

In the hopes of zooming out many, many years on the Putney experience, we gathered insight and perspective from former heads of school (or directors, depending on when they were here). Here are their reflections.*

50 YEARS

5 QUESTIONS



1 What set Putney apart from other schools during your time?

TOM JONES, DIRECTOR 1975-81:

When I arrived at Putney in 1974, the construction of the Art Building was underway. The academic schedule had been modified to allow students to periodically join construction crews. For lumber, we were harvesting trees from our property and sawing then with our sawmill powered with a Sherman Tank engine. In our studio students were creating metal hinges and other hardware. I doubt any other schools were so committed and involved in the construction of a building. It was

a tremendously exciting time and the finished building was stunning. You can imagine the shock and disappointment when, in December of 1977, the building burned to the ground. For other features of Putney's program, I could add the farm and students building their own cabins and living in them.

SVEN HUSEBY, DIRECTOR 1990-95:

We tried to make an environment that supported the students in carrying out the program successfully. We broadened the scope of academic support services, strengthened departments, and became more sophisticated in intervening for students who had learning issues. And it worked. As we had hoped, students felt

more committed, stronger in meeting the challenges of the program, and better about themselves as they grew into young adults. [A] lot of educational consultants took notice, and started to refer students to Putney.

BRIAN MORGAN, DIRECTOR 1995-07:

When I first arrived at Putney, Terry Dwyer, business manager at that time, proudly introduced me to the school's email system, based on Lotus software. I had learnt a little basic computational skill while at Exeter, but email was not yet widely available there. Shortly thereafter, I hired a new librarian, Nancy Hellekson, from the East-West Institute in Hawaii, where she had computerized

the card catalogue. At Putney, she also computerized the card catalogue and, in addition, established the PutneyWiki in order to electronically record Putney's history. Sadly, few alumni embraced the PutneyWiki and the enterprise fell into oblivion. Another example of when Putney was ahead of its time!

EMILY JONES, DIRECTOR/HEAD OF SCHOOL 2007-22: Putney students had genuine responsibility for the daily working of the community and for helping determine its future. Many schools pay lip service to this, but it's rare to find students authentically shaping the community, the goals, and the educational outcomes. Students regularly worked out ways

to better honor Putney's Fundamental Beliefs. Those words of Mrs. Hinton's were like the mainmast on a sailboat out at sea. And at student request, the Board of Trustees added a ninth Fundamental Belief to the list, this one on environmental sustainability. Students also initiated the conversation about Putney's financial investments, leading to the endowment being moved to a socially responsible investment firm. (One of the highpoints of my years at Putney was watching the student head of school quizzing the representative from the old firm (JP Morgan) on their investment ethics). Students usually rose to higher levels of maturity because of the trust and responsibilities they were given.

DANNY O'BRIEN: We foster collaboration, not competition. Our kids are doing work because they love it, not because they feel like they need to. A classic example is senior exhibitions. Every high school in the world—including every high school I went to and every other school where I've worked—does senior spring terribly: college applications are in, transcripts are in, and everyone holds their breath to graduation. We don't do that. At Putney you see a third of the senior class doing a 40-minute presentation, and it's clear that their curiosity is enhanced and not dribbling. They are not crawling to the finish line. Additionally, kids are learning because they're interested in learning, and not showing them grades



Former heads of school celebrate the school's 75th anniversary. From left, Tim Daly '74, Barbara Barnes '41, Sven Huseby, Lyssa Jackson '12, Lies Pasterkamp, Brian Morgan, Emily Jones, Tom Jones

until junior year really works. It has its frustrations and downsides, but the upside is it's contributing to an ethos that "this is for something greater than my grades." We hold curiosity and creativity in as high esteem as any place that I've seen. The last thing we do really well—and this goes back to our fundamental beliefs too—is that we live for the spirit of living. I think about a basketball game last year. The other team came with a minimum number of players, and one of them got hurt. They were going to have to forfeit the game. And our captain took off his Putney jersey, put on their jersey, and played hard for that team the whole time. It was a tight game, and we won. He played as hard as he could. We didn't send our weakest player to the other team, and we didn't forfeit. We gave them one of our strongest players and everyone had a great time. It's for all the right reasons.

