

## Windy Hill School Dedication Ceremony

*Remarks by Janet Bliss '71*

*October 14, 2010*

The year was 1976. Professor Marc Clement had convinced the administration that an on-site early childhood center would help promote and enrich the college's new Child Studies Program. I was invited to direct the fledgling operation. Twenty intrepid families enrolled their 4- and 5-year-olds. Teachers were hired and paid an astounding \$2.30 an hour or about \$368 for the month. Full-day nursery school and kindergarten cost a family \$6 a day; a 20-day month cost \$120 and the 180-day school year topped out at \$1,080. The school occupied one room in the basement of Abbey Hall and shared a kitchen with the dormitory. We accepted donations of toys, furniture and other equipment. We constructed bookcases and shelves. Professor Clement found funding for playground equipment. Windy Hill School was launched.

Humble beginnings. Professor Clement and I were responsible for the billing of parents as well as tracking teachers' hours and compensation. I still have this original ledger with Dr. Clement's meticulous notations detailing charges for each family. Far different from the sophisticated system now utilized by the college! Close examinations of photographs from that era, a number of which are on display in the hallways, reveal a very different physical environment than what you see today. Perhaps you will notice the makeshift table with its cinderblock legs erected to allow for all the children to sit together for a holiday party. Or the child-sized chairs purchased from someone's yard sale. And yet despite our cobbled appearance people began to quickly take note that there was something exceptional about Windy Hill School. Perhaps most striking about these photographs are the children's expressions and their obvious engagement with the environment. Fast forward to 2010 and children's expressions are identical.

And herein lie the essence and success of Windy Hill School. *Children matter.* Provide children with interesting and provocative materials and they *will* construct understandings and become confident in their own abilities to reason and think autonomously. Trust that children are indeed competent and when given appropriate guidance and challenges will indeed become the competent industrious beings we want.

*Families matter.* These are our partners in raising successful, curious and happy children. Strong and trusting relationships are important to us as is the reciprocity of shared insights and expectations about the children entrusted to us. Children's education is a collective responsibility and no relationship is more significant for children than that of family. We respect and appreciate the complexities of parenthood and are especially grateful for the countless ways families have supported us.

*Teachers matter.* Windy Hill has always been unusual in its practice of hiring individuals with degrees in early childhood; teachers who understand and appreciate the wide and rich continuum of children's development. Teachers who reflect on their own practices and who continually seek

out opportunities to expand their understandings. They value research and both analyze and engage in research initiatives. They present at conferences. They are well respected for their knowledge, ability to work with children, families, college students, and peers at other institutions. In short, they are the cream of the crop in early childhood.

*Research matters.* Lab schools have an obligation to promote best practice as it is currently understood as well as help others understand what it means when we use terms like *best practice*, *intellectual and social autonomy*, or *Reggio inspired*. Mentoring those who themselves desire a career with children and families is paramount; we hope to positively influence the ways people think about, interact with, prepare environments for, and promote early childhood.

*Environment matters.* Windy Hill has evolved considerably since those early years as has the Child Development Program, building on its understandings of children, adding programs, expanding its presence, adding teachers and faculty, conducting research projects, and spreading its influence across many domains. We have received many commendations for our programmatic design and imaginative curriculum. But it is precisely the celebration of *environment* that brings us all here today. Environment very much does matter. One might reasonably ask, if Windy Hill was so successful in its old environment why go to such expense and effort to create a new environment? Certainly many people subscribe to the notion that children can prosper in spaces far less impressive than what stands here today. And I would not argue with that. What I do contend, however, is that Windy Hill can and is already transforming its best practices into even better practices in this environment. Everything about this new facility speaks to the importance of children and families and the people who work with them. In the few short weeks that Windy Hill has inhabited its new home, the environment is already having a tremendous impact. Light, space, dedicated curriculum areas, expansive views, observation rooms, and even bathrooms specific to children and adult need are changing the way we are able to imagine, plan and execute. If you have yet to tour the facility the Windy Hill teachers will guide you through this magnificent building immediately after this dedication ceremony and give you the opportunity to imagine the tremendous potential this environment offers.

If you are here today, it's because you have in some way contributed to the success of Windy Hill and share in the delight of its new space. So many individuals have supported the lab school in countless...seriously *countless* ways and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And although I am going to mention a few of the individuals who helped us get here today please know that I and everyone associated with the Child Development Program appreciate every kindness and donation extended to us.

