



A Celebration of the Barrie School at Age 75

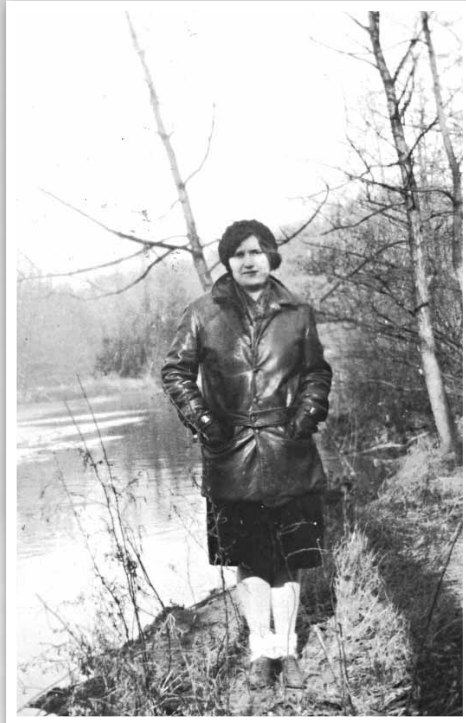


By Tim Seldin

In 1932, my mother, Frances Littman Seldin, founded the Barrie School. She served as its Headmistress for thirty-nine years until her death in 1971. On April 24 Barrie, the school that was my alma mater, my life's great passion, and my family home, turned seventy-five. I write in celebration of my mother, my own years there, and the marvelous children and educators who I knew and loved. I also write to honor all of the other men and women who,

like my mother, founded and lead their own schools in the United States and abroad.

Their energy, dedication, and personal sacrifice create schools that are vibrant and alive, personal and caring, and which are extraordinarily powerful in helping to shape their students' lives. All of us who have had the privilege to know, work with, and learn from these founders celebrate their courage, vision, and contribution to so many lives.



My mother on one of her weekend hikes c 1932

Barrie began with thirteen children in my mother's family home in Washington, D.C. Having spent her childhood out-of-doors hiking, riding, skiing, and camping, she believed in the importance of learning from hands-on experience. In college, she was most influenced by the ideas of John Dewey, the great American educator who inspired the progressive education associate. Although my mother had taken a course in Montessori education, she did not call Barrie a Montessori school. She thought of it as a progressive school in the country. For many years, we described Barrie as being based on "the coordinated work of Maria Montessori and her associates: Alfred Adler, John Dewey, Anna Freud, and Jean Piaget."

Barrie evolved into a warm close-knit community of parents and teachers who were committed to giving their children an education that would prepare them for both college and for life. From the original thirteen children, it rapidly outgrew my mother's home, moved to the Alexander Graham Bell estate in northwest Washington, then in 1936 to an even larger seventeen-acre estate near the D.C border with Maryland, and finally expanded to its present forty-six acre campus in Silver Spring, Maryland, which has been its home since 1976.



Barrie's 17 acre campus in Washington DC c 1954



My mother with some of her early students c 1935



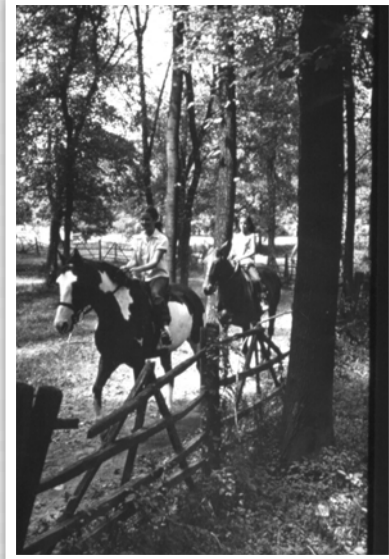
Lunch 'family style' in an upper elementary class c 1955

I attended Barrie, starting as a toddler in 1948 and graduating with the class of 1963. My own children, Marc, Michelle, and Caitlin also attended the school. Despite initial thoughts that I would study law, I found myself drawn back to Barrie. Upon my mother's death in 1971, I took over as Headmaster to continue her work. Barrie slowly grew to over five hundred students ranging from two-years-old through the twelfth grade, when I retired in 1993 as Headmaster, after twenty-five years at the school.