2 What lessons did Putney learn during your time?

TOM JONES: During my first year at Putney, a parent told me that the worst thing that could happen to Putney School would be to receive a gift of a million dollars. "Money would sabotage Putney's values." I suppose this myth is based on the belief that with more money we would jettison our core values and become just another "prep school." Because everything we did was based on our core values, we lived by those core values. I learned how untrue this statement was.

SVEN HUSEBY: [We had a] significant clamping down on the looseness that was here at Putney. As Barbara Barnes had pointed out in the mid-'80s, there is nothing incompatible between progressivism and structure. However, we weren't sure that we'd be able to get all of

the faculty to rally behind this decision. And, of course, how would the students react? Was I going to be able to stand up in assembly and tell them why they had to accept this? I did, and I'll never forget that day. There was a great deal of uncertainty about how it would go, despite our conviction that this would strengthen the school in the long run.

BRIAN MORGAN: Putney was learning much about computers during my tenure, although cell phones really only made an appearance in my later years. The real catastrophe was September 11, 2001. We held emergency assemblies for our terrified community and held close those students who had family in

New York City. One student waited five days before learning that his family was safe. The entire community was learning how to survive a major catastrophe, and the centerpiece of that learning was the immense importance of community.

EMILY JONES: The faculty as a whole was challenged to work on curriculum together—each department being clear and open about its goals, how students would be measured, and how students would understand the goals and purposes of each piece of the curriculum. This work was published as The Putney Core, and it covered all aspects of learning at the school: academic, social, and ethical. Teachers could design curriculum knowing what their students were learning elsewhere, and although grades were still not shown to students until it was time to apply to college, there were clear systems for students to know how they were doing. The 9th grade curriculum was called "Humans in the Natural World" and combined English, history, and science into one course. This helped students become broad and curious thinkers and learn academic skills that crossed all disciplines.

DANNY O'BRIEN: I think we are still trying to figure out what it means to put a human face on AI. We know AI is coming, we know AI is going to change the world; it's changing industries that were sure-fire entry-level industries for ambitious young people, from programming to paralegals to first-year lawyers. All of those professions are going away and we can't disengage from society. Our alumni have to be part of it. What is the work that will be there for them? I think the real answer is being able to be facile with this technology, while also having the social intelligence that you'll need to maneuver toward making mankind better. We're uniquely positioned to do that, but we have to figure out exactly how to make that happen. The fact that we've always tried to put a human face on things means that we should have a head start on that. We're also trying to balance, constantly, how to play the "game of life" while also creating your own path. Our alumni need to be able to function in society and make the

compromises that they need to make, and also know when to take a stand. We develop a lot of really passionate people here. They are ideologically strong, and they see what's right and wrong. It's one thing to get really fired up and to have passionate beliefs, but how do you actually work with them? So we're working to raise awareness, and to talk about the world as we wish it would be. Let's make sure we know what our own values are, and then ask how we go out into the world where not everyone is going to share those values, and engage respectfully, thoughtfully, and also sometimes win the day.

3 How were the values of progressive education reflected then?

TOM JONES: I believe that the Putney School maintained its position as a leader of progressive education because we held to the philosophy that Carmelita Hinton brought to Elm Lea Farm in 1935. In fact, during my first three years as Director of the school, Carmelita and I met at least once a year to discuss the school. Forty years after she established the school, she continued to insist that students continue to value manual labor, immerse themselves in the arts, and take responsibility for their own education. We did our best to live up to the standards she set.

SVEN HUSEBY: For me the question was always about how to get the students to care enough about the issues so that they're provoked, angered, or somehow interested enough to give of their energy and of their intellectual vigor in order to see why they believe certain things, why they argue certain positions, how they support certain ideas. What is the connection between the ideas that you hold, the values you hold, and the ways that you finally choose to act?

