



Appendix
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This interview took place in July at a summer camp in western Connecticut. Present were Vashti Gittler, Jeff Graham, Jimmy Graham, Lisa Mamis, Betsy Reid, Cathy Salit, Peter Winston. The interviewers were Ellen Solomon and Gregg Thomson of the Harvard Educational Review.

What has been your experience with student rights in the schools you're leaving?

BETSY: I had no rights whatsoever in my school.

Was this a private school?

BETSY: Yes. And it was just like being under the Gestapo.

LISA: I.S.____¹ also, where I used to go—they have a puppet student government. You know, people run for mayor, and secretary, and treasurer. And they don't do anything. They don't do anything at all. It's just a total farce. I think it was last year, I heard that they decided just to hold off student elections. And then the students got upset. So the administration set up a supposedly real G.O. which supposedly had power. I really doubt how much it had. There were never any student rights in the school while I was there.

Were there any confrontations about this lack of real rights?

LISA: Not when I went to public school, although I hear they have them now. But when I went to Y____² last year in eighth grade, we all decided we were going to become very political and get a student government going, because there's never been a student government there. And so we set up this thing where each eighth-grade class would elect two officers to meet each week with the headmaster to discuss problems. And the kids in the class would tell their representative what the problems were.

The kids were too passive to recognize when they had any problems. If there was anything bothering them, they were too lazy to do anything. So that fell apart anyway. They don't want anything. All they want in Y____ is to smoke dope and get out at three o'clock.

1. A public junior high school in New York City.
2. A private school in New York City.

Smoke dope in school?

LISA: In school. 'Cause they have to. It's the only way they can live inside.

Well, should the right to smoke pot in school be a student right?

LISA: But nobody's asking for that. Sure, you can make up weird student rights. You can label anything a student right.

But that was what you said. They wanted to smoke dope—

LISA: The majority of these students *are* interested in smoking dope and getting the fuck out because it's such a bad environment. That's what *they* want to do. But those aren't the kids that are actively working for students' rights.

Besides, that's the situation only in private schools. You can take a kid at Y____, who has been there all his life, and try to show him something. Because he's been isolated in the private school he can't see what's been happening in the public schools. The public high schools are, like, the most radicalizing places that exist. You become a radical if you go to a public high school for a day. Private school kids are just beginning to get together over Kent. That got them upset because they could relate to white students' getting killed.

VASHTI: I don't think that's the way it is at my junior high. In my public school, the kids know how bad it is—they don't have any rights at all—but they just learn to live with it. And they don't even try to do anything. People try to arouse the kids' interest in—to get some things, but it doesn't seem to work. The kids are so used to it—they just try to forget about it by doing other things.

Wasn't there something about the flag?

VASHTI: In another public school I went to, a lot of the kids didn't want to pledge to the flag. They didn't think that the pledge had any meaning. They just said, "We're not going to stand up." And they were suspended from school. So they got themselves a case in court and got the law changed. Now it's not illegal to sit down during the pledge. That was something. But when you're doing something like this, it takes so much work, especially when all the teachers are against you.

Are there other rights that are important to you?

LISA: Well, decisions on curriculum and hiring teachers—the sort of things that are going on in the school. Like who gets expelled. For example, I remember an incident this year: we had a senior who was taking a test that he felt was a pretty uptight test and a lot of silly questions were being asked. So he put on the bottom "Why don't you fuck somebody—you'd feel a whole lot better." And the teacher took it to the school psychologist. And while she was in the office the headmaster said, "Hey,

let me see that a minute." And it grew on from there that he was suspended. He met with the headmaster of the school to discuss what he had done and the headmaster said in the beginning, "I've already made the decision to suspend you. I'm just holding this meeting as a token." So everybody got very excited over this. And we met on a Saturday which is big for private schools. Like who sacrifices their Saturdays for school? So we all went to school on Saturday for a big meeting about strategy and how we were going to disrupt classes and not go to classes and have a student strike. We held up the lunchroom one day, and the teachers got very into it. And so we decided one day we were going to go to our classes and take a vote about discussing this kid. I went to my class and there were seven in my class and we voted five to two for discussing him. So the teacher comes in and he hadn't been at the meeting—he didn't know what was going on, so we explained it to him. He said, "I don't give a shit what the fuck you're talking about. This is *my* class and we're going to learn *grammar*." So we were all pretty surprised at that, so we ran up to the lunchroom and told everyone what had happened. And the same thing happened in every other class. Nobody was concerned. And parents got upset over that, too. But it died down. And he was suspended . . . but he came back.

It seems like at least some teachers are helping you get rights

LISA: Some teachers, though not very many.

CATHY: Even some of the ones who do support them, they're not really for them.

Why not? Why wouldn't a teacher be for student rights?

LISA: Because most of the teachers employed in public schools are the kinds that have been there for thirty years and have very old-fashioned ideas. And all the teachers that support students' rights are new and young and soon become disillusioned with the system and quit. So there aren't many of them.

How do the other teachers respond when you protest?

VASHTI: They do things like give us bad marks and put us down on section cards; it's really disgusting.

CATHY: In private schools I think it's worse though, because like in my school, Y____ they used to warn all the teachers about me, and I was marked in the school as a bad influence.

Your private and public schools seem to be similar in their attitude toward rights. Do private schools at least offer you better learning experiences?

LISA: Well, Y____ is supposed to be a "progressive" school and you're taught the same thing you're taught in public school. I know from experience because I switched from public school to Y____. Their science

courses are exactly the same. You don't learn anything in anything. You're just fed information, the same as you would be anyplace else.

What do you think should be happening instead?

