

The Dyers: A Lesson in Caring

For the pair of teachers at the Simnasho School, a recent student exchange trip to the coast told it all.

The handful of kids with whom they had spent the last two years cheerfully turned their backs on them and went off to visit with strangers.

Such evidence of happy self-assurance is how the Dyers are measuring their success these days as they pack up for their own more final leave-taking.

The discovery of mutual respect might well describe the married teachers' involvement with the Simnasho kids, and

the process has been rewarding for all. Love seems to bounce off the school walls - but the confidence that has grown among them knows no walls.

Tom and Liz Dyer leave at the end of this school year knowing they will be missed but certain that the kids will carry on the pride and positive self-image that have bloomed under their tutelage.

The Dyers refuse to take all the credit for the students' progress. They are grateful for the circumstances - an intimate two-room school in a tiny, traditional community, a

supportive administration, and a strong, close staff.

"It's not that we're better," said Tom about their teaching. "We've just had a better chance."

Of course it took special people to make the most of a good situation. Not every teacher would bake a cake for each student's birthday, or talk to kids in their native language, or provide a child with a place to beadwork after school.

The first year was admittedly rough as the couple adjusted to the challenges of a small school and the students to their new, sometimes blundering, teachers.

This year the seasoned Simnasho residents gloried in the combination of an ungraded curriculum and an especially stable group of kids, with a lot of time, effort and flexibility everyone benefited.

With only 20 kids in grades 1-4, the Dyers were able to meet the needs of each student without rigid grouping at grade levels. Reading and social studies groups as well as special projects gathered kids from both classrooms together and created a family-like unity to the school.

Such an atmosphere made it possible for the Dyers to zero in on each individual child without inviting the stigma of "special needs."

"Love relationships," as Tom described them, naturally developed from this close work. As many educators recognize, kids learn more when the knowledge is couched in caring.

The Dyers proudly pointed out that every child made at least one year's progress during the past school year.

The teaching duo was warmed by the flexibility and sharing of the staff. Kids felt free to make ice cream in

Mrs. Gilbert's kitchen and the bus driver Mr. McKay could be found in the classroom assisting in a geology lesson. Teacher aide Eliza Hicks had more responsibility than most aides and proved invaluable in regular lessons as well as in her Indian language instruction.

The community felt comfortable about pitching in, too, especially in the form of Matilda Mitchell and Sylvia Wallulatum. The elders taught Indian language the first year the Dyers were there and have involved themselves in the kids' cultural activities.

Because of the importance of the Longhouse in Simnasho, the school is not the heart of the community as it is in many other small towns. "What could be better than their own culture?" posed Tom. But the Dyers provided a source of energy in the community. They actively involved themselves in 4-H outdoor and leather clubs, and made kids and parents feel welcome in the school after hours.

This kind of involvement with the community and the individual students was in line with what the Dyers had been seeking. Originally hoping to find positions in a remote Alaskan community, they jumped at the chance to live and work in Simnasho. Surprisingly they would have enjoyed even more isolation.

Commented Superintendent Darrell Wright, "The Dyers had the maturity and judgment to function independently. They didn't require daily supervision."

The amount of time and money the Dyers invested in their children cannot be measured. They don't think in terms of sacrifice because of their total sense of dedication. Being married helped ease the load.

They could plan and prepare lessons and take trips together.

Tom remarked, "We'll miss the level of commitment we've tuned ourselves to."

But an assortment of interests outside Simnasho beckons to them. Tom intends to pursue the study of linguistics in a Ph.D. program at the University of Arizona. He thirsts for the academic challenge and wants to begin writing grammar instructional materials, most probably in an Indian language.

Liz is looking for a teaching position in Tuscon, although she is rather anxious about taking on a large classroom. A former music teacher with a masters degree, Liz misses the musical activities and opportunities that larger communities offer.

Tom and Liz can talk enthusiastically for hours about education, academics and the arts but will eventually confess that their real love is mountain climbing. Veterans of scores of peaks, the Dyers discovered together the thrill and beauty of scaling vertical rock faces and trekking through the wilds.

