

2010

## J. Graham Brown School

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J. GRAHAM BROWN SCHOOL

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Bachelor of Arts Degree with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Jessie Magee

\*\*\*\*\*

Western Kentucky University

2010

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Jessie Magee

2010

## ABSTRACT

Couches. Creativity. Teachers. Thinkers. Call it the Hippie School. Or call it the Brown School – a self-directed learning magnet school in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Since 1972, the J. Graham Brown School has educated children from elementary through high school beyond the traditional education model to face the world with a different perspective from the norm: one of acceptance, of the individual, of the cohesion of our differences. Students mentor each other and form open, real relationships with teachers to develop a unique, whole understanding of the world – all the while trying to shed the image of a school full of hippies.

In this piece, I explore the hurdles the Brown School has faced in its history intertwined with my own experiences throughout my twelve years of education – including the years after entering the “real world,” and the effort it took to retain and implement what I had learned to be right in a world that wants me to be wrong.

Keywords: J. Graham Brown School, Martha Ellison, Steve Pence, Jefferson County Public Schools, Magnet Schools, Standardized Testing

Dedicated to the all those in Brown School's history who helped create Brown,  
and keep it alive

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank the Brown School and all its teachers, staff, and students that brought me to where I am. Finally, to my parents for choosing to send me to the Brown School and allowing me to be me.

VITA

November 16, 1986.....Born – Louisville, Kentucky  
2005.....J. Graham Brown School,  
Louisville, Kentucky

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: English – Creative Writing; Spanish

Minor Field: Recreation – Outdoor Leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

*“...We do not claim to be better than any other school, but our informal, less authoritarian, open environment, combined with the degrees of emphasis on the arts, diversity and the community, combine to create a visible, observable difference and to provide another option for Jefferson County student and parents.”*

—Martha Ellison,

founder of J. Graham Brown School

Check it out.

For twelve years, I went to an eccentric, tie-dye-at-summer-camp kind of school. It infused my brain with communist ideas. We didn't sing the National Anthem in the mornings; instead, to commence our day we watched Jimi Hendrix play it and burn his guitar onstage afterwards. We didn't have real grades; instead, we had reports of things like, "Painting makes Jessie feel sad. The sandbox makes Jessie feel like a crab." We never had homework, took tests, or gave presentations. We yelled curse words into kindergarten classrooms and taught kids how to cheat on standardized tests so The Man wouldn't shut us down. We dressed like prostitutes and pimps. We slept on couches, listened to the Grateful Dead, and ate sushi all day. We smoked pot with our teachers. We made third graders White Russians in their milk cartons during lunch.

Or so you might've heard.

But I've got the inside scoop. And (get this) we actually read books! And discussed them. And watched them performed on stage at a local theater. We painted, we drew, we composed. We wrote letters to state officials for class assignments. We had ideas. We sang and played musical instruments. We didn't cut the arts budget. And we still performed well on state tests.

Us Brownies, we ran the spectrum. We were rebels and brown-nosers. We dyed our hair green and pink and platinum blonde and black. We played sports and sang in the choir at church. We were gay and straight, and so were our parents. We wore dreadlocks and braids; slippers and boots; name brands and patched clothing. We were from government housing and suburbs. We were Buddhists and Christians, Muslims and heathens.

In 1972, Martha Ellison opened Brown School in Louisville, KY with the vision of a diverse school that would be an alternative to the other local schools. Students and teachers were both expected to respect the mission of the Brown School, which is *to recognize, respect, and foster the unique potential of each student in an informal environment that reflects the diversity of our community*. A selection of teachers taught the first semester of classes to the roughly 300 kids in grades 3-12 in the lobby and grand ballroom of the Brown Hotel (of the same namesake as the school, J. Graham Brown). The alternative school would take applications from students across Louisville to welcome the entire community as well as match its diversity in a time when Louisville

was busing kids across town to the dismay of many in order to integrate the school system.

As one of Louisville's first alternative schools – that is, non-traditional – Brown has been forced to defend its non-standard teaching methods since its conception. An option for highly motivated students who wanted another option and with no set curriculum laid out for the faculty, the teachers were free to create their own lessons and the students knew they held the responsibility for their own education. The first year, Brown graduated two students. After a few years in an adjacent building owned by the school system, the Brown School moved to its current location on 1<sup>st</sup> Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard and added grades 1 and 2; kindergarten was added in 1993.

Today, Brown is a public magnet school in the middle of downtown. Admission to elementary school is chosen through a lottery system based on zip codes, and middle and high school admission is decided based on zip codes combined with grades and test scores from previous schools. Brown integrates all ages, races, zip codes, and economic levels in one building, and tries to give each student an individualized education in the hopes that the students will learn and develop more if the teacher has the students' interests directly in mind.

Brown is currently ranked as the number one school in Kentucky, based on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), the state-recognized standardized test.

And, yes, there are couches in the classrooms, students call the teachers by their first names, and there are no uniforms, hall passes, or bells.

By the time I graduated from Brown School in 2005, I had been walking the hallways for twelve years. Too many times: I could sneak around the locked doors they put in when I was a little kid because I'd figured out the pattern of which ones weren't locked at what times and which ones you could go around by going up or down certain staircases. They were really meant to keep outsiders out, but they were also there to keep students from going into the part of the building Brown didn't own and buying junk food in the vending machines we illegally accessed.

I could get into the building before and after hours with the parking garage code I wasn't supposed to know (which, of course, all the seniors knew – and found out within two days when they changed it because there were barely fifty of us). I could squeeze past areas with security cameras if I needed to sneak out of the building. Too many times I'd seen the screens while using the main office as a shortcut and knew exactly where they were. It was time for me to go. I was a danger, and they had no idea.

Perhaps twelve years in the same building made me a little crazy, a tad mad, but on good days, I feel like I am only a liar, instead of mad.

On bad days, I feel—not like I'm going mad but — like I have been mad since I was six and will be mad forever.

You cannot understand me because Brown was my norm and Brown is weird. I am crazy because my normal is weird

not because I am actually crazy. You roll your eyes and say I'm but a dreamer,  
but if that is true

I lived in a dream.

My dream can explain the education problem. My dream can walk up the White House steps and snap Obama's eyes so wide open they'll shoot out like a cartoon.

I can see it. Can you?

I have devised a future – a career plan – for our education situation – for our child. But you will not listen to me

you would rather sit at the same table with the same ideas, would rather ignore my madness than notice that the kids coming out of this weird school can solve critical problems, can empathize, can change the world,

could maybe be able to live in reality if you'd only let them.