LISA: Well, they don't bother to sit down and ask you, "Well, what would you like to learn? Would you rather learn about India or would you like to learn about Red China?" See, Core class is a mixture of English and history. And they tell you at the beginning of the year that you're going to learn about India for a year. Like it's a whole year down the drain if you're not interested in India, or if you happen to be interested in Cuba or Red China or some other country.

PETER: You know, you take a negative attitude. You resent the fact that you had no choice in the matter at all.

LISA: And any teacher who would do that in the first place is not going to teach that subject in such an exciting way that you would be turned on by it.

In other words, you say that you know better than the teachers what kind of things you should be learning?

CAHTY: Of course!

LISA: It's us that's doing the learning, and we know what we're interested in. And it's not true anymore that teachers know better. Nobody can know what's important to you.

Well, what are some of the things that you think are important to learn?

LISA: Well, you know, *relevant* is a very over-used word. But, you know, things that are relevant. Like everybody's very interested in Cuba, right? So instead of everybody learning about India for a year, you learn about Cuba. And you find out what's going on in terms of the Venceremos Brigade, things like that. It really relates to you.

Are science or math or things like that relevant?

LISA: They could be. You know, you could *make* them relevant—if you're interested and have a good teacher.

Did you think about these things when you hired your new teachers?

CATHY: Definitely. Yes.

LISA: We weren't looking for what they knew. We were looking more towards personality and overall rounded-out characters. We wanted people we could feel close to and talk to and relate to more, I guess.

VASHTI: It always seems to me that if it's someone I'm close to or someone I like and respect, I learn much better. If my brother tries to teach me something that a teacher whom I dislike has already tried to teach me, my brother could always teach it to me much better. We picked

them also because they knew so much more than we do, and I want them to kind of interest me in more things. Then I can decide what I want for myself.

LISA: All the teachers we hired have the same kind of personality. They all like Chinese cooking, they all know urban problems, they're all into art and photography and pottery and things like that, and things like ecology and Cuba.

CATHY: If they don't know something, they'd say so. We'd learn together—it would be an exchange.

LISA: Or we'd get a part-time teacher who could teach it.

CATHY: I have a question. There isn't any special time when you're supposed to go. It's open all the time, isn't it?

LISA: It's open when you want it, and when you arrange with the teacher.

Do the teachers know they've been hired for a twenty-four-hour-a-day job?

CATHY: It's not a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. I don't think you can say that at all.

LISA: Well, it depends on the teacher's commitment. The full-time teachers wanted it to be a total commitment. Some of the part-time teachers also want it to be a total commitment. But they have less responsibility, I guess.

Around what age do you think students start thinking about wanting their rights?

CATHY: Twelve. Twelve is probably the best age that they should start. Once you get into junior high, that's when things really start happening. When you're in elementary it's kind of hard to understand all the shit that's being handed to you.

LISA: And you still have to learn basics, things like reading and writing. It shouldn't necessarily be the way they're teaching it. But you do have to learn basics.

Why should a student have to learn how to read and write?

LISA: Oh, if he doesn't want to? I don't know how to answer that. I guess that to function in an environment like the city, in order to be able to communicate, you've got to learn how to read and write.

Do you want to do more reading and writing?

CATHY: I'm interested—not the way it's being taught now.

LISA: It depends on what's being written. You know, not the old-type books like *Silas Marner*. They're dead. But books like Jerry Rubin's are widely read.

Are you at all afraid that you're risking too much? That when you're about thirty-five and you find you didn't learn calculus because nobody made you, you're going to be lost?

LISA: No. It's too important to be scared. You can't be scared.

CATHY: That's not true. That's not true at all—

LISA: Yes, but you can't be a coward about it and say, "I'm dropping out and I don't want to drop out." If you really believe in it—you just try not to be scared.

PETER: I feel that I'm far beyond the time when someone has to expose me to different subjects. I think I'm capable of deciding what I want to learn.

Suppose you can't decide what you want to do—will you be able to ask for guidance?

LISA: It's up to the student, the whole school is based on the student. I know when we first discussed setting up the school, a lot of us said that we didn't know what we wanted and could you help us? That would be the school—to expose us to things that we weren't getting exposed to in public school and _____ Y.

Do you think seriously about what kind of work you're going to do for your life?

VASHTI: Sometimes I don't think, like, I'm going to be doing work the way adults do it today. It doesn't seem like it's still going to be that way, that you'll have a job and then go home to your family. Things will change and I will be doing things differently. If I really need to earn money, I'll do something I'm really interested in.

Do you all have a vision of what the adult world will be like? What would you like it to be?

VASHTI: People won't have a job and a certain role in life. You do what you're interested in. I guess it's something like the school. Everyone helps each other. And money isn't the main thing in everyone's life. There will be other things.

JEFF: I think our school is a preparation for better education. I mean, learn what you're interested in.

But you think you'll go to college?

LISA: Well, it depends. I have three years left.

JEFF: Well, I don't want to go to college.

Why don't you want to go to college?

CATHY: Well, I'm only twelve now. By the time I'm of college age I hope colleges will be more relevant to today's society. Colleges now are so useless. The only way they're useful as I see it is to get a job. And it

I wanted to get a job I guess I'd go to college. But why should colleges only be for *that*?

LISA: A lot could happen. The alternative school thing is just starting and it's really growing, and it's a big booming thing. Colleges could begin to accept the idea of alternate schools and really begin to understand it. And colleges have to be geared toward people coming from alternate schools.

Suppose you thought that starting this school meant that you'd never be able to get into any good college? Any college you really wanted to go to?

CATHY: I know kids who've been in a school where there's no science, and it's not accredited and they've gotten into college. Like some of them got into Antioch and Goddard.

LISA: You'd have to get into the progressive schools. You can't get into the Ivy League schools.

