



Views from a Visitor

By Larissa Kiyashko

My six-year old daughter, Zina, and I turned into the driveway of Diablo Valley School on a Wednesday morning. We were met by a staff member, Vicente, and a girl about Zina's age, dressed in a full body Rainbow Dash suit. The two of them helped sign us in as guests, and then Zina and her new "Rainbow Dash" friend disappeared for most of that day.



Larissa and Zina, visiting from Russia

I am used to "losing" my daughter at school. We have a similar school in Russia, where we live, and I came to Diablo Valley to learn more about the practical side of a Sudbury school. Prior to this visit, Zina and I visited three other Sudbury schools: in Jerusalem, in Harderwijk (Netherlands), and in Ghent (Belgium). It's been wonderful visiting all these different schools and gathering the wisdom and experience of seasoned staff members and founders.

As a co-founder of our school in Russia and a parent, I am learning the forgotten art of trusting our children to grow, learn, and develop. Our school is young by school age standards, only three years in existence, and it didn't start as a Sudbury model. When our version of an alternative school didn't quite work out, we turned to the Sudbury Valley School, a fifty-year old model with several generations of graduates and sound research. While visiting relatives in California, we decided to continue our own research into how Sudbury works, and were approved by the School Meeting to spend a week or so at Diablo Valley School.

Truth be told, I had a harder time of it the first day, than my daughter did. She is an outgoing person and had found her "tribe" right away. I, on the other hand, was initially struck by visuals. There was an active inner companion in my head that day, who kept wondering about things like "Who cleans here?" or "It seems a little crowded; how do they all get along and find space to do different things?" or "How do they deal with noise?" This inner companion really tried to be the judge that day, but I knew better than to let it spoil my first impressions. I started asking questions to understand how cleaning worked; I learned that enrollment is at its maximum right now and that there are people on the waiting list; and I reminded myself that the life of vibrant, healthy kids is just noisy sometimes.

There must be something here that allows the school to flourish!

As the day and the week progressed, I started to understand things, and my judgement deflated like a pufferfish, when all is safe. I understood and witnessed how the cleaning works, totally impressed by the collaboration between younger and older students to get the cleaning tasks done. I was amazed how people switched rooms and groups, and moved around the school with ease, apparently unfazed by any lack of space. And I marveled at the level of trust on the part of the staff members.

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I returned home every day and journaled about our experiences, sharing them with friends of our school back home. From one of the early posts, one of the readers picked up on the "no big deal" phrase and it stuck. I started noticing that yes, no matter what, the staff members remained in the "it's not a big deal" mode. Our experiences are always relative to ourselves. If I say, "no big deal", that means that somewhere else I've seen similar situations and a "big deal" reaction to them. Here

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the calm, patient, thoughtful, respectful attitude of the staff towards students leaves space and time for students to think, figure out *their* deal and respond accordingly.

I am familiar with the Sudbury model, knowing that there are no classes, curriculum, tests, or age division at the school. They operate from a whole different premise of what learning is and how it happens. I would call it a "back to basics" approach. Somewhere in the last hundred and twenty years we stripped kids of the natural way they learn and put them in day prisons called "schools." Much is written about the history of compulsory education and the reasons behind it. However, I was struck by what Peter Hartkamp said in his book *Beyond Coercive Education*: "Over 100 years of coercive education has conditioned five generations of citizens to believe that 'coercive education' is normal." When we look beyond that conditioning, we start to see the value in everything children do and play, with an admirable level of concentration and with no coercion present whatsoever. Control loosens, and long-term trust is born.

But I was wondering if a school like this is a good fit for everyone? To rephrase my own question: is there a personality that the school doesn't suit? Understandably, I could only look at the students present at DVS, but I found that they really varied: there were the outgoing, the shy, the introverts, and the talkative, even a couple of students on the spectrum. I realized that there isn't a personality that is "left behind," simply because the ground value here is mutual respect. The model has many checks and balances in place, and disrespectful behaviour or bullying, although occurring

occasionally, would not stand a chance to get rooted here! The community would not allow it. The Judicial Committee (JC) is set up to deal with any rule breaking through investigation of each individual case. If necessary, they are backed up by the School Meeting, comprising all students and staff. In the words of the school's preamble, "All School Meeting members are responsible for the general welfare of the school, through actions that contribute to preserving the atmosphere of freedom, respect, fairness, trust, and order that is the essence of the school's existence." I saw exactly this at Diablo Valley School: the confidence of the students in using these checks and balances to ensure the wellbeing of the school community.