On good days, I feel like I am only a liar instead of mad

I am tired of feeling like a liar, of pretending and not existing because I do exist and it's time for you to accept that, time for you to really *stare at me!*

*stare at me!*

I challenge you. I want you to close your mouth, clean your ears, and *listen* to me for once:

I am here to propose that I have been driven mad – not by Brown – but by you.

I am here to propose that I am indeed sane – I just don't belong in your world, your world without community, without individualism, without someone like me who gives a damn.

This has come down to my sanity. Embrace my abnormalities or put me in an asylum.

## SHARED VALUE #1:

*An informal and unthreatening environment of diversity will create an atmosphere of mutual respect in which students, parents and staff will work together.*

Even the building itself is abnormal for a school. Plopped downtown next to the hospital square and a few blocks from the river, Brown's bricked building used to be the home of a vocational and trade school. Go inside the gym over there. Its capacity is incredible for a school with only around 600 students. And we all piled onto the bleachers for pep rallies, believe me. (It helps that half the school is small children, and that each grade is only 30 to 50 students.) The wall on the far side caught my attention every time I was bored in volleyball practice. A graffiti-style Brown Bear, in a blue and gold basketball jersey is running, jumping, dunking his child-sized basketball into the basketball hoop in the farthest corner of the room. The Brown Bear is wedged between the two words that scream in blue and gold letters, "BROWN BEARS!"

The year it was painted I was in third grade and had gym class during the same period the senior artist worked on it. In order to graduate from Brown, seniors have to complete an independent project overseen by a mentor that benefits the community. While he worked on his project, we raced each other towards an inflatable rubber pig in the middle of the gym. His finger would shoot spray paint into the boring, tan wall that was there before

the colors. By the time I participated in middle school sports, I was sure that the mural showed the kids from other schools that Brown was the best, because no other school has such a big gym with such a wall glorifying graffiti. Even if we hardly ever won games.

The stairs on the other side of that door lead to the basement. The band and choir rooms both seem more sophisticated than the elementary school kids who also use the rooms to practice xylophone and recorder skills. Around the building you will see classrooms for young children with the alphabet and other illustrations around the top of the wall and very small desks. My classroom in first and second grade was big enough to have a carpeted sitting area where we would sit in circles to do show-and-tell or listen to a book read aloud, an area with tables for book work, a sandbox, an art space, a science exploration area, and a backroom I used one time to practice my rain dance (which I later performed for the class and, mind you, it rained that day).

There are several classrooms upstairs that have a similar layout as college biology labs, fully equipped and ready for the experiments we often did in middle and high school. Farther down the hall are the infamous classrooms: you might see students sprawled on couches, on the floor with and without cushions, in hard plastic chairs at tables, and occasionally in the hallway to work on projects. Even within Brown, the rooms with couches are the most abnormal. Two large classrooms where I had classes junior and senior year have huge panes of glass – some stained as a flaming sun – that brought the light in and warmed the white clouds on the blue walls. We would write our standardized portfolios and state essay tests embedded in the clouds, floating in thought. And we would defeat those tests.

By no means do most of the classrooms have couches in them, but there are very few rooms with only traditional desks; the preferred method of seating is around tables to allow for more open discussion and an informal atmosphere that is much harder to get with common straight-back desks. The teachers who chose to have desks invariably taught math.



## SHARED VALUE #2:

*Each individual will be encouraged and allowed to freely yet responsibly express him/herself, confident that s/he will be accepted as capable and unique.*

I learned about poetic devices sitting on a donated couch, listening to Credence Clearwater Revival's 1969 contribution to protest music. My sophomore English teacher reread the lyrics to "Fortunate Son," emphasizing the places he chose to break the lines to prompt a discussion about our own upcoming poetry anthology. Yes, John Fogerty wrote in free verse, without meter or much rhyme, but us turn-of-the-century teenagers knew the lyrics so we could follow along with the rhythms and repetitions and see how the pattern of his singing mimicked the breaks on the page.

"Fortunate Son" was being used for a Levi's jeans commercial at the time to promote patriotism after September 11, 2001, so the entire class at least knew the beginning of the tune from all the advertisements telling God to Bless America and reminding us that Freedom Isn't Free. Levi's cut the song right before the first "it ain't me," which successfully reverses the fortunate son image in the song from one of dishonorable privilege to one of pride for the American dream. After seeing such distortion, the

message was clear: it was possible a reader could find a way to distort the poet's meaning, and we needed to be careful with our own words.

We went through a few other songs from the same time period, reading the words as the music played. She played The Beatles' "Yesterday" for its rhyme schemes, line breaks, and stanzas, and Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" for its fast, compressed rhythms, imagery, and inconsistent internal rhymes. And then we looked to Eminem, for good measure. Everyone knew the words to his and Dr. Dre's song, "Guilty Conscience," but none of us had really considered rap lyrics as poetry before.

Our poetry unit eventually delved into different types of meter, kinds of rhyme, and forms of poetry other than free verse, and we were encouraged to try them in our own poems. CCR, The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Eminem were names we knew and admired for their fame and recognized talent, yet we had never considered them "real poets" because their words went with music and were heard from speakers; they were not analyzed in hundreds of anthologies, yet we understood them completely.

We could've been forced to read Chaucer and Poe before making the connection that poetry is similar to song lyrics, something we were confident about from our insatiable ear for popular music. We could've started our poetry unit with learning what iambic pentameter was, and reading the historical epics from which poetry developed, but I'm not sure we would have wanted to write poetry of our own. It can be discouraging to attempt to read Shakespeare or Beowulf for content for a test before seeing first that poetry can be accessible, in contemporary language. Both hearing the artist sing the lyrics

and reading the lyrics aloud as “poetry” made us want to create poems other people would want to hear.

At the end of our poetry unit, our teacher staged an in-class poetry reading. Our finished poetry anthologies contained seven original poems and one selected poem from any author of our choice. We got up on the “stage” that was an old set box from a school play, and our peers gathered round in an assortment of couches, cushions, and chairs. We thought we were hilarious when we snapped our fingers at the end of some of the poems. Our hands, pounding on the floor, wished for a drum to complete the stereotypical poetry reading we’d created in our heads.

### SHARED VALUE #3:

*Difference and diversity will act as bridges rather than barriers to communication.*

I was in the middle of Copenhagen, Denmark when I went into my first sex shop. Passersby likely realized my friends and I were from the United States, and consequently sniggered at us as we entered the shop we weren't old enough for in the US. Our Danish hosts right by our side – embarrassed, and laughing that we flew halfway across the world to look at pink dildos and sparkly tassels – we glanced around the shelves. I was impressed that I was able to determine what kind of lube they were selling with use of my Germanic language knowledge.