What about your parents? Do you feel that they really have a good sense of what your rights should be? Do you foresee any difficulties with them?

CATHY: Difficulties? Not really. Not with my mother. I think, maybe, with my father. I'm not sure he understands everything that I want, but then I'm not sure I know everything *he* wants either.

VASHTI: At some of the first meetings some of the parents got a little scared. Like the first time we started talking about our rights, they kind of drew back.

JEFF: In the beginning my mother was more for the school than I was. She just knew more about it, that's all.

LISA: Yeah, a lot of parents dragged in kids.

JEFF: She didn't drag *me*.

LISA: Yeah, but some did.

Were there kids interested in coming to the school whose parents wouldn't let them? Or did other kids not want to come?

LISA: Well, some kids were scared. It's a scary thing to drop out. We had trouble with a couple of parents whose kids wanted to stay too.

And did those kids think of leaving home?

LISA: Yes, one did. She left home. But things got cleared up. There was a meeting held with the parents who were having trouble and they got it cleared up. So the girl went home, and she's coming to the school.

Then most of the kids you know are working it out with their parents in some way? As far as you're concerned, then, is the whole generation gap just blown up?

LISA: It was invented by the media. The generation gap was invented by an idiot. I'm sure it exists very little.

CATHY: I don't think it's a generation gap. It's an individual gap between parent and child, and parent and parent, or child and child. It's not a generation gap—that's such a *disgusting* way of putting it. I'm not sure, but I think the majority of kids in this school are a lot more radical than their parents are. I don't think the parents realize it either.

VASHTI: One day my mother said to me, "Vashti, don't you want to go to a good private school?" I couldn't believe that! I was really angry. She wants me to go to a good college too. Sometimes she's kind of wistful. She's getting over it.

LISA: It's like with Women's Liberation—my mother's into Women's Liberation—and she turned to me the other day and she said, "You know, there's one thing wrong with Women's Liberation—you don't have weddings." *(laughter)*

And were there conflicts as you grew up about things you wanted that your parents didn't want?

VASHTI: Well, with me there was. I began to realize—it kind of started when I realized what was happening to me in the schools and how my mother kind of always decided how my life was going to be. I'd just say things like "I'm my own self, and no one's going to run my life for me." And we still have fights—but I think I'm winning.

CATHY: I have conflicts sometimes with my mother. She's always saying, "Cathy, you're only twelve years old. And don't you forget it." As if I'm ever going to forget it if she keeps on reminding me! Politically, like with the school, we agree with each other almost completely. I don't know if there's anything political we disagree on.

Do you discuss everything with them?

LISA: Yeah.

JEFF: No, not *everything* that goes on.

LISA: It's a different thing—certain things that are private but that doesn't mean we don't discuss freely with them.

VASHTI: I don't discuss freely with my mother things that I know she disagrees with me on. I don't want to get into hassles with her. But if it's something that affects me then I'll fight for it all the way. Like I do sometimes.

Can you envision any point at which your parents would tell you you had to do or be something?

JEFF: Well, I can't imagine my father coming to me and wanting me to be a lawyer. You know, I'll do what I want. And he's not going to tell me what my life's going to be.

LISA: I don't think that any parents that would consent to letting their kid go to this school would actually make a demand on their kid, of what

to do with his life. I mean, the whole thing with this school is that kids decide for themselves what they're going to learn and what they're going to do with their lives anyway.

Have you made any progress toward getting what you and your parents want—an ethnically balanced school?

LISA: Yeah, we've tried, but we've been only partly successful. I mean, black and Puerto Rican kids have a different life to lead. For blacks and Puerto Ricans—they need a diploma.

Have you talked to blacks and Puerto Ricans who say that?

LISA: Right. We have a white skin and that's a privilege, so we can use it the way we want. So it's scarier for them than for us to drop out and make it whatever way you make it.

CATHY: I mean society will at least accept us because we're white, you know.

LISA: And middle-class.

CATHY: Well, naturally.

LISA: Two poor whites called me up. It's almost as hard for them—I'd say it's as hard for them as it is for Puerto Ricans to drop out.

What about the parents of these kids you've talked to?

LISA: Of the black and Puerto Ricans? We haven't talked to them. Except for one—I spoke to one Puerto Rican father. But his kid isn't coming into school because he's not interested. His father is.

Well, why should a black or Puerto Rican kid who needs a diploma so bad come to a risky school like this?

LISA: Right. Well, that's where we're having problems. But the Puerto Rican or black kids that we get that *are* interested are into revolution and beating down the school system. And you know, you could devote your life in this school to what you want. You do in school what you want. If you want, what you do in the school is to work on the school strikes, organize.

I was struck by someone's remark that being in public school is a radicalizing experience. Why do you want everyone into free schools then?

LISA: You see, the schools destroy people. And like, you can take a prison up to a point. Like schools are prisons. When Huey Newton got out of prison, he was asked, "How does it feel to be free?" and he wasn't free. It was just another prison. That's the way it is in schools, too. You can take it up to a point. And you're radicalized the first day of school when the teacher tells you to take off that button you're wearing. Or to cut your hair or not show up again. You know, that's all you need.

Aren't there laws?

LISA: There are laws, but the laws—you know. Who protects them? I mean, there are lawsuits, but it still happens.

Then you feel that by making your school and by developing yourselves as individuals, you're beating the system that way and you're saving your souls for the future.

LISA: And encouraging other people to drop out too.

And the black revolutionary kids?

LISA: Well, they have to get themselves together. And you know there're black schools and Lower East Side schools that are for blacks and Puerto Ricans, and they get themselves together and we get ourselves together.

CATHY: One of our main ideas is that when we reach our limit of thirty kids and we can't accept any more kids, we'll be trying to work with other kids to start their own schools—as many as possible.

