson-Blagden, who teaches a course on Earth Living skills. Willowell also rents the 230 acre parcel of Monkton land to VUHS, and helps the students run a ½ acre garden in the summer that supplies the students lunches well into the winter. Watson-Blagden says the cost of the Walden Project per student is cheaper than the traditional school with the overhead consisting of land rental and busing costs.

In addition to teaching, Watson-Blagden recently helped secure a \$12,500 Farm-to-School grant from the state of Vermont. The grant was jointly awarded to VUHS and the Ferrisburgh Central School (FCS) to purchase local foods and equipment needed to process them, to develop curriculum units for students at both schools related to local foods and farming, to set up mentoring relationships between Ferrisburgh

in and current events both local and global are named and briefly discussed. Then there are poetry readings, followed by clapping for each one. A feeling of comforting ritual is felt in this place.

We break for snack—and I have some time to talk with the students before their solo time. When asked the question, what do you love about the Walden Project, there is a long pause. Slowly and thoughtfully, the answers come and then cascade over each other. "I like being outdoors—in the real life. It makes me pay attention to what isn't trivial." "I like learning how to be independent." "It's a close-knit and diverse community." "We learn to be more open, to see both sides of issues." "It gives us the freedom to take charge of our own education." "It's easier to learn when you decide what you want to learn about." And when asked of the negatives, there is less response, although from one, "well, it's like anywhere—we have to learn to communicate and to speak up in a group."

Slightly frozen, I leave the woods. I am optimistic for our world's future.

To learn more, you may go to <http://vuhs.org/walden> or [www.willowell.org](http://www.willowell.org).

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