“Is KY Jelly from Kentucky?” Anders, my host brother, asked. We didn't know, and thought likely not, yet couldn't think of another acronym for KY. “Do they put it in KFC?”

Brown has an international exchange program with The Roskilde Lille Skole in Roskilde, Denmark, which is about an hour-long train ride from Copenhagen. The Roskilde Lille Skole (which literally means Little School) is one of many elementary through high school Lille Skoles in Denmark, which are smaller, more prestigious and progressive schools that focus on language study, the arts, and critical thinking. Roskilde found

Brown when doing research for a school similar to their own in values and methods of education to send classes to in order to study English and become immersed in US culture. During each October, the highest class at Roskilde Lille Skole travels to the United States, first to Washington D.C. to see the United States government in action for a week, then to Louisville and Brown for a month. Brown is a perfect size for the Danes to feel part of the school community and not get too homesick for little kids running through the hallways. The students stay with Brown School families and attend classes for about one month before going back to Denmark to finish their final year.

The October the Danes were at Brown my sophomore year, we all took classes together and we had various culture activities, as well as just having normal lessons the Danes would participate in. Once we were grouped together to develop the laws and details of a new country on the land of Luxembourg, which helped us realize foundational differences between our backgrounds. It seemed every one of them played an instrument or sang, and many of them joined my jazz band class. Later, they performed songs they had written for the entire school. On Halloween, which Denmark does not celebrate, the Danes came dressed in cowboy hats, as ballerinas, and in other tacky costumes they'd never seen in Europe.

One of the Danish teachers, Lars, gave us a lecture on the album and film "The Wall" and its impact on and significance to culture throughout the world. Lars talked about the symbolism for the isolation that existed in Europe apparent in the film. We also got a taste of the Danish culture and its treatment of teachers: Denmark holds teachers in very high regard, especially when compared to teachers in the United States. At the end of the

lecture, the Danes clapped (which was a normal closure to any lecture for them) and we joined in, clapping for a teacher for the first time.

In June each year, a group of students from Brown who chose to go would fly to Denmark and stay with the Danes who had visited Louisville in October. My trip to Roskilde, Denmark was my first time out of the country; because it was so significant, it would not be my last. The immediate difference between our trip to Denmark and the Danes' trip to the U.S. was we knew absolutely no Danish.

“AN-ders,” I said, reading my host's name as one would say “Andrew” from the card I had been given with his name on it. He came over to me, laughed, and taught me his name was “Ah-ners” as if there was no ‘d.’ He took me home, where I slept in his NASCAR-decorated room. Anders was slightly disappointed that I didn't watch NASCAR like he thought all Americans did, but was impressed that I had a driver's license since they couldn't get one until they were over 18. His little sister was terrified of speaking to me. She knew a little English, but was embarrassed so we had little communication besides her telling her mom to compliment me on my clothes when she liked them. Meanwhile, all I could do was promise myself I would learn another language because I felt inept compared to my bi- and tri-lingual Danish friends. They could talk to us as if they lived next door in Louisville and the only accent they had sounded British.

Traveling without my parents, even if many of the trips were planned for the whole group, was an experience in itself simply because the amount of trust and independence Danish teenagers were given was far beyond what I was used to. It seemed they were treated as “adults” long before my friends and I were, and it seemed we were given more

trust and responsibility than many other American teenagers. Because of this, they were more mature and more able to fend for themselves with public transportation. It was the first time I felt what it was like to be independent. When we left the house in the morning, we walked to the bus station and made our way to school. After school, we were free to do what we wanted and our host parents simply didn't worry about our whereabouts. When I got home to the states, all I wanted to do was go back.

SHARED VALUE #4:

*A healthy, honest self-concept will promote in students a desire to learn more about self and the environment.*

In first grade, my class traveled the horrible hour-long distance to Otter Creek Park, went through a tunnel of large trees with unimaginably large crowns, and entered a new world for two days. School camping was common throughout my twelve years at Brown, but this was my first time. I had been waiting ever since my older brother got to go, and this was my chance. We stayed in a cabin, each child with his or her own sleeping bag for the floor, and some with outfits rubber-banded together with day labels to instruct on which day the clothes were to be worn. Our parents and chaperones helped cook meals and prepare activities while we went on short hikes around the park with my teacher and several other chaperones. Bonnie named trees and plants along the way and helped us learn the art of identifying trees and plants on our own. While on one of the hikes, we came upon a creek and we learned about erosion and water quality. We got to see the way the water slowly shaved off inches of the banks, something some of us city folk had yet to see.



On the morning of the last day of our weekend field trip, we entered a small cave called Morgan's Cave. I held tight to my flashlight in my right hand and my line-partner's hand in my left. The cave was still wide enough to go two-by-two, and I was not ready for it to narrow. We stopped right inside the entrance to look up at the stalactite holding tight to the cave ceiling and making us think the stalagmite might meet it halfway. Our teacher told us the mnemonic device – as she called it – was the easiest way to keep the two names straight in our heads. To this day it is still the only way I can remember the difference. The guide asked us not to touch the pretty rock formations so we wouldn't stunt their growth with the oils on our hands. I couldn't reach them, and anyway I didn't understand why I would touch them and ruin them if they could keep growing forever if I didn't.

It was finally time to go single file through the underground museum. The panic subsided after a few moments as we got deeper inside the cave and began getting our clothes as muddy as we'd hoped. At a large opening in the rock formations, the guide stopped our group and handed each of us a spearmint candy. After I immediately popped it into my mouth, he said, "Wait a minute to eat the candy, until it gets completely dark." I let it sit in my mouth and begged myself not to chew. "When you turn your flashlights off, the cave will be pitch-black, but don't get scared." Instead, he said, we should chew our hard candy rudely – with our mouths open – and look at our friends and parents because their mouths would be doing something unbelievable.

We all clicked our flashlights dark and chewed our mints with our mouths open. Green sparks like the red ones from the campfire outside of our cabin the night before bounced

around the walls of everyone's mouths. I no longer wanted to turn my flashlight back on because it would ruin the light-filled absolute darkness of the cave. It seemed like stars grew out of our mouths each time we emptied our lungs.