How did you decide that thirty kids would be the limit?

BETSY: That's all we could handle for space, and financially.

And how do you decide which thirty kids it will be?

CATHY: First come, first served.

There are no entrance qualifications?

LISA: Uh-uh. But the ages are from twelve to seventeen.

How do you handle disputes among yourselves? Do you vote?

LISA: No.

CATHY: Yes, we do. None of us really agrees about—

LISA: We don't raise our hands and vote. We usually say, "Well, is that agreed?"

CATHY: And if somebody says, "No"—

LISA: Well, when we were discussing whether Lin was going to be full-time, we discussed it with Peter and we said, "Well, is it agreed that since only one person wants Lin as full-time he should be part-time?" and everyone said, "Yes."

CATHY: That's majority rule.

The vast majority of the kids don't have parents with the values that your parents have. Do you think about those kids? Are they ever going to have a chance to get the kind of education that you're setting up for yourselves?

LISA: It's got to be a personal decision whether you're going to fight your parents. Last year my brother was involved in an alternate school. He

and a girl were helping set it up. In mid-July they discovered that everybody was quitting the school except for the two of them. But come September when they advertised in the *Voice* and got a whole lot of students, this girl learned that her mother didn't want her to go to the school. Her mother had registered her in the U.N. school. And she fought her mother and just refused to go there. And so she went to *her* school. You have to fight.

Do you think other kids will be influenced by your idea of education?

LISA: Yes, we can expose them to it. We can help them and tell them what we've done.

VASHTI: It's sort of sad in my school. The kids realize what's happening, how they're being treated in the public schools. But they're so used to having it fed to them that they're just beyond doing anything about it. Instead of trying to make something new, they just kind of think about other things, like fights and little cliques and not going to classes. And those are the only things on their minds. But it wouldn't really occur to them to make some—

LISA: But then you have to point it out to them.

VASHTI: A lot of them are past hope.

LISA: Nobody's past hope.

Perhaps the public schools themselves will begin to be influenced by the kind of education you're creating for yourselves.

CATHY: You'd never get it there. You could never do it. They wouldn't give it to you. And even if they said they would give it to you, they wouldn't go through with it. I mean they would just trick you. Anyway, you wouldn't be able to function with three thousand kids.

LISA: Look at the size of *this* school!

CATHY: . . . and overcrowding and conditions like prisons. And there, in the public schools, the whole idea is that it has to be *given* to you. No, you've got to *take* it. You've got to get it *yourself*.

Is that also a responsibility in terms of the whole society?

VASHTI: You mean changing society? I don't think anyone *has* to do it. But as in setting up the school—if you care about where you live and everything, you probably want to change it and make it better.

LISA: One of the responsibilities we're taking on is changing students' lives, you know, making lives livable for students. By starting our own school, we destroy the system. So that's the responsibility we've taken.

Parents and Teachers

The interview took place in July in a Manhattan apartment. Present were the full-time teachers of the school: Peter Leventhal, Elaine Louie—and parents: Barbara Gittler, Jerry Graham, Jack Mamis, Peter Reid, Sema and Murray Salit, and Florence Winston. The interviewers were Ellen Solomon and Gregg Thomson of the Review.

Let me ask you this: Why start the school in the first place? Weren't your children getting rather adequate education in their private schools or public schools?

MR. GRAHAM: No, no. Inadequate education. In *every* way. I personally don't believe—to use John Holt's term—in a "right answer" theory of education. Everything was wrong with their education. I wasn't motivated terribly by student rights so much as the whole concept of the educational system, the whole educational relationship between student and teacher and student and school administration.

MR. MAMIS: I think you can make a long case about how the administration and the teachers deprive students of their rights and use them, treating them as the enemy. We could go through that whole thing. But it goes after the fact that they are not being educated. The students don't feel like school is exciting, they don't feel that this is the place they want to go in the morning, and, as soon as that feeling arises, the conflict which creates the rights issues comes up. So we have all sorts of anecdotes about how their rights are infringed and the awful things the administrators did to assert their authority, but it still goes back to the fact that they weren't getting anything out of school.

In other words, you're suggesting there wouldn't be any conflict of rights if the kids were really turned on by their education?

MR. MAMIS: Well, it's really a question of the chicken and the egg, but the teachers that turn the kids on don't have that kind of conflict, because they are understanding.

MRS. SALIT: I disagree with both of you and with the notion that you can separate kids' rights from inadequate education. I think what happened was that in all of their educational experience, someone was always trying to negotiate something that was not negotiable, which was their rights. And each time this came up there was a conflict. First it caused mild trouble—they would stand up and claim their rights. Then it got to be the whole action that was going on in school—they, defending their rights, and the administration, trying to negotiate with them.

What kind of rights are you referring to?

MRS. SALIT: Well, I think that, by and large, one of the ways kids learn is to ask questions, and this is their right. However, each time a provocative

question was asked, it was suppressed one way or other. First they say things like "That's not in the curriculum; it's not going to be on the test so we can't deal with it." Then, as it got worse, their attitude would be, "You're being very disruptive," and then that led into all kinds of miserable—

MR. MAMIS: Still, I think of Josh going to public school where there are allegedly all sorts of problems with rights and where he has a very straight English teacher who teaches the subject, but makes it so exciting he wants to go to that class. There's no rights issue about whether he does his homework; he willingly follows many traditional aspects of what's going on in that class, because the class is very stimulating. He's treated much more like an adult than in the other classes.

MRS. SALIT: I think that if rights are respected, education takes place. I don't know what happened in this particular English class, but I would suspect that without it's ever being discussed, one person would have to be respecting the other person. They have to, in order to get anything out of it.

Your children have gone to both public and private schools. Is there a difference in terms of student rights?

