

THE PRESCHOOL IN THE VILLAGE

The Preschool in the Village recently celebrated its 25th anniversary of serving the Amherst community and its young children. Founded as a community outreach program and sponsored by the Congregational Church of Amherst, it remains a preschool dedicated to the healthy development of three- to five-year olds. While it is no longer sponsored by the church, it is self-sustaining and resides in the church building. The early history of PIV that follows is the story of its beginning.

Shortly before Chris Trudo passed away at the age of 95, she was concerned that the original mission of the Preschool in the Village was no longer remembered. She told Sue Spiess that she wanted to have the story of its founding and purpose written down and saved for history. Unfortunately, her illness progressed too quickly at that point and conversations with her weren't possible. Fortunately, Kate Thompson and Kathy Skoglund, members of the original PIV Board, have clear memories of those days, and Andrea Cyr, Congregational Church of Amherst Administrator, was able to find many records of the early years of the PIV. What follows is collaboration among the four of us. We hope that we have fulfilled one of Chris's last wishes.

The privately run Village Preschool had operated in the Congregational Church for 16 years. When Barbara Bell, the director, announced in the spring of 1996 that the school was closing in June, it was going to leave a large void for families with preschool children. New families were moving to Amherst, there were very few preschools available, and there were no public kindergarten classes.

Chris Trudo and Betsy Austen, both longtime educators and church members, proposed a church-sponsored, non-religious preschool. The Preschool in the Village would be seen as a community outreach program with a board of directors including parents and church members. Chris and Betsy would run the school for one year, after which a permanent director would be hired. The trustees supported the proposal and agreed to provide a \$15,000 startup loan to be repaid over three years (at prime plus two percent) and called a special church meeting.

At the meeting in June 1996, the congregation agreed to support the church's sponsorship of the school, to open in September 1996. Chris explained why they believed the church should support a preschool as one of its programs: the church needed to be more visible in the community, and the community's need for preschool education called for concrete action. The preschool would be a community service outreach available to all families, supporting both families and children. It would be away to introduce the church to new families. The school would be a place for all children, including those with special needs; would exercise good stewardship of the church space; and would be self-sustaining with a board of directors answering to the Church Council.

Outreach is central to Congregational Church history, from educating the very young, school age children, and teens, to founding and supporting colleges and universities. The Preschool in the Village would continue this tradition of outreach and education of both students and their parents. It was considered part of the mission of the church.

Chris and Betsy's appeal was successful; the church members supported the continuation of a preschool under the general sponsorship of the Church. The school was not to be a 'Christian' school as the term is used today; it would be non-sectarian, modeling Christian principles and lifting up all cultures.

The church meeting was held on June 6, 1996. The new Preschool in the Village was to open in September. There was a lot to be done in a very

short time frame. Betsy and Bud Austen and Chris and Vern Trudo, with the help of parents, church members, and staff, worked tirelessly all summer to clean and paint the classrooms and bathrooms, hire staff, organize materials and equipment, prepare staff and parent handbooks, build a curriculum, AND build a playground! When she was asked why she would come out of retirement to take on such a project, Betsy simply replied, “because the children need it.”

Enrollment for the first year was at 93%, putting the preschool on firm ground. Parents had requested an extended day program, and that was offered for two days/week beginning in January. The board was able to offer financial assistance to qualifying families and projected a strong need for this in the future.

Chris and Betsy felt strongly that they wanted PIV to be a developmental preschool, not an academic one, and that supporting families was essential to supporting students’ growth. Chris firmly believed that kids shouldn’t start school until they were ready. Continuing with this tenet, PIV created its Pre-Kindergarten program in 2000 in response to the Amherst School District’s decision to drop its Readiness Program (which had offered an extra year of growth between kindergarten and first grade).

In the beginning, the school’s bylaws required that its board consist of a majority plus one of church members, as well as representation from the community. Preference for registration was to be given to church members. There was also a parent on the board. That has since changed; there is one representative from the church on the current board.

Kathy Skoglund, chairperson of the board in 1996, emphasized the energy and abilities of the first board: “I have been particularly grateful for the highly effective and collaborative Board of Directors. Their collective abilities in finance, management, tax issues, education, buildings and grounds are remarkable! It is due to the combined efforts of this board that our first full year of the preschool was completed by the directors and staff with confidence and enthusiasm.” We are particularly grateful to the

members of the Congregational Church of Amherst for their faith and shared vision.”

Enrollment grew from 75 to 125 families in the first five years. 92 children provided income and expenses at the “breakeven” level. 32 children in the extended day and kindergarten enrichment programs provided for most of the profit and discretionary income. Over the years, PIV sponsored parenting workshops to help parents navigate the world of nurturing young children.

When Susan Drumm was hired as Director in 1997, Chris and Betsy were able to step back and see their shared vision of The Preschool in the Village become a reality, as well as a respected contributor to the Amherst educational community.

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