## SHARED VALUE #5:

*Self-discipline will be nurtured as an essential part of the learning process.*

### Teaching at the Louisville Science Center

During fifth and sixth grades as part of our integrated science class, we took trips to the Louisville Science Center where we volunteered in a variety of positions. Our options ranged from playing with children in the KidZone to performing experiments for visitors around the center. One year I was in charge of demonstrating a science experiment that showed how acid rain could affect different kinds of rock. I was given a table and put in a little alcove with another student. On our table we had various sized rocks, each of a different type, and vinegar, lemon juice, coke, and water all in different bowls. We would explain what acid rain was and how it could harm the environment in very direct ways and then demonstrate different chemical reactions using the liquids.

Our volunteer times at the Science Center were during school hours when a lot of the visitors came with other local schools. We performed the experiment over and over for whoever wanted to see it, and by the end of each day we might have had anywhere from two to fifty people watch. One group of visitors, on a day when almost no one else cared

to watch our acid rain test, gathered around our table. They were with a school group, but seemed to be much older than us, perhaps even in high school.

“All of these liquids we have in front of us have different acidity levels, so they will affect the rocks differently,” I said. “Keep in mind that these liquids have more or less acid in them than acid rain would, so they will affect the rocks much differently. Now watch as the limestone rock dissolves in the liquids. See if you can tell which makes it dissolve faster.” My partner put the rocks in the different bowls and everyone would watch the rocks bubble a little, reacting with whatever liquid it was in. The rock in the bowl of water wouldn’t bubble or dissolve at all.

After the experiment, we asked our usual questions: How long does it take to dissolve the rock? Which types of rocks were most affected? Which liquids affected the rocks most? There was a silence like I had never heard before, and I was unable to break it for fear the older students would look at me even more horribly than they already were. Finally, one of the guys in the group spoke up and answered a few of our questions. After we had a little discussion, which he was able to draw more people into, he asked us why we were there and what we were doing.

“We’re here with our science class, volunteering.” I said. “There are people all around the building doing experiments.” I felt so nerdy and pathetically young knowing these high schoolers were only hanging around because their teacher was making them.

“Cool,” the guy said. He looked over at his friends. “I’ve never been here until today. We didn’t even do experiments at school. I wish we had done something like this.”

## Teaching Spanish as a Student

Since Brown School is small and has a limited number of teachers, there weren't as many electives or alternative to classes, which was one of the downfalls – perceived and realistically – of such a small environment. By the end of high school, when students wanted more choice in electives there were opportunities at the community college down the street and in the co-op work program. Other times, when there wasn't another option, the administration would arrange different situations to accommodate. When I was a sophomore in high school, I had advanced to Spanish III and needed a second section of a foreign language to get into college, but Brown didn't offer Spanish beyond Spanish II.

My alternative was to sit in the classroom during Spanish II and do independent work with the two other students in my same situation. We worked out of the book, with occasional instruction from the teacher, who was usually teaching the rest of the class things we'd already learned; most often, we worked amongst ourselves. A little into the year our teacher asked us if we were interested in leaving the classroom one day a week to go downstairs to one of the first and second grade classes to teach them basic Spanish. At that, a classmate and I began teaching Spanish to the young students each week.

We started with the basics: “*hola* means ‘hello,’” and they'd all repeat it back to us. I was teaching class the day we went over the vocabulary for *la familia* (family), and really had no experience or idea how to teach other than the past nine years interacting with other students and my slight knowledge of the language. I stood at the front of the classroom

that had been my own when I was in first and second grade. The small students sat in a semi-circle around the chalkboard and me. “*La familia* means ‘family.’ Can anyone tell me one part of a family?” I asked.

One student raised her hand and said, “Children!”

“That’s right,” I said. “Families have children. The word for children is *los hijos*.” I wrote the word on the board along with *la hija* and *el hijo*. “These words mean ‘daughter’ and ‘son.’” I pointed to each, having them say the words with me, and then asked what else families had.

“Parents!” Another student called out.

“That’s right. Every family has parents. In Spanish they say *los padres*.” On the board I wrote *mi mamá* and *mi papá*, and pronounced each of the words slowly. “This is what you call your mother and father. Every family has a mother and a father. What else?”

A boy in the back row raised his hand. When I called on him, instead of saying families have grandparents or pets, he said, “I have two daddies, not a mommy and a daddy. What does that mean?”

For a moment, I was taken aback because I had not expected a question about homosexuality and didn’t even know the word in Spanish. “Well,” I said. “That just means instead of saying *mi mamá* and *mi papá* you can say...does anyone remember the word for two?” The same, apparently attentive boy answered me. “That’s right, *dos*. So you can say *mis dos papás* because that means ‘my two daddies.’ Any other questions?”

There were none. I had settled that problem, apparently. The next kid said, “Families have houses!”

Uh oh.

### Teaching in the Real World - Lesson Plan

*Concept to Teach:* Reading, writing, anything they’re willing to learn, especially my

*General Goals:* of helping words write smiles on these small faces. To help them believe in education if their parents don’t. To have them read even though “summer camp’s ‘bout fun, not books.” To give them opportunities to use

*Description:* to share their thoughts and ideas, to show them new vocabulary words can be just as fun as kickball and have a longer

*Duration:* hopefully throughout their lives. One hour every day for nine weeks of summer camp, in between arts & crafts and sports. Any moment I can possibly create new

*Specific Objectives:* for these children, like starting to see words as hands to hold, not faces to punch. I want their laughs to move Seuss’ hand to write another book from the sky so they’ll keep laughing. I want them to sound out words to each other that aren’t “du-uh” and “je-erk,” ones that aren’t meant to start fights. For these kids to keep reading and writing during the summer they need

*Step-By-Step Procedures:* on how to make reading cool in the Shepherd Square project housing, on how to talk their way out of a problem instead of punch their way out. Show them how to choose a book they're interested in, so it feels less like school, until they no longer hate school. They'll need

*Materials:* Call the library. Get the BookMobile here and let them pick from the piles inside. Let them read and enjoy the pictures. Let them trade and share books. Enroll them in the summer reading contest so they win prizes for reading books. Maybe they will make a

*Plan for Independent Practice:* since their parents have no time for such a plan. It's for their parents that we do this. The parents who walk down the street from the neighborhood, grudgingly come in the door long enough to scratch their name on the sign-in sheet on the foldout table and drop their children off, with hair product in hand instead of in hair, hoping they don't have to discuss another battle or cuss word from camp yesterday, hoping to get to work on time, for once, presentably; they turn around with a, "Yuh, see ya lata," as they walk through the door without a backward glance at their devoted child. It's so next week their child won't get into another battle and all I'll have to talk about is how they love the train book. It's for those busy parents that we play word games, have reading time and

*Assess Based On Objectives:* The children still complain about quiet reading time. They want kickball, not someone teaching them poorly disguised spelling lessons. Still, all they want is to play real summer camp games, to go swimming, and to make popsicle stick boxes. But then they pick up a dinosaur picture book and say, "Miss Jessie, is it my day



to read with you?” and shyly smile, caught self-consciously excited about a book. It’s for the children who learned to write their name a year ago, but would trade that knowledge for anything electronic they can’t afford. It’s for those children, and the children who love reading but aren’t allowed to walk alone to the distant library and can’t afford books of their own. It’s to show them

*Possible Connections to Other Subjects:* and that reading can get them out of the neighborhood their parents could never escape.