MR. MAMIS: There's a distinct difference between the experience we had at the junior high school and the experience we had at the private school, where there seemed to be no rights whatsoever. No parental rights—it was conspicuous. You paid your money, you signed a contract with the school, and in effect, you had nothing more to say about it. The Board of Trustees and the people they designate to run the school had absolute control, whereas in the public school system you could scream and yell and say these people were responsible to you. You can't say that in the private schools, and I think that affected the kids that I know at the private school. The parents couldn't even help them, because the administration was so remote from them. And it created an entirely different attitude. I sense in my daughter who went to private school—"I've got to get out of here so I can have my own school with my own rights"; whereas I sense in my son, who's fighting for his rights in the junior high school, that it is compensatory. He can say, "Next year I'm going to try to do this and try to do that."

Can the struggle for rights be an educational experience?

MRS. SALIT: I don't think kids should have to spend all their time proving to teachers and administration that they know what their rights are and they're going to fight for them. It should just be an accepted thing. Otherwise the kids have to constantly prove their rights and there's no time for education to take place.

MRS. GITTLER: When Vashti and the children in her school demanded their right not to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, it was the first time

she really ran into a bureaucracy. And it involved suspension and legal battles and the courts. And the children knew they were being put upon for something that was their right to start with and it colored their whole relationship with the teachers and with the school. They became "trouble-makers." It affected their homework, their schoolwork, the interest the children had in their teachers. It just changed the whole atmosphere in the school.

Are you saying that before the eruption there were no problems?

MRS. GITTLER: Oh, there were many problems. But the kids were sort of battling it out, not knowing what the battle was all about, and suddenly they saw the whole problem: they had *no* rights at all according to the teachers and the system. They were battling for something they thought they had anyway, and they found that the system was really horrified that they thought they had these rights. So it became a really legal, heavy confrontation, apart from whether the teacher or the subject matter was really interesting or not. It certainly gave Vashti a whole other view of her school—in terms of herself and how much she could do herself, without the approval of the school, her teachers, grades, and that sort of thing.

MR. MAMIS: But I think it takes a good many years of battling on Vashti's level before you have some self-confidence that you know what your rights are and that you know where the teacher is denying them to you. And that you're right. You don't run home to your parents and ask, "Did I do the right thing? I'm afraid."

MRS. GITTLER: But you still sound as if the more sophisticated you get, the better a demander you are, whereas I think what Vashti and our kids seem to be saying now is, "We don't want to have to demand any more. We don't have to make these explicit demands. We want to start from where we should be."

MR. MAMIS: Yes, but I think that's idealistic. Besides I think that there's a whole learning experience, that the struggle is educational, that there's something very exciting that these kids could develop for getting, as leaders of a school, more and more rights for the body of students. And I think really comes to a point when the administration becomes so overbearing that these kids lose, they make no headway. Then you have drop-outs; you have, perhaps, a new school like this. Or if you're lucky, you have some relationship, some breakthrough with the administration and you start getting some rights. As soon as you start getting some, then you really have something exciting in the school, even though it may be miserable and oppressive and all that. You start getting places.

MRS. SALIT: But I saw Cathy in a very ugly position in her school. I felt that the struggle had caused her to lose interest in anything educational. There were many things that ordinarily would not have bothered her. Somehow the struggle became the most important thing. I felt it was having a destructive effect.

Then do you think the Elizabeth Cleaners Street School will be a conflict-free experience for the kids? Or will the fights be different?

MR. REID: I think that they're only going to fight each other.

MR. GRAHAM: Right. The fights will be individual rights versus rights of the group—and which comes first.

MISS LOUIE: I can see your new school becoming very insular for the students, unless ninety-nine percent of their activity occurs outside and they really become New Yorkers, so to speak. It's possible that students will have no conflict simply because there would be enough time, enough patience, enough reason, enough familiarity between enough people that they can just go right through it. A radical attitude that might have developed would be totally smothered because their rights will be taken for granted. "We got it, and we're only thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen, and we did it by ourselves." In a sense that's good, because they won't have personal struggles on a day-to-day level. On the other hand, the revolution isn't won, because it's only going to affect maybe twenty kids at this moment. So probably their emphasis on using the city as a school is one of their most important premises.

Your kids are undertaking a great deal. They're not starting just an individualistic Summerhill-type school—they're in the midst of an urban slum. Do you have fears for them?

MRS. SALIT: Yes, I have certain fears. At the moment I'm in a fortunate position, because my child still talks to me. I don't know how long this is going to last but, for example, the first weekend we were at school, there was an unfortunate incident. A young man had gone into one of the semi-abandoned buildings to get a refrigerator to bring to another apartment, and in the course of all this, he was stabbed by the superintendent of the building. He came into our storefront and then was taken to a hospital. You know, everyone assured me that our kids were really all right. I wasn't there, but I had the suspicion that my own daughter must have been upset by it, because though she may have read about these things in the newspaper, she had never witnessed anything like this. I felt certain she was disturbed by it. When we spoke about it, she admitted that she had been frightened by it, and at that point I asked her if she felt that she really wanted to be a pioneer in this sort of thing. And she said that if she had a choice, she would rather go into a school like this that was already established; however, there was also something very exciting about starting it herself. And that, yes, if I would stick close by she would want to do it. And I assured her, too, that at any point she felt she wasn't capable of handling a situation like this, that we could change it. And I meant it. And that wouldn't mean that she would have to go back into any institution-type school. We would just find something else. But, yes, my kid was scared, and I think she's still apprehensive about what's going to take place there in September. And I think we are, too.