What made Barrie work so well was its strong sense of tradition and the culture of kindness, community, and support that my mother began back in 1932.



The school had several child sized houses on the campus



Students riding c 1955

Barrie worked hard to create and sustain a culture of spontaneous learning. Teachers were mentors, not task-masters. Our days were a mix of hands-on activity and intellectual discussion. As I have often written, instead of lectures filled with the "right" answers, our teachers posed great questions: Why did this happen? How could things have turned out differently?



Tim with students on schooner in Virgin Islands c 1985



High school students c 1970

Its students went out into the world with a passion for creating things, solving problems, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Barrie was at heart not so much focused on lessons taught by teachers, but about following children's interests and their self-selected work. There was a balance. Wonderfully bright and well-educated instructors enticed us with great ideas, the stories of great events and famous people, and the cultural achievements of the world's civilizations.

My mother deeply believed in the potential of all human beings. She insisted that we respect even very young children as full and complete individuals. Our task was not simply to teach, but to help each of them to discover and develop their unique talents and possibilities.

The idea of work freely chosen; an atmosphere of mutual respect based not on fear of punishment, nor hope of reward, but on a social contract of trust; and the concept of vibrant independence; these were the principles on which Barrie was built.

Barrie's Social Legacy

My mother was a social activist. Like Maria Montessori, she was a fierce champion of social and economic equality for women, children's

rights, and multicultural pluralism. When she founded the school, she thought of it as a 'school for all nations', and consciously sought a racially integrated student body. In those days, Washington D.C. was completely racially segregated, and this was considered radically controversial! Ignoring the criticism, fear, and downright hostility of the local community, she reached out to the Black, Asian, and Hispanic



communities, forming friendships with ministers and other leaders of those largely separate populations. Slowly, giving considerable financial support to those in need, she convinced first a few, and later many, multiethnic families to enroll their children in Barrie. It was this mix of children from so many backgrounds—racial, religious, international, and socioeconomic—that led me to devote my life to Barrie. My decision was greatly influenced by many long conversations that I had as a young man with people of color whose lives had been touched by my mother's work. During my time at Barrie, our student body represented more than fifty-five different countries and was approximately one third Black, fifteen percent Asian, and five percent Hispanic; well beyond the mix typically found at the time in the local schools.

First and foremost, Barrie was a country day school.

My mother loved the forest. She was an avid hiker, horseback rider, and skiing enthusiast. She spent her summers working at a sleep-away camp in upstate New York. When she founded Barrie, she rented a farm just north of Washington and took her children there every day for our first a summer day camp as a natural extension of her beliefs and interests.

Outdoor living and animals have always been an important part of Barrie. Our first campus on Fern Place was located in a semi-rural area in the 1930's. As the city expanded, the school moved to its present campus in Montgomery County in 1976. There the school was nestled onto a forty-six acre wildlife habitat in the midst of suburbia. We were originally in the midst of a hardwood forest that stretched for many miles. Today the school still has acres of forest and fields, a pond, marsh, and a stream meandering through the campus. Our buildings were designed to be warm and comfortable, retaining a sense of being part of the natural environment, rather than closing ourselves off from it. Barrie's facilities included gardens, greenhouses, an equestrian center, and a children's farm.

My mother passed her deep love for the world of nature on to thousands of students through a program of outdoor education and wilderness experiences. We see this as the foundation of a lifelong interest in the sciences.



The campus was a wildlife habitat that served as laboratory for first-hand nature study.

In the spring and fall, students hiked through the woods looking for wild flowers. We headed for the pond to collect tadpoles or to see how many different kinds of birds we could spot.

Outside the classrooms, children worked in their gardens. They fed the goats, sheep, and pigs or cleaned out the small animal pens. As a child, I belong to the group of children who spent every free moment caring for the school's twenty-five horses, seven days a week. My



daughter Caitlin grew up with a similar love for the stables.