SHARED VALUE #6:

*The adult community will maintain high expectations and respect for the achievement of each student's personal best.*

Because Brown is such a unique place to send one's children, one of the requirements for anyone who applies to Brown is a tour during school hours. Each student and his or her parents wander around the building with a faculty member and witness an hour of the daily life of Brown School – how the classrooms look, how the teachers operate classes, what the students look like.

Despite such a rich opportunity (and obligation), one parent went to his daughter's high school graduation in 2003 apparently without any previous knowledge of the school's mission and shared values. Shocked by the spectacle he witnessed at the ceremony, he threw a public fit that quickly became a forum discussion in The Courier-Journal for weeks. Due in part to his reputation around town, Louisville lawyer and then-hopeful, now-former Kentucky Lieutenant Governor Steve Pence brought both negative and positive attention to the Brown School once more.

Pence, whose daughter was among the graduates, was reportedly shocked by the commencement festivities, which are always lively. Former teacher Jamie McMillan, in a

letter to the editor during the tsunami of opinion pieces about the night, called the ceremony “thrilling as usual” and described it as “funfilled, with laughter, fond memories, tributes, awards and the usual sharing by students and staff with the love grown between them in the three to 12 years they have been together.” Two senior teachers handed out Mardi-Gras eye masks to each of the seniors while “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” by the Beach Boys played in the background.

After a few seniors spoke, a commencement speech was given by Johanna Caminesch. A peace activist and former Brown School elementary teacher who taught many of the graduating seniors years prior, Johanna compiled a speech about the importance of standing up for one’s beliefs, supporting others, and making efforts towards peace a priority throughout one’s daily life. She quoted essays the seniors sitting on stage had written as third graders about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. She spoke of equality of people, the importance of our freedoms and liberties as United States citizens, and the blurring of truth. She discussed the 1950s Red Scare, which she said proved McCarthy to be “just a bully, not the patriot he pretended to be.” Johanna then condemned the USA PATRIOT Act as a governmental act of censorship, and said she worried about the extent to which our civil liberties were threatened. David V. Hawpe, a Courier-Journal writer who published an opinion piece about the incident described the end of Johanna’s speech:

“She told the seniors that, even in scary times, it is important that their fears not keep them silent, or make them look away from injustice. ‘Take a stand, even when you are afraid,’ she insisted, and ‘no matter what you do in life, look for the good in people.’

She closed by reading from scenarios written by two members of the class when she was their elementary school instructor. One was an imaginary dialogue between Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass, in which they discuss the bravery of Rosa Parks, whose refusal to sit in the back of the bus provoked the historic Montgomery boycott and stimulated the civil rights movement.”

Johanna explained that she respected each of the graduating seniors’ goals and expected them to stand up for what they believed in – what they knew was right – throughout the rest of their lives, as based on everything they had learned about the world and themselves while attending Brown School.

And they stood up in ovation for her as she left the stage with the closing words: “Now it is your time. Carry on!”

Reportedly, Pence rushed the stage immediately after the ceremony and started yelling at both the school principal at the time, Ron Freeman, and the superintendent of the school system. He then verbally berated Brown School teachers and community members in the school lobby and later wrote a letter to the superintendent and Ron. Jamie, in his letter to The Courier-Journal, described the scene, saying he watched as Pence, “approached the superintendent and principal, loudly voicing his opposition to ‘allowing that woman’ to interject ‘politics’ into such an important and solemn occasion as a high school graduation. The Brown School principal explained that the senior class had chosen her as one of their guest speakers, emphasizing that the graduation had been planned largely by the students. The superintendent thanked the man and countered with, ‘It is really about the kids, isn't it?’”

When he was exiting the lobby, Jamie approached Pence. He wrote: “I had the idea that my perspective might help him better appreciate the student/faculty feeling of ownership and participation that exists at Brown School. He countered by asking if I thought it would have been appropriate for someone to speak in favor of the Ku Klux Klan at Brown's graduation, inexplicably equating freedom of expression with hate, threats and bigotry....I later found out that we are all going to get the chance to know this discontented parent better very soon. This November he will be running for lieutenant governor of the state of Kentucky on the Republican ticket!...I feel we are lucky as citizens to get an early glimpse of his lack of respect for individual choice, diversity of opinion and civility in human interactions.”

Because of Pence’s position in society, and, thus, avid public interest, in the days following the graduation The Courier-Journal published several letters to the editor on several days, the opinion piece by Hawpe, and the full text of the speech Johanna read to the graduating seniors. Hawpe quoted Steve Pence from a letter he sent to both Principal Ron Freeman and Superintendent Daeschner: “Pence complained to Daeschner that ‘[Johanna’s] remarks may have been appropriate for recruiting members of the American Civil Liberties Union, but were completely inappropriate for a public high school commencement address. I agree that these young minds should be challenged, and be willing to challenge and evaluate all points of view. However, this commencement address was not aimed to challenge minds but to indoctrinate them into the speaker's own political point of view and her bias against the current administration.’” Pence was offended by allegations she made against the Bush Administration, and he had the right to point out his disapproval of her using the commencement speech to speak politics. But

the Brown School administration by no means suggested or encouraged her to spread the Democrat virus.

In fact, Hawpe also quoted the Brown School principal in his opinion piece, a response to a claim by Pence that the administration had read the speech and approved it beforehand, and that other parents and students had complained as well: “The principal has no idea what Pence means when he says school officials were ‘warned’ ahead of time. ‘The only thing I asked [Camenisch] was how long it was going to be,’ [Ron] recalled.” In regards to receiving complaints Ron said, “To the contrary I’ve even had a couple of comments, verbally and by e-mail, saying they were in favor of the speech.” It is possible that many attendees were in support of Johanna’s dissent against the Bush Administration, but just as possible that there were audience members who supported the Bush Administration – and just didn’t object as loudly and publicly.

