



## EDUCATION



# Women see school they created thriving 40 years on

In many prep schools, the founders are framed pictures on the walls. At the Philadelphia School, the founders are friends who still stop by for school functions.

---

by Liz Gormisky, Inquirer Staff Writer  
Published Nov 29, 2010

---

In many prep schools, the founders are framed pictures on the walls. At the Philadelphia School, the founders are friends who still stop by for school functions.

Recently, it was a function in their honor - as the school celebrated the 70th birthdays of the two women who created it 40 years ago.

Lynne Berman and Caroline Simon, who were born three days apart at the same Philadelphia hospital across the hall from each other, said they saw a need not met by the city's school system. Berman, who had left the city for a period, particularly noticed a lack of options when she returned.

"We had moved here from New York, where there were about a zillion different choices," Berman said. "Here, people who wanted progressive education were putting children on buses."

ADVERTISEMENT

She and Simon reconnected with one of their high school teachers and over coffee began developing plans for their school, which would eventually encompass preschool through eighth grade, with 370 students.

Simon said they wanted the school not only for their own children but also to "raise a group of people who would know and love Philadelphia," creating the next generation of the city's leaders.

The idea generated interest, but was also seen as folly by some. Soon, however, Berman and Simon persuaded two important critics to join their ranks.

"Our husbands tried to talk us out of it, but when they couldn't do that, they joined us in it," Simon said.

ADVERTISEMENT

The school began with 11 students, two teachers, and a headmaster in a rented space at Rodeph Shalom Congregation on North Broad Street. Berman and Simon had attended the temple together as children. The children and teachers also took weekly trips to a farm in Ambler, where the school developed its motto of "City Country Classroom."

Four years later, the Philadelphia School moved to its current location, with a country campus at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education.

Amy Vorenberg, current head of the school, said she is amazed that the women were able to launch the school and create a place where curiosity is cultivated, despite their other roles as career women and mothers.

"Here they were, 30 years old with five children between them under the age of 5, and they decide to start a school," she said. Berman was a social worker and Simon was a lawyer at the time of the school's opening.

"For the first 15 years of its existence, TPS was like my third child," Simon reflected in a chronology she wrote for the school's 25th anniversary.

Now, she sees that third child flourishing even more, as the school develops a new property across the street that will allow enrollment to grow to 450. Construction is set to begin early next year.

At one point, Berman and Simon worried that the newly opened school could afford to accept only students able to pay full tuition. Today, Vorenberg said, the school has a \$7 million operating budget and grants \$1 million in scholarships and financial aid each year. Tuition starts at \$16,500.

The founders' mission of creating a place where children feel empowered to guide their own learning remains strong in the quirky but welcoming classrooms at the Philadelphia School. There are no single desks or straight hallways. The students sit at round tables, and the rooms flow organically into each other almost like a maze. From Snappy the turtle to the parakeets in the preschoolers' room, the building is alive with creatures and children's happy chatter.

Vorenberg wears jeans, and the students cheerfully greet her as "Amy." A precocious sixth grader named Daniel stops Vorenberg as she walks through his classroom and proudly explains his project on African biomes. Judging by the confidence of his speech, he seems ready to present at a company board meeting.

While they worked tirelessly during its beginnings, Berman and Simon are pleased to see the school thriving. They said they always intended to step out of the way and let professionals run the school.

"It has happily taken off," Simon said. "It has adopted and stayed true to thematic education and grouped learning."

"The only thing I can't quite fathom is why it hasn't been replicated," she added.

Berman's son Michael, 40, who works as a communications consultant in Philadelphia, is a 1984 alumnus of the school and now serves on its board.

"I see her a lot differently now that I have kids of my own," he said of his mother. Michael Berman has two young children. "I don't have any idea of how she did it."

He remembers the first planning meetings with his mother, Simon, and their families when he was 10. The gatherings boasted freshly baked cookies and lots of laughter, to the point where he said he, his siblings, and Simon's children didn't quite understand the difference between their mothers' meetings and parties.

"We didn't realize it, but they were working on the school," he said. "It was just part of who they were."

Published Nov. 29, 2010

---

 **Debra Cornick**, Inquirer Staff Writer