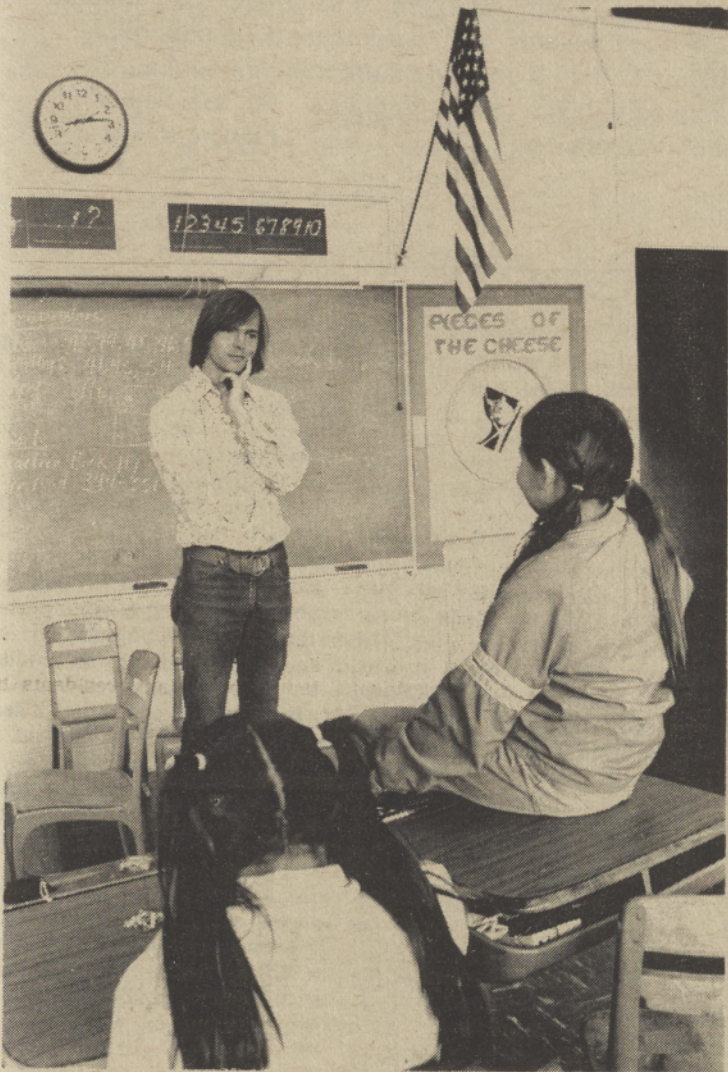
They have exposed their students to backpacking, climbing and camping but have had little time recently to fulfill their own wilderness needs.

"We lived with the school," they said without a trace of regret. The rewards have been too plentiful for their efforts to have been anything but justified.

As Warm Springs-Simnasho principal Tony Miller explained, "Tom and Liz made the kids feel good about themselves."

And that makes Tom and Liz feel good as they leave their Simnasho friends and neighbors.

It will be a little like losing members of a family. But as in any good family experience, the individuals come out the winners.



"Tell me what one fourth of eight is and you can go home," Mr. Dyer challenged Pixie Sanders at the end of a day. Students didn't look particularly eager to leave but their desire to please Mr. Dyer was enough to produce many correct answers.

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counselors. The youngster's family counseling begins in the second week.

The family, child and counselor work together as a team, says group home director Arlene Boileau, with the goal of returning the child to the home.

While kids are learning to be aware of their own feelings, parents are learning to listen and be sensitive to their kids.

When a youngster leaves the group home, an event which is determined by the court or through staff negotiations with the court, follow-up

counseling is arranged for as long as the family desires.

It has been a time out for the child and the family, but primarily as a means of getting the family back together as a working unit.

As psychologist Edelhart said, "We recognize that all families have problems. From time to time the family may need an opportunity to create a little space between family members in order to sort out problems. The group home provides the facility to help the family come to terms with their difficulty."



One of the Dyer traditions has been to bake a cake for each student's birthday. Willie Sahme covered his ears while Mrs. Dyer led

the class in a round of "Happy Birthday" recently at the Simnasho School.

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BLACKBIRD

ACROSS THIS BLACKNESS, A WAVE SOFTLY RIPPLES

DREAMS AND DRUMBEATS STILL WALK ON

SONGS OF MY LIFE ONE BELONGED TO YOU

I THOUGHT