In reality, the speech – and Johanna’s politics – never needed to become an issue. I remember the biggest and most common complaint about the speech that night was of boredom from the lengthy speech at a ceremony that always drags on. Possibly, Pence was much more offended that Johanna’s points of view were welcomed in the large, mostly full auditorium than he was simply by the words she chose. He might have heard the speech elsewhere and ignored it, but the added shock that his daughter had for four years been attending a school that would even have such a former teacher, thus such a commencement speaker, was too much. Coming from the perspective of Brown School, which encourages heavy parental involvement with each student, his reaction to the ceremony was just as shocking as he felt the speech itself was. The core of the speech was a reminder and general encouragement to think for oneself rather than blindly

believe what the federal government dictates; blind belief – of the government as well as of her – was, rather, exactly what she was discouraging. Partisan in execution or not, that’s a solid message for graduating high school seniors, and one that didn’t surprise involved members of the Brown School community.

## SHARED VALUE #7:

*Creativity, innovation, and flexibility will be regarded as necessary elements of education by the entire community.*

With a reputation for being full of liberal-minded teachers and students, it's clear how Brown earned the title as the hippie school in town. Its history began as a school that challenged tradition in its techniques, which "were considered radical at the time," Holly Holland of Louisville Magazine wrote in 1997. The same practices, however, "were later recommended [by the state], such as mixing students of different ages and abilities in the same classroom; asking students to ponder complex social issues instead of simply responding to a teacher's directives; and using the community as an extended classroom." Integration of subjects within each grade and faculty collaboration were common throughout the school so that often units in different subjects would overlap in strange, fun little ways. Our Civil War unit in third grade was in both Social Studies and Language Arts, and our vocabulary tests in Science class sometimes incorporated words from other subject areas. Throughout the years, we studied literature that correlated with the period of history we were studying so that we could keep the historical context in mind while analyzing the text.



As progressive education has been gaining popularity in an outcry against standardization, Brown has remained a front-runner in the debate, as an example of both the good and the bad.

There was a time when the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) – which preceded the current standardized test in Kentucky, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) – decided Brown’s middle school was “in crisis.” The state’s accountability index at the time measured each school’s progress against itself over a two-year period. Despite scoring number one in the county and number seven in the state amongst other schools on the 1995-’96 state test, Brown was declared in crisis due to a failure by five points to meet a goal of improvement over a period of two years.

Brown Middle was the only school in the county that spent a year in crisis, despite scoring the highest for the year. As Holland wrote, “The year the school’s faculty and staff have spent with this label, and with two state-appointed distinguished educators to evaluate and recommend changes in response to it, raises questions about what is good and what is not in the Kentucky Education Reform Act.” In addition to the two trained master educators employed by the state, Brown received \$14,460 from Kentucky to fund extra resources and training. A top-ten-ranked school, therefore, cost the state of Kentucky dearly when there were schools in the state struggling with failing overall scores that were in need of more assistance than the “in-crisis” Brown Middle.

The master educators infiltrated Brown to watch each teacher give a lesson, after which they would give suggestions for improvements or possibly termination. One member of the faculty, Tony Peake, was identified as having problems in the classroom after the first

lesson – for which he used a new lesson experimenting with base-five, instead of base-ten, math – and faced four meetings with the distinguished educator so she could form a set of recommendations of improvements. Tony said the experience, was “‘punitive’ and ‘threatening,’ and claimed that [the distinguished educator] had followed a one-size-fits-all approach that did not take into account his experience and innovative teaching methods” (Holland). Tony, a teacher of thirty years with many outside training sessions on such innovative teaching methods, was ultimately recommended for continued employment based on the other lessons she observed, but took a job at a private school the following year out of disgust with how he was treated.

“The state's new evaluation process is particularly upsetting to teachers such as Peake who have spent hundreds of hours over the years attending workshops and consulting colleagues around the country to gain new insights about effective instruction. They thought they were doing a good job,” writes Holland. “The distinguished educators have pointed out, however, that there is a mismatch between what the teacher conveys and what the students learn in many Kentucky classrooms. Good intentions do not always produce good results.”

Or do they?

After all, the mismatch the distinguished educator perceived in Tony’s classroom simply did not match the school’s overall top-ranking score, which included his subject areas. Tony had successfully taught – traditionally or non – the information the students needed to succeed on the KERA test. Or, if Tony’s good intentions were producing bad results in

his students, perhaps the state was measuring the wrong things, because Brown still managed to come out on top despite the supposed mismatch.

So begged the question, then and now, of how a school's performance is best measured. Accountability in schools was put in place to ensure each student in the nation is receiving a proper education, equivalent to that of other students and up to the standards set forth on state and national levels. By comparing schools to others, the departments of education are theoretically able to locate deficiencies in schools or districts, thus allowing for improvement of identified low-ranking schools. By comparing two years of one school's scores, it's possible to identify schools that aren't improving test scores year to year, thus theoretically not progressing, which is something Kentucky wanted to find a solution to.

But, because KERA was supposed to be about increased and continued improvement, by labeling Brown Middle "in crisis" the state of Kentucky put a school that had high test scores and has always graduated almost 100 percent of its students on the lowest level of the totem pole – and drastically stepped up widely desired state funding as a result, something that ultimately hinders struggling schools in the state, which does just the opposite of its intentions. Once a school hits such a high level of performance as Brown had, perhaps it demonstrates that further improvement each year isn't as pressing to the state as schools whose students struggled to simply pass.

Not to say there isn't always room for improvement even if a school scored perfect marks. Holland quoted Judy Kasey – a mother of three Brownies who has been involved in the Brown School community for years – who felt the year of introspection was good

for Brown. “I just don’t think it ever hurts for people to evaluate where they are. It’s real easy to recognize what’s going well; not so easy to see what’s going wrong.” As Kasey noted, the increased funding and attention was a great opportunity for Brown to look within and redefine its mission and goals, thus bettering the experience for each student, which is what Kentucky aimed to do through standardization, and what Brown aims to do through its mission.

The accountability Brown faced during the in-crisis year caused Brown School faculty to refocus the school’s mission, look deeply at their teaching methods, and open their eyes to new methods that could potentially help them in the classroom. Holland also quoted a long-time high school language arts teacher, Sue Vislisel, who generally rejects such high-stake accountability where teachers could face termination, but also thought the experience during the 1996-97 school year benefited Brown in the long run. “I think there are several master teachers [at Brown] who teach by instinct. I don’t think that’s good enough anymore. We can’t ride on our past successes without reflecting on whether all the pieces are there. I don’t think they are. We have not been accountable until now.” The “pieces” to which Sue referred are the standards and methods of the state curriculum on which the test is based, many of which are considered more traditional than Brown has been known for.