BRIAN MORGAN: Putney's educational program has always been different and the arts have been central. We have dedicated spaces on campus for ceramics, fibre arts, sculpture, jewelry, blacksmithing, printmaking, painting and drawing, stained glass, woodworking, music, dance,



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fashion design, photography, culinary arts. The Putney farm arguably stands out as the prime example of progressive education during my time. Under the guidance of Farm Manager Pete Stickney, students were learning true responsibility, not only towards livestock and agriculture, but also towards themselves. So many alumni relish the memory of the joys of AM Barn duty.



Not only was I introduced to the Farm by the student head of the barn when I was interviewing for the Director position, but when our student trustees showed the barn to Graham Berwind '47 a few years later, he was so impressed by their presence and by the role of the farm, that he [partially] endowed the Putney Farm with a major gift. In addition to the farm, Glenn Littledale '76 introduced 3D printing to the school, first in evening activities, and nowadays in the science curriculum. Project Week and Senior Exhibitions continue to excite students, and learning by doing continues to be the beating heart of a Putney education.

EMILY JONES: In 2010 we held a progressive education conference at the school to celebrate Putney's 75th birthday. This was a summer workshop that brought educators from across the country. One outcome of this was a

decision, along with two other schools, to start a graduate program for college students who wanted to teach—this became the Progressive Education Lab, designed and run out of Putney.

DANNY O'BRIEN: Ultimately, progressive education is still about putting a kid at the center. This is still a student-driven school. Our grading culture is still pretty revolutionary even amongst the really highly regarded progressive schools. Exhibitions and independent studies are ways in which we're at the cutting edge of demonstrating that our students leave here more curious than when they started. The Putney Core is our stake in the ground. We identified the skills our students need for the future, and backward-design curriculum from those skills. You can demonstrate mastery anywhere, from the soccer field, to a maple tree, to the barn, to the classroom. That puts us on the cutting edge. It's a great, optimistic way of being. It has also become increasingly clear that a place where Putney has really thrived and positioned ourselves is at tension points. Carmelita is a great example. She was a radical and had one foot deeply in the establishment. That's a tension. For a lot of our families and kids, what distinguishes Putney for them is they see a chance for a stronger, happier, more well-rounded education that is still going to likely get them to the end point that they hope for, which is an admission to the college that they want to go to. We provide kids with the skills they need to go to the colleges that they want to go to with their curiosity enhanced and their sense of community intact.

4 What are ways the outside world was reflected at Putney?

TOM JONES: We were early adopters of clean energy. We purchased a used windmill and wired it up to provide electricity to the KDU. Students and faculty kept the kitchen alert to sustainable foods, particularly seafoods. And on November 2, 1976, when Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States, we had peanuts for lunch.

SVEN HUSEBY: We made a decision to get out of commercial dairy farming. We were selling most of our milk, but as prices continued to fall many farms were going out of business. We were pushing so hard to make a profit that the educational outcome was less and less part of what the farm was about ... We wanted to shift from Putney as a school on a farm to Putney as a school that has a farm as an integral part of its educational program.

BRIAN MORGAN: The outside world was reflected at the school both locally and internationally.

At least once a year Executive Chef Marty Brennan-Sawyer and his current student crew prepared and served the monthly Community Dinner in the Village of Putney. On Sundays, local folk played pickup soccer on the school pitches, and in winter local folk enjoyed our ski trails. When St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Brattleboro established a relationship with a village in Ghana, first by collecting and then shipping bicycles there, Putney students also traveled to that village for several summers to build a library. They stayed with a local farmer and built the library from the ground up—literally. The first summer they made the bricks! Once the library was built, student groups took boxes of text books. To reciprocate, we tried to arrange for a visa for the farmer to spend time at Putney, but even with the help of Senator Pat Leahy, we were not successful. Some students requested a Russian language course for seniors who had completed the language requirement. Based on Joyce Vining Morgan's previous experience with the State Department's School-to-School Program, Putney was invited to participate in a school exchange with an English-language school in Petropavlovsk in Kazakhstan. After the first year we alternated annual trips for five years. That was an exciting experience for all concerned.