MRS. GITTLER: I found that a lot of the goals of starting a school like this—which were very much to do with education and learning—became very blurred when it came to community. Because really she felt, and I certainly did—because I'm a parent, and they're only twelve or thirteen—that the fear involved in choosing a place that's in a very dangerous neighborhood to start with became part of what the school was about. And that worried me because I felt what the kids wanted in terms of education was being very mixed together with what the parents in the community wanted in terms of the community in which they had lived for a long time. And I felt that it went a long way toward diminishing the actual educational goal—"What are we going to learn and how are we going to learn it?" and "Who are our teachers going to be?" and "There's a whole world of things we want to learn about." It became very involved with—"What are we doing for the community?" and "Can we cope with this?" and "And are we going to be afraid or are we not?" and "What are we going to do when a junkie walks in the store?" Which I really felt was aside from the weight of starting a new school, and becoming truants, and bucking the whole system. And raising money was a great extra burden.

MRS. SALIT: I have those fears that you mentioned, but I don't have the fear that something was happening that took the place of what the kids had set out to do. Those kids had the best lesson in city government that they will ever have. Let's face it. Like, the guy who was stabbed brought charges against the superintendent. The superintendent was let off, the hospital wouldn't accept the wounded man, he was sent off to the Tombs with forty-five stitches, and his bail was put at \$3,500. How could the kids escape learning from that experience?

MR. SALIT: Barbara, you make it sound as if we guided the kids into this storefront. If you remember the several meetings before that when nothing was being accomplished, the kids unanimously agreed that what was the sense of talking about a white, middle-class school if we were to be a street school, and that we better find some way of doing something so that we had some balanced composition. The feeling then was that the best way to go out and get this was to literally go out and establish ourselves in the areas that we wanted to do the recruiting. So we didn't say, "Let's go to the most dangerous neighborhood in New York City." We said, "Let's go to a place that does represent the kind of ethnic balance that we're seeking, establish ourselves as part of this community." I think that that was the reason for doing it.

MRS. GITTLER: I just know that many times Vashti would come home and talk about the girls being worried about walking out in the street. Men would come by and, you know, they hadn't gone through this with men looking at them that way, or coming up close to them, or coming on to them and they didn't understand the language these men were speaking, which was a whole new thing. And I feel that to a child—twelve or thirteen years old—it becomes a thing wholly apart from their educational process.

I feel that the weight of learning and establishing a new kind of learning is very grave. It really is. I don't take that for granted for one second. They haven't been in a situation where they've chosen their own life styles or their own subject matter or their own course of learning before. And add to that a kind of fear of walking out of the school into the street.

MR. MAMIS: They've chosen their own life style for years, they've picked what they want to learn for years, they pick what kind of clothes they want to wear. Of course they do—you just don't recognize it.

MRS. SALIT: I think what Barbara says is right. I think that if a kid is living in fear of something he really can't learn too much.

MR. MAMIS: You didn't hear what I said. What I said was that these kids have for many years picked their own life style. They pick the kinds of clothes they like, they pick the kind of hairdo they want, they choose the kind of books they want to read, they think what they like. You don't recognize it as picking their own life style because it remains under your wing.

MRS. GITTLER: I have yet to meet one child in this group whose life style doesn't reflect the views of the parent.

MR. MAMIS: In other words, they can't make choices if they relate to their parents' choices?

MRS. GITTLER: I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying they haven't really been on their own yet.

MR. MAMIS: I'm saying quite clearly, they have made a number of choices as to what they like in life. And they have been doing that since they've been infants. I think that's what children do. They make their choices. And I think what frightens the parents now is that those choices now take on an aspect of being independent of their parents at an earlier age than we expected it would happen. And we're relatively unprepared for it.

MRS. GITTLER: What really frightens me is that something very important to my daughter, choosing her own kind of education, which I think she can handle, is extended to her choosing the kind of fear that she has to live with.

MISS LOUIE: On the one hand, to refer to your comment about the girls' not being able to understand men rapping with them on the streets, it probably was in Spanish. But on the other hand, the function of the school will literally be to explain the whole *machismo* concept to them. Instinctually my feeling about the area was that it is not mini-skirt area, and the girls can make that decision in and of themselves.

MR. MAMIS: You make value judgments about the kinds of fears these kids have. They also have fears if the college president walks in the door.

Or if Governor Rockefeller walked in the door, they would have fears. They have fears when they have to call someone to help to raise money. They have to learn how to deal with these real things. And if they learn, if they can say with some confidence, "I'm no longer afraid to call some rich businessman on the phone and ask him for money," it's the same kind of solution that can say, "I'm no longer afraid to walk down that block. I know what these men are going to do."

MR. GRAHAM: I don't see how we can separate education in the classroom from life. To me that's what's been wrong with all of the schools. Kids have been told, "You must learn what's in these paragraphs. Don't worry about life. That's not your problem, you'll learn for life later." And now to me, this school offers a chance for a kid to be as dumb as he may have to be to learn something, make as many mistakes, be as open, go through whatever he has to go through. I believe that kids get scared in the hall of a private high school when a guy, suitably tough-looking, comes up and threatens a girl. One way or another, life is learning how to cope with that, with the guidance of teachers sensitive enough to see the problem and work with it.

Have you created procedures for dealing with disagreements among you? Are there certain guarantees you have formulated for the individual rights of the kids, parents, and teachers?

MR. LEVENTHAL: You know this came up—I can't remember what meeting—but this came up in general terms of conversation. In one meeting a boy was very insistent that these things get written down. But the general feeling in the group was that we don't really have to write them down because actually we're all working together. So you don't need to prescribe ways in which you can or cannot do certain things. And it occurs to me now that this is the only right that really exists—the right to have some sort of sympathetic correspondence. But at that time at that meeting—I may be wrong, maybe I picked this up wrong—but at that time the general feeling was that there was really no reason to describe exactly what the rights of individual persons were.