The issue of traditional versus creative methods has long plagued Brown School teachers and students. And as much as they are attacked or poked fun at for challenging tradition, the answer from the administration has generally been the same: Brown never claimed to

be traditional, but rather touts its nontraditional, unique methods as a marketing tool to attract genuine interest.

Moreover, the slant away from tradition has proved to work (with the exception of the KERA accountability index's findings that one year). Brown High is currently ranked number one in CATS test scores in the state, has over a 95% graduation rate, seniors with consistently strong SAT and ACT scores, and an incredibly low number of suspensions and other disciplinary actions – all of which are accepted, traditional ways of measuring a school's performance, and which placed Brown right at the top of the list of best schools in Jefferson County for the year 2008-09.

What's the problem, then, with nontraditional?

#### SHARED VALUE #8:

*Every individual will have a responsibility to contribute back to the greater natural and social community from his/her Brown School experience.*

The biggest hurdle for Brown School in recent years has been battling the concept that its mission and goals are politically motivated. The idea of progressive education has been equated with other issues important to many members of the Democratic Party the same way the creationism movement has been equated with the Republican Party despite disparities. A recent development in Louisville might help Brown make a division between its progressive methods and beliefs about education and the idea of progressive politics, which might help in the future with situations like the one involving Steve Pence.

Brown School is currently the only public school in Jefferson County that offers grades kindergarten through twelve; there are, however, private schools in the county with similar set-ups that are more methodically traditional. There are many benefits from this integration for the students of all ages, regardless if the teaching methods are traditional or not.

One part of Martha Ellison's mission was to create a community where the older students helped the younger students succeed and proceed through school. Because the elementary school is divided into teams – 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> grades and 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> grades – and because many students go through all levels of school at Brown, the faculty develops different programs to help students adjust during the scary transition upstairs to the next team or level of school. Each student would eventually act out both roles, hopefully easing the stress from the little buddy's shoulders and ultimately connecting age groups between students in the school to form a sense of community. Feeling like school is a safe haven with ample support helps many kids struggling with situations outside of school to see their teachers and peers as a community, which might keep them in school and doing well longer than they otherwise might be.

#### The Fireflies' Trip: Holding Hands with the Moonbeams

The yellow school bus was late. Since we were in the middle of downtown, most of Brown's many field trips were walking trips because the theatres and museums are all nearby; we didn't even have them to and from school, instead commuting by car and by public bus. We were not used to waiting for school buses to show up. The Fireflies chattered in their sitting circle in the entranceway, and the Moonbeams repeatedly checked the gray sky for rain, knowing this day would go horribly awry if the five-year-olds got their shoes wet.

My senior class, the Moonbeams, had mentored the Fireflies – better known as kindergarteners – throughout the year as part of Brown’s mentoring program. Senior year, my friend Hannah and I chose our shared kindergarten buddy, Marlee, off of a list because her name was almost reggae enough to catch my attention. We met her at the beginning of the year in the small classroom with the tiny desks on the first floor, which was the exact opposite of our large, couch-filled classroom on the third floor. Throughout the year, we helped Marlee write her alphabet, folded Origami paper cranes for a senior’s 1000 paper crane project, and sometimes created art projects. The idea here was that we were actually responsible, mature role models.

Finally, we stepped out of the school buses to sunny skies and began wandering the Louisville Zoo in clusters of pre-adults and small children. A Moonbeam thought it would be smart to run after one of the peacocks that lived wild on the zoo grounds. He was showing off for five-year-olds and was mistaken that his idea was a good one. The peacock reversed the game and ran after him for a few minutes, of course prompting the children to join. The rest of us had to chase the kids down until the peacock finally grew tired of him. The children screamed and laughed and tried to throw the bread from their sandwiches at the nearby female peacocks until we convinced them the Moonbeam was setting a bad example.

I was wandering in a group of several Moonbeams and our respective Fireflies, but we repeatedly ran into other groups throughout the day. When we got to the orangutan exhibit, my friend Dave was with another group inside of the wooden shelters. We stood



together and watched the Fireflies crowd around the plate of glass to get a better look at the hairy creatures that looked a bit like themselves.

After a few minutes of monotonous scratching and dangling, the male orangutan wandered over to the glass using his hands and the ceiling of netting. He began pressing his body against the glass, and our hands crawled to our mouths to cover our howls. The orangutan was hanging from one hand down to the ledge that was at about the height of the twelve kindergarten faces; with the other hand, he was cupping his large fingers around his genitals. Dave, who laughs louder than a middle school cheerleader when something is only mildly funny, grabbed my arm and made a sound like he was a congested cartoon train.

“Jessie!” Dave said. “What do we do? Do we have to get these kids out of here?” His face was turning more Irish by the second and he was shaking with laughter. “Do they even get it!?”

I looked over at Marlee and her friends and saw they were all still staring at the orangutan in excitement, unaware they might consider his gestures rude in a few years. They were just excited he was so close to them and they had such a good view. We chaperones laughed a few more minutes amongst ourselves until the orangutan got bored of himself and the Fireflies did too. Marlee came up to me, grabbed my hand, and said, “He’s boring. He keeps playing with his hair. Let’s see the penguins next!”

At the end of the school year, Marlee made me a graduation card telling me to “hav good luck in colege” and gave it to me during our mock graduation ceremony the

kindergarteners threw us. She drew a moon with beams of light reaching the firefly at the bottom of the page. I hung it in my dorm room.

The mentoring program was a good experience in all the times I was involved – as mentor and mentee. Magnet schools in general provide students and parents alternatives to traditional curriculums. Brown School’s magnet simply encompasses all of what Brown is as opposed to other county schools with magnets specific to something like aeronautical engineering, a magnet program at local Shawnee High School. Shawnee is a traditionally poor neighborhood located in the heart of the city, and its elementary, middle, and high neighborhood schools have been struggling for decades to maintain its scores and students, a lot of whom drop out before graduation. Adding an engineering magnet focused on aeronautical studies – which no other Jefferson County school offers – was one of the methods the school and county tried a few years back to increase enrollment and pique interest in current students to graduate and go on to a career.

Recently, the county was forced to remap how they assign students without using race as a factor, but rather “schools must enroll 15 percent to 50 percent of their students from neighborhoods where the average household income is below \$41,000; education levels are less than a high school diploma with some college; and the minority population is more than 48 percent” (Kenning). Due to this and the fact that the neighborhood and traditional pool of students is almost completely made up of such families, Shawnee administrators have been looking for other options to boost the reputation and output of

the school to attract more variety because parents from other neighborhoods are balking that they have been assigned Shawnee.

The idea on the table involves modeling Shawnee after the Brown School.