First, let me tell you a bit about the donor family. They are the ones who gave the college the one-million-dollar challenge gift that started the process. Why did this family choose Windy Hill School for its philanthropy? Well, they definitely love Colby-Sawyer College, but, of course,

there were any number of worthy causes or projects at the college to which they could have directed their gift. They, in fact, support the college in a number of significant ways. But this family that so values the benefits of a college education also recognizes and appreciates the importance of *early* education. In particular they were impressed with the Child Development Program and the role Windy Hill plays in supporting students' understandings of young children. Their daughter, a favorite person of mine and a generally reserved young woman, felt especially passionate about Windy Hill deserving a new facility and promised her father that, if necessary, she would mobilize her friends to picket a trustees meeting! Although this was never necessary it remains one of my favorite stories about how strongly individuals appreciate Windy Hill. In the case of the donor family, they already believed that young children and the people who work with them deserve beautiful spaces. They felt quite strongly that an outstanding program deserved an outstanding facility. And while this remarkable family chooses to remain anonymous, I do want to express publicly mine and everyone else's deep appreciation for their generosity and foresight. Please join me in applauding them.

I also want to publicly thank Ingrid Moulton Nichols of Banwell Associates, the architect extraordinaire who designed this facility. Intelligent, talented, and an especially excellent collaborator, Ingrid listened and responded to the collective voice of the building committee. Her great style and sense of beauty are evident as well as her understanding of how function operates in concert with that beauty. She likes red, too! Ingrid continues to be instrumental and crucial in the initiative to make this the college's first LEED-certified building. As part of this Ingrid will be working with the Child Development Club to design early childhood projects centered on a greener environment at Windy Hill.

Doug Atkins, too, has been a joy to work with and has been involved in every aspect of the project having to balance any number of competing college perspectives. For those of you who think Doug only concerns himself with finances, building design, site location, construction codes, time management of projects, ...did I say *only*?.. Doug also assisted Ingrid and me with the selection of wall, carpeting, floor and cubbie colors, helped put furniture together including placing slip covers on couches and chairs on one of the summer's hottest days, and drove with me to the Upper Valley to pick-out the beautiful farm stand in our outside area. He has been totally invested in the success of this project, and he knows I appreciate him if only for the fact that he, too, loves red!

Now, of course, there was a committee to work alongside Ingrid in planning this building...lots of meetings and so many considerations. In addition to Doug Atkins and me other individuals worked diligently and passionately, each with a perspective crucial to the success of this project. Danny Wolfe was the trustee representative and had considerable experience with new project construction as well as keeping an eye on the bottom line. One of his biggest challenges was to rein me in from my overly extravagant imagination! Mary Borque was our parent representative and brought both her perspective as a parent as well as her expertise as Dartmouth College's new

projects manager. Kristen Peterson contributed both the college student and Windy Hill teacher perspective and was especially helpful in educating others about what college students wished to see included in the building. Miriam Shumway represented the Windy Hill teachers, collecting ideas and dreams from all the teachers and strongly advocating for spaces that supported all constituencies' needs. Professor Janice Ewing represented the Child Development Program, bringing her lengthy association with laboratory schools as well as her understanding of best practice to the discussion. Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to this endeavor.

And, oh my, North Branch Construction...kudos to you! It was barely a year ago when the college broke ground for this building...how amazing what you accomplished in several months shy of a year!

Thank you, too, to Professor Dexter Burley, who donated his expertise to designing our outside area. Although we have yet to turn our full attention to the outside area, I promise you will be captivated by Dexter's design which capitalizes on our New Hampshire beauty and location, adds to our overall green design, and supports children's love of outdoor exploration and challenge.

To all of you who have contributed monetarily, with gifts of books, an awesome fish tank, your time or your kind words of encouragement and congratulations ...my heartfelt thanks. A very special thanks to President Galligan and the Board of Trustees for going forth with this project and wholeheartedly encouraging people to direct their philanthropy to Windy Hill. Thank you to all the Windy Hill teachers who have invested time, energy and love in this project and who represent all that is good about Windy Hill. Thank you, Donna Berghorn, Katie Betz and Marie Patten for struggling with unruly slipcovers on 90-degree days. Thank you to Jerry Bliss for loaning art, antiques and donating flowers, pumpkins and hours of service to making the school dazzle.

Thank you to the members of the Department of Social Sciences and Education for your unwavering support over all these years. Thank you to Professors Lynn Garrioch, Randy Hanson, and Maurissa Abecassis who show up regularly at Windy Hill just because they like to! Thank you to our college students, past and present, who are overjoyed at Windy Hill's good fortune. And thank you to Vice President Deb Taylor, who sent her children way back when we balanced table tops on cinder blocks and who still remains one of Windy Hill's staunchest advocates. Thank you to all the parents over the past 34 years who have entrusted their children to us. And I close by saying thank you to all the children who have enriched our lives and who I hope are out there smiling at the thought of new generations of children playing, imagining and loving school in this amazing tribute to early childhood. Thank you all.