MRS. SALIT: But at every meeting somebody said we've got to identify our roles in this. This came up at every meeting.

MR. REID: You mean the students didn't want to write down a list. They wanted no part of laws, government structure, formality, even the vote.

MR. LEVENTHAL: Yes, and there's a very serious, classical, anarchic sort of feeling in terms of students getting together. I taught at a private school, and even there there's the feeling that if this state apparatus weren't there, then we wouldn't have to talk about this shit all the time.

It seems to me that the aspiration in this situation is to reach that point. The possibilities are such that you can reach that point, whereas in

the other situation, no matter what you do, you can't. All the other schools tend to isolate them as units and not allow them to get together.

MR. MAMIS: I think that what creates whatever conflicts we've had so far is the desire of some students who feel very strongly that other students don't understand the community spirit and are being divisive and that they can't cope with it. "Why haven't they cooperated? Why aren't they coming into the thing instead of setting up a barrier?"

Have the students faced a situation that divided them?

MR. MAMIS: There was a meeting called to interview a teacher. Some students who didn't come to that interview insisted that, before any decision could be made, that they should also interview, and that it wasn't fair. Those who had attended felt the meeting had been openly announced, that they had met as a community group, and that their choices, feelings, and opinions should be accepted as a community choice of opinion without the others feeling offended. But they scheduled another interview.

I have the feeling that they don't want something divisive to come up, and they're willing to go through that extra effort to keep it going as a community. They really want everybody to be feeling much the same about these things.

MR. GRAHAM: No, I don't think that at all. I think they're very shrewd about and are really quite sensitive to that. The strong sense of who's uptight about learning specific things, uptight about the dangers, uptight about the money—they know that already.

Have there been any divisions between the parents and children? Have the kids wanted things you didn't?

MR. MAMIS: I felt considerable surprise when the students began to assert the demands for the rights that they wanted. "We want to pick our own teachers. We want to make that kind of decision." None of which I necessarily would have objected to. And I don't know if any other parent really would have objected, but it came very abruptly. It came all of a sudden.

MR. GRAHAM: Remember the tenor of us getting together at first—all of us getting together, and of the kids getting increasingly frustrated and increasingly losing their voice at these meetings and finally putting themselves together and saying, "Well, finally, these are the rights we're going to have." And they really did that. All of a sudden, they made that shift, asserted the rights that they wanted, and they have not backed down in any sense.

MRS. GITTTLER: I personally started feeling that it was important to identify goals in this vein, because we were headed for unnecessary trouble. If we were going to inflict what we thought was right for the school on the kids—

MR. MAMIS: Are you confusing what we think is right for the school with what our rights are as parents? In this school we have evolved a role because we were there at the beginning. We existed as parents, we helped them whatever our role in the school really is, I think we're still going to have enormous problems about our role as parents. A lot of these things about what we feel *should* be going on at the school really are going to come up a lot of times. But we really have a role as part of the school. We exist as part of the school. We even want to be students in class.

MRS. GITTTLER: That's up to the kids to decide. I don't think they've—

MR. MAMIS: Whatever it is, I throw that out as my feeling. I think that those things are going to come up, but we're still part of the school. We are a part of the school in a lot of ways.

MRS. SALIT: I think what's happening in our school is that they have discovered that they can't do a lot of things by themselves. But unlike a public school or a private school where it would be pointed out to them, I think that we took another posture in this case. I don't know how we did it, but I don't find any animosity between the kids and myself. But I also know that in order to get certain things going, I have to set the date, I have to call them to remind them—

MR. MAMIS: But they also plan meetings on their own and tell *us* when they're scheduled. They're developing their roles, and one of our roles is to help them. They're at ease with the roles that we have so far as long as we have not been domineering.

I feel considerably different about the situation than I did when I started. I feel probably more extreme than anybody else. I feel that Lisa right now in her own head could very well operate without the school with my consent. I think she'd do a lot of the things that the school has in mind as an educational objective by herself if the school didn't materialize. I think that at some point they don't need academic learning, or they have to be made to see the world as apprentices, and they have to start functioning that way. And what I see her doing within this school is learning how to find out what she'd like to do, try out different things, mature. That's what I hope she'd develop in this school.

You say the kids are making all decisions themselves. How would you feel if they decided that they wanted to turn the school into a community center—a center for dropouts or an abortion advice center or something like that?

MR. GRAHAM: I do feel that thirteen-, fourteen-, even fifteen-year-olds, as most of these are, should have their rights to learn, should have much, much freedom. They also should have responsible, sympathetic adult direction that they can look to and respond to. I just am not prepared to turn a kid loose and say, "There's the world, go get it!" I think that the teachers will be all important in this school. And I think that kids want to

learn. I don't believe these kids are turned off from learning. They just want to learn in a reasonable way.

But I'm worried about knowledge. I'm worried about interest in education and learning and the learning process. Yes, I'm concerned about that. And I would not be terribly thrilled—though I don't believe that teachers would be in favor—if the kids decided, "Well, let's stop being a school and we will be an abortion center, or a dropout thing." Yet I think that almost any project can be so framed to encompass a lot of learning skills. I think that through, for instance, a dropout center my kid could learn a bit more about math, and, in order to do a dropout center correctly, do some research and study up on what is going on. And by its very nature he would have to read. All the learning potential is there.

MR. REID: Sometimes there's conflict between what they want to learn and what parents think they should learn.

MR. GRAHAM: Yes, I'm prepared for that. I don't have a set of preconceived things that I want Jeff or anybody to know on coming out of school. I don't believe many of us knew much when we came out of school. I think that those of us who were lucky only knew how to learn.

Then you don't feel you have a right to say to your child, "Look, I really think this is more important than that" or "you need a sense of how the past relates to the present"?