Witnessing JC was one of the most valuable practical experiences for me. I saw how different JC clerks and JC members practiced fairness and staying on track, as cases varied in hardship. I witnessed the gathering of the whole school for a case that needed an important announcement to be made to all members of the School Meeting. And I marveled at the "no big deal" attitude of a JC member who had a complaint against him, taking full responsibility for breaking of a rule and suggesting his own sentencing in all seriousness and fairness. I was impressed with the level of understanding of rights and responsibilities each student has for preserving the wellbeing of the school. But just like staff member Anne-Martine says: JC does no magic; it works with people, and sometimes that work takes a lot of time and patience.

I was fortunate to be present at two early graduations in February. The process of graduation itself was pretty simple: graduating

students presented their theses in writing to the assembly community and had to defend their theses by answering questions for 50 minutes from the assembly members at the local public hall. It sounds easier than taking a bunch of tests to graduate, but it's not as easy as it sounds. To withstand the pressure of being asked questions about how well they have prepared themselves for life in a wider community, and then have their graduation be voted on based on that public interview is no small feat. The setting was very professional, and I felt both a serious and supportive attitude from students, the staff, and assembly members. Both students successfully defended and moved on.

Both Zina and I are forever grateful to the students and the staff members at Diablo Valley School for allowing us to experience first-hand what life is like at your Sudbury school. Anne-Martine, Chelsea, Sam, and Vicente, thank you for answering my endless questions and making time to share the staff perspective. I now wish for an opportunity to welcome any students and staff at U. Dacha, our school in Russia, and to return your hospitality!

Wish List

We would be grateful for donations of any of these items. In general, it's a good idea to contact us by phone or email before donating items to make sure we haven't already received them. Thanks so much!

Art Supplies: Shimmery & glittery paints, good erasers, oil paints

Kitchen: Americraft round cake pan

Electronics: High-quality headphones

Thanks to You: Time and space to grow, learn, and develop



We are grateful to these wonderful supporters who have made gifts of funds or materials to help our school.

Brianne & Tony Ayala
Allen Baum
Lori Miller & Michael Baum
Patti Berrow
Hal Childs
Jacqueline Bott & Cal Collier
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Veronica Sepe
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Chris Thomas
Camille Vernick

Invitation to IDEC 2019



Alex Müller at DVS

Now it's been two years since I left California, since I left the DVS community. And I must say I miss students, staff, parents, and all the lovely events, and even just day to day life at school. Now here is a chance to meet again: **I invite everyone to come to Ukraine, August 1 - 9, 2019 for the IDEC (International Democratic Education Conference)**, held together with EUDEC (European... you get the idea). The first part will be held in the lovely city of Kiev, and second part in Vinnitsia, not far away.

Many of you will remember how passionate I am about this kind of event. A conference like this is a place to meet people from all over the world, any age, to explore ideas together, to grow, and to find out how we can make democratic education more accessible to all. And it is a great way to discover a country. See some impressions of EUDEC 2018 here youtu.be/wiQ_4IQBDDA and find more information on the event here <https://idec-eudec.in.ua/>

Oh, and yes, it is safe to come, yes, it is safe to bring children. I just checked the website of the German Foreign Ministry and they say that this part of Ukraine is safe (they advise not to go to districts Donezk und Luhansk; the conference is nowhere near those). Getting around with English should be no problem. I am definitely going with some students and staff of my school (Demokratische Schule X Berlin). If you are interested, contact DVS staff and they will put you in touch with me.

Alexander Müller

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A Sudbury School

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Do you want to save paper by switching to
the electronic version of our newsletter?
Send us an email.

Open House
April 6
11am – 2pm



See our school and talk with staff, parents, and students.
The whole family is welcome.
Please contact us to let us know you are coming.

DIABLO VALLEY SCHOOL
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