Shawnee is considering combining Shawnee High School with Shawnee Elementary and Middle Schools, to form a “whole-school” magnet. In his article “Magnet Plan for Shawnee Planned,” Chris Kenning explained, “The proposal, which hasn't been unveiled publicly, would see the school adopt 12 grade levels, use selective district wide admissions and retain its planned energy technology and aeronautical programs in hopes of attracting more students and polishing its reputation.” Shawnee School would become a Brown School cousin, with an energy technology and aeronautical twist.

Kenning quoted current Brown School principal Timothy Healy as saying, “A great benefit of having 12 grades is that the curriculum can be seamless and teachers can work together to anticipate children’s needs.” Teachers are able to pass on information about specific students’ problems to help the students continue through each grade with a sense of continued progress rather than having to rebuild a foundation with each new teacher and having to rediscover weaknesses each year – a stop-and-go process that only breeds frustration. Following the train of thought that many students drop out of school in frustration with grades or because of outside factors of instability, Shawnee is hoping for seamless transitions such as those Brown School faculty boasts. Through student mentoring and teacher collaboration, students might feel more part of a community of learning, which could that positively influence more students to stay in school through high school graduation because of the uniquely individualized attention.

Another draw to the idea of modeling a new Shawnee on the Brown School's whole-school concept is the lack of interest parents outside of the traditional Shawnee district have of sending their children to Shawnee. The Brown School is largely popular around the city, which Healy says results in "far more applicants than we have spaces available" (Kenning). Shawnee hopes to increase enrollment from around the city with the attraction of a new kind of school, with a model based on Brown – while still rooted in traditional teaching methods and focused on technical training for attractive, upcoming careers rather than a more liberal arts approach.

As Kenning wrote, "Jefferson County school board member Ann Elmore, who represents the Shawnee area said, 'It's a great idea, and it's about time.' Shawnee has been struggling to maintain enrollment and increase graduation rates, and this transition might improve those rates, as well as other issues. 'Some academic studies show that K-12 schools can improve performance partly by smoothing transitions between grades.'" And because Brown ranks "among the system's higher-performing schools," it's an attractive option for a situation like Shawnee's: an elementary, a middle, and a high school that are all failing to retain enrollment combine to consolidate the budget and create a community environment within the school. Enrollment and retention rates increase. Teachers are able to creatively make a difference. Students prosper. Everyone wins.

## THE END RESULT

The Shawnee School would be a K-12 magnet school like Brown, which would hopefully bring to the school diversity and stability. Brown, however, wasn't created to achieve stability or increase enrollment, but rather to provide a functional option for nontraditional students. Brown gathers students from across the county, considering economic and ethnic backgrounds and attempting to achieve the most realistic sample of the community possible. It has achieved a situation that mirrors the diversity in Louisville as documented on paper in some government office, but the atmosphere of acceptance inside Brown's walls is not a reality on the downtown street outside of it.

Despite every attempt to mirror reality, Brown is not reality.

Brown is a world that accepts, connects, and conquers barriers. It pushes students down a path toward the view of a better world, toward one that adopts Brown's mission. It academically prepares students for the university or the professional world and hopes alumni will ultimately improve the quality of life in their community.

In this, it succeeded. But, Brown prepared me for the wrong real world.

My first semester of college I felt I was a foreign exchange student from the lack of understanding I had for the cultures of the other people around me. And I was an alien to them.

“How do you all think we could eliminate racism?” My professor would ask. Everyone would say it just wasn’t possible. People would always be racist if races existed.

“Well, if we just taught children from the beginning to believe everyone was equal – if we didn’t even introduce them to the idea that they might be unequal based on something like race –” I’d get cut off. Again, they’d say it was impossible. Racism was a fact of life.

“How do you all think we could get rid of the stigma of people in need of receiving government assistance?” My teacher would ask. Everyone would say that it would never happen and that rich people hated the idea of poor people taking their money, that the rich people all think the poor could just work harder.

“But that’s ridiculous!” I would say. “You just have to show children from an early age that –” Cut off. Again. They’d say inequality was a fact of life and that it bled into everything.

“But if everyone had equal educations it would be less of a fact of life because –” They’d say poor children would never get as good of an education as rich children. It just wouldn’t happen. It was a fact of life.

“But that’s not fair! And it’s not true! At my school –” They’d roll their eyes. I was incapable of defending what I had known to be reality for twelve years, which I had seen

with my own eyes as fact. No one actually wanted to hear valid ideas to improve things. They just wanted to roll over and accept their reality.

“Not everyone grew up like you, Jessie. We went to schools where the teachers had better things to do than to teach us ethics,” someone would say, laughing.

I didn’t know I had a set of ethics. I didn’t even know I had been taught ethics. “Yes, but…” I’d trail off into almost a whisper. “But, the new generation could all grow up like I did! If only –”

“If only what, Jessie? If only we all went to a hippie school?”

The problem with Brown, then, is graduation.

When we all graduated, we all fled – consciously or not – back to our economic and ethnic backgrounds by nature of the divisions inherent in the rest of the world. It turned out the “real world” was decades and eternities behind the situation in which we grew up – it is not a blended smoothie of happy integration and equality like we were used to.

I am abnormal because I am not scared of people who are unlike me. I am normal, however, because I live in Kentucky, and it is unheard of for me to walk over, sit down, and attempt random conversation with people who do not have the same skin tone or clothing as me – so I didn’t. I just wanted to and I didn’t know why I wasn’t supposed to want to.

The Brown School might have been started by a group of hippies with rainbow dreams but it has grown to be inclusive to all walks of life. Businessmen can be accepting, community-oriented people and use informal methods just as easily as hippies – and students who grew up in such a place don't have to move to a commune after high school.

In fact, the business world could benefit from such openness, too. Let 'em loosen the ties and take off their jackets! Let them spread The Word of Brown School: that everyone has unique value and should be treated as such. How could that ever be bad unless you are hateful and want your child to learn to be hateful too?

It makes sense to me that all students should be treated like intelligent beings. That parents should be involved in their children's education. That teachers should act as mentors to their students, and collaborate with one another. That everyone learns and lives differently, and it doesn't have to be a barrier.

It makes sense to me that these values were just inherent in the Brown School, that I was never exactly taught some of the most important lessons I learned there: that they permeated through the bricks and the lockers and the paintbrushes and the reeds and the couches. It makes sense to me, knowing what happens to children who are introduced to such values, that we should try our damndest to put those values into each and every school, every classroom, every activity, every child's life – until the whole world embraces my abnormalities.

Until the whole world is mad. Because I still argue y'all are the crazy ones.



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