MR. MAMIS: I have a right to say, and have said, in loud tones, "God damn it, you never heard of Debs?" or "What the hell, they went through that in the 30's!" and all that. I expressed some shock that he didn't know the historical similarities between what had gone on and what he was trying to do. But in realistic terms he is, nevertheless, learning the same things, developing how he feels about those problems, as if, or better than, had he read them in a book. It'll be a harder lesson and he'll make more mistakes, but he'll know much more strongly how he feels in practical situations about it than he would from having learned it from a book. That would be marvelous—if they could read the whole historical perspective and apply it to what is going on. But they can't—there's no time to do both things. You're given a choice. I feel much differently about the choice I've made now than I would have two years ago, and I really feel what they want to do is a more exciting thing. It makes them more exciting, makes them better people.

Do you feel that the age differences among the students should sometimes influence what happens to them individually?

MR. MAMIS: There are things I can see coming up which would give me great difficulty. I would feel differently with a twelve-year-old than with a fifteen-year-old

MR. SALIT: I guess that would depend upon what the parents' and children's previous experience was. Normally you would say, "Hey, we have a twelve-

year-old. What are we exposing her and ourselves to?" But based on our years of private school education, we are now willing to try this, to try it wholeheartedly. A year from now you might find me being more vocal about saying no to the things I didn't like that occurred. At this particular point, I can't honestly say I can anticipate any *no* because I'm committed to try anything. In our minds it can only be better. It can't be worse, and if we remain free and open about this—

MR. MAMIS: You were asking a specific question about age. If the teacher orients Lisa towards a dramatic group that's functioning, and the director says, "We're going out of town for a month, and we need our apprentices to come on up for the scenery," I would be apprehensive. I would say no to a twelve-year-old—but not to a fifteen-year-old.

MRS. GITTLER: I would say no about going down to the Lower East Side by herself at midnight.

MRS. SALIT: The way I see the school there's no reason a child should be asked to do something that's not appropriate. In other words, Lisa, who's fifteen, will be doing things far different from Cathy in certain areas and in others they might be doing similar things. But I'm going to assume that Elaine will get to know my child well enough to know just what she can do and what she can't do and where to direct her and where not. I don't know that there's an age appropriateness for this type of school. I would say that this is the proper role of the school for any child at any age.

MR. MAMIS: I think this is true even in terms of rights. After our lawsuit the principal said, "Well, if you complained about the food in the lunchroom, I could understand that. Next thing you know, the kindergarten kids are going to be petitioning." He thinks as if there is an age distinction as to who is entitled to rights. The distinction is: if you can articulate what you want and what you feel you're entitled to, you're old enough to get it. If you recognize the problem, then you've got a right to that. So I think that that holds true to this kind of school too. If you come home in the fourth grade or fifth grade and say "I'm bored," you've recognized something that should be dealt with by the parent.

Will age differences influence individual reactions to the freedom in this school?

MRS. SALIT: Cathy is experiencing a kind of total freedom in the summer camp she's at now. And she was frustrated by this freedom that has with it the kind of responsibility she wasn't aware of. So last week she came home for a day to talk with me. She kept talking about needing authority. This really isn't what she meant. What she really meant was that she'd been given this banana split—everything she'd ever wanted—and she couldn't zero in on anything. She wanted her counselor in a sense to say to her, "Okay, it's time to go to weaving." At the same time she didn't want her counselor to do that, because three days from now, she may not need

that any more. So she was terribly conflicted with the experience of having genuine total freedom. We talked about it for a day and she couldn't wait to get back. Once she understood what was bothering her and once she understood that it might take her the whole summer to get used to it, she was all right.

You mentioned boredom. Will this school eliminate it?

MRS. SALIT: I seem to remember in an early discussion about the school, people mentioned that some students might just come in and sit around for weeks and weeks not doing anything. Will we be able to tell if this is "boredom" or something else?

MR. GRAHAM: I think we've overemphasized this boredom issue. I think that's one of the rights, and I don't think we're going to eliminate boredom by any means. That's one reason that I want my kid in school—so he won't be bored. But I think boredom is an intellectual decision.

MRS. SALIT: Jerry, there's something though about boredom that frightens me. If a kid understands what's happening to him, that's one thing. But these kids are coming from a pretty rigid kind of experience. And that transition can be a frightening one for them if they don't understand where they're at.

MR. MAMIS: One of the things that happened to them in public or private schools was the sense that when they were bored, they felt themselves becoming disruptive.

MR. GRAHAM: And that they were failing.

MR. MAMIS: And they were failing. They felt like they were becoming troublemakers. Josh would come home and say, "I'm so bored, I can feel myself about to cause trouble in class."

MR. GRAHAM: Being bored was causing trouble.

MR. MAMIS: So that at least in the area of being bored, in this school you can relax and—

MRS. SALIT: But there are all kinds of different kids in this situation. I don't think Cathy would react that way. I think that it would frighten her to think that she wasn't accomplishing something. That has been her only experience: you work, you achieve, you get a mark. And although it's the very thing she wants to escape, it is not a simple thing to unlearn. Some kids can go through a period of floundering and waiting to find themselves, some kids may not be able to.

MR. GRAHAM: All I was saying is that they have a right to do that. That's a right for those who have to do it that way.

MRS. SALIT: I think it's essential, however, to realize that there are children who will benefit through a period of floundering. But there are other children who will be worried by it. I hope the teachers will be sensitive to this and help these children through it.

Then does the parent have a right to go to the teacher and say, "My child is miserable and frightened about being bored, and you've got to do something about it."

MRS. SALIT: I would say it would be largely up to the parent. I guess I would have to grit my teeth for a while and wait.