EMILY JONES: In many ways Putney is an island, and that is part of its beauty. But whether we liked it or not, new technology was going to come find us, and we constantly had to rethink and revise what we were going to do with that. When I arrived at Putney there was one large

rock that one could stand on with one's phone and get a call through, sometimes. When I left, we had three smart people in the tech office, all of whom were also master educators. One girl who learned from them got into the third level of coding in her freshman year at Berkeley. At the same time, many of the faculty were scrambling to keep up with the students in the tech world. This in itself was an interesting dynamic. I was lucky to be at Putney during a period in which international students were still eager to come to the U.S. Much of my educational experience having been abroad, I was in favor of having as much cultural variety as we could. We had an international student office staffed by a wonderful faculty member who both worked with the admissions office and ensured that incoming international students would land on their feet and thrive. Some years we had students from six or eight different countries, and we also created ways in which our American students could go abroad for a part of a school year.

DANNY O'BRIEN: I think that we really still struggle to walk in the shoes of other people and to be curious about other perspectives and other mindsets. People are becoming more certain in their political perspectives and it becomes really, really hard to separate political values from a person. And then it becomes really hard to see them as behaviors. And so we judge people more quickly than we should. And everyone is a little bit less curious and a little bit more certain. I think certainly everything from climate, to changing economy, to a mess of a world just makes everyone feel a bit more anxious. It's harder to have fun when you're tired and anxious. We all carry around that extra weight right now. But the value added of working in a boarding school is how much fun it can be, and the adventure that you can have by living together and working together, and when teachers have the energy to bring kids with them on the things they're going to do anyway, it's magic. But you have to have the brain space to do that and the heart space to do that; the world makes that harder. But there are also positives to all those things too. We know that you can cure some mental health

challenges by having the confidence to do things, by the chance to work with animals and be responsible for them: it's a chance to show kids that they have purpose, and purpose drives confidence. At Putney they actually have a chance to do something. And doing something is what gives you the confidence to do something again. And that's a cure for anxiety. There's a lot in our program that is an antidote to the things that we're seeing in society writ large.

5 What was something you hoped to accomplish that did get done? That didn't get done?

TOM JONES: We did rebuild the Art Building. We didn't build a significant endowment.

SVEN HUSEBY: One area of risk was launching into a \$5 million capital campaign at a time when we were operating with deficits, operating with a school that was under-enrolled, operating in much more conservative times. Progressive institutions have not been known for expanding their operations, and to begin to raise money in such times felt very risky. But I certainly never had second thoughts or never wavered in my belief that Putney was deserving, that Putney was viable, that Putney was necessary.

BRIAN MORGAN: The 1995-96 academic year began with a serious enrollment challenge, after a large number of juniors decided not to return to Putney. The first challenge of my tenure was to balance the budget and to regain the confidence of Putney alumni sufficiently to persuade them to send their children to Putney. That eventually happened and the enrollment stabilized at 200 students, thanks largely to Rick Cowan. As the enrollment grew, it became obvious that a new dormitory was required. With the idea of blurring the outside and the inside, Huseby House became a reality. Inevitably after the arrival of a new Director, there were some changes in staffing. One change was critical: the Board instructed me to revitalize the music program. When the



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occasion arose, I was able to recruit Inès Gomez-Ochoa as music director, who did indeed re-energize our music. She even introduced opera as an activity. As I made the acquaintance of many alumni, a common theme in conversation was a performing arts center, which had been discussed for at least thirty years. The design did not include a new theatre, but the Lower Farm Theatre was rehabbed by our talented maintenance crew under Jim Taylor and many student hands. Trustee Josh Goldberg '75 generously facilitated the effort and the theatre was renamed the Jeffrey Campbell Theatre. A major capital campaign resulted in the Michael S. Currier Center with its auditorium, dance studio, music practice rooms, meditation room, and exhibit and reception space. Its completion was celebrated by a sand mandala made by Buddhist monks invited by Dean of Faculty Judith Sheridan.

While much was accomplished over twelve years by talented faculty and administrators, guided by a visionary board of trustees, much was left for my

successor, Emily Jones, to undertake, notably new dormitories to house the growing enrollment and to replace the ancient Old Boys dorm. Putney remains one of a kind and a model for schools yet to come.