In winter, Barrie's children collected food for the birds and the wildlife of the forest. We studied the tracks left in the snow, and learned how to identify trees without their leaf mantles. As spring approached, we would go out every day to see who would discover the first bud or crocus poking up out of the dormant earth.

Upper School Science classes at Barrie also incorporated a balanced hands-on approach. Our high school students studied the ecology of our pond. They collected water samples from the stream to be tested for pollutants. Astronomy classes build a scale model of the solar system that stretches out over two-miles! They charted the cycles of sun spots and solar rotation by projecting the sun's image into a light box. On clear winter nights, we stayed up late making observations with the school's telescopes. The school's science labs were filled with snakes, fish, and various animals that the students were raising. Many classes were taught out-of-doors in the fields and forests.

Barrie has always offered a variety of high adventure program that develop endurance, such as rock climbing and rappelling, hiking, backpacking, and canoeing. Horseback riding lessons are offered, using the school's own stables.

Younger children camped out right on the Barrie campus; older students headed for the Appalachians, Chesapeake Bay, or the seashore

for several days of camping, hiking, canoeing, fossil digging, and ecological studies. Every year the Upper School sponsored at least one major environmental study trip. Two popular examples were our annual trips to the Caribbean to study Marine Biology aboard a gaff-rigged schooner, and our trips to the French Alps to study the life of the high peaks and alpine meadows.



Studying marine biology on a gaff-rigged schooner in the Caribbean c 1984

Another theme that has long defined Barrie's character has now become common throughout the Montessori community: our program of international education and studies of human society. Over the years they were encapsulated in two of our widely read books: *The World In The Palm Of Her Hand-History and Geography for the Young Child* and *Celebrations Of Life-Making International Cultures Come Alive Through Festivals and Celebrations*.

Barrie always felt that it was vital to teach our children that we are all members of the human family, that our roots lie in the distant past, and that history is the story of our common heritage. Our goal was to help our chil-



Upper school retreat Fall, 1990

dren to develop a global perspective, and the study of history and world cultures formed the cornerstone of our curriculum.

Barrie tried to present a sense of living history at every level through direct hands-on experience. Children studied the emergence of the first civilizations and the universal needs of humanity. They built models of ancient tools and structures, prepared their own manuscripts, made ceremonial masks, and recreated all sorts of artifacts from the everyday life of historical eras. Students learned how to chop wood, build shelters, cooked over an open fire, churned butter, and camped out in the log cabin on the school grounds. Experiences such as these made it much easier for us, as students, to appreciate history as something living and important.

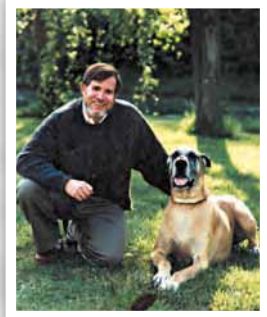
The school sponsors The Institute For Advanced Montessori Studies, a nationally accredited center for graduate level teacher education and curriculum development. Barrie's Upper School was the first officially recognized Montessori high school in the United States and

helped to spearhead the development of Montessori education at the secondary level.

Barrie's legacy lives on in the Montessori Foundation, which we established in 1992, and in the hundreds of schools that follow the Foundation's model of Montessori best practice and partnership that we advocate worldwide. The Montessori Foundation continues to develop and disseminate innovative curriculum,

publishes a wide range of books about Montessori Leadership, international Montessori seminars and conferences, teacher education, Montessori school leadership, and educational consulting services that we offer to Montessori schools around the world. Even Tomorrow's Child, our parent's magazine, began life as The Barrie School magazine.

As Barrie reaches this milestone, all of us who were for so long part of that wonderful school can look back fondly on what it contributed to our lives, and what is quietly spreading to Montessori schools around the world.



Tim Seldin with Jerome, one of several generations of Great Danes who lived at Barrie.