EMILY JONES: We had a design for a new theater, to be attached to the Currier Center, and we looked at the drawings of it longingly from time to time. We were not able to raise the funds to build it. Fundraising in general was slow in my time, for which I take full responsibility.

DANNY O'BRIEN: In a progressive school, by design, we have very few external markers of success or progress. Instead, you need a sense that you're going to be held accountable, as opposed to a set of numerical goals. It's not, "Did I get my advisees out of my office in less than 46 seconds each? Did I produce this thing?" If we commit to holding each other accountable by regular coaching and regularly giving each other feedback—and being both willing to give it and open to receiving it—we can be a progressive school without a lot of rules. If we can't do that, and if we're not willing to have the conversations that we have to have with one another to help our own self-awareness and to excel, the only thing we have to fall back on is either complete chaos, or lots of rules and regulations. So we live in tension between agency and accountability; we're trying to find that perfect balance. And that's where deep learning comes from. And on more specific notes, lots of heads of school since 1952 have talked about saying goodbye to Old Boys dorm, and I'm pleased that Old Boys has finally had a chance to rest. And for ongoing work, I think we have to continue to invest in deferred maintenance. We don't invest in our buildings to be fancy. We invest in buildings so they're here for the next generation, so that our teachers can teach in quality classrooms, our kids can live in quality places, and we can attract really good students and really good adults. We do it so The Putney School will be here 90 years from now. To me, there's just no more relevant place in the world to address what I think the world needs right now. ■

LETTER FROM THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

Ninety years ago, Carmelita Hinton founded The Putney School to educate individuals and to model a better way of life for a world that desperately needed it. She asked Putney students in 1941—at the beginning of a terrible world war, "Are (you) going to help pull civilization up or be unmindful of its disintegration?"

After that war came an uncertain peace, and a fear-driven trampling of freedoms and civil liberties during the Red Scare. At ninety years old, Putney has seen many of these cycles. Our campus has experienced the traumas of Vietnam, Watergate, and counterculture. We now live in another tumultuous time, for education and the world around us. The world feels rife with division, rights we took for granted feel under attack, the climate is shifting rapidly, and artificial intelligence will change how we live.

How do we respond? Through this, as it has during previous times of tumult, Putney's unique mission and fundamental beliefs serve as our north star. They are as resonant today as they were at Putney's founding. We can not take this for granted, however. On this birthday, the time seems right to reiterate what The Putney School stands for. We work together to combat prejudice, develop a social consciousness, and work to create a civilization worthy of the name.

Our commitment is to stay the course through current turbulence. Diversity, equity, and inclusion—for our employees and our students—is not a political ideology for us. Staying the course, therefore, does not mean merely fighting retrenchment. Rather, it means continuing actively to search for ways to make Putney a better place for adults of color to work and students of color to learn. This is what we will continue to do.

As an independent school, we do not solicit or accept federal funds. As a result of this autonomy, the federal government has limited reach into our affairs. For example, we do not ask for citizenship status when reviewing applications for admission, nor will we start doing so. We will continue to offer mixed-gender dormitory options, and to have gender-neutral restrooms. We will always fight to maintain Putney's independence, doing everything in our power to ensure each of our students has the opportunity to reach their potential as a learner, and as a human being.

As regards the rapidly changing climate and evolving technology, Putney's values serve as a lighthouse for us here, too. We know that expanding our capacity to generate solar power and replacing and renovating energy-hungry buildings with efficient structures is the right thing to do, and we are doing it. We know that ignoring AI or jumping in headfirst are recipes for failure for us and the world—but asking how to put an ethical, human face on this new way we will live is the Putney way. We are confident in our approach because our mission and fundamental beliefs are strong and time-tested.

Putney is more important than ever right now. We aspire to be a place where all students can live, work, create, and learn together in community. We are also the harbingers of a better future: a school that creates leaders who refuse to accept things as they are, and demand that they be better.

We are safe, strong, and independent because of our community. As always, thank you.

DANNY O'BRIEN
Head of School