# Salvaging Forgotten Children

(From The Washington Post)

FARMVILLE, Va.—A new world opened up for 10-year-old Jimmie last September. He went to school for the first time.

"To learn," he will tell you if you ask him what he likes best about school.

Jimmy, a quiet little boy on the shy side, and the 1574 other students in the Prince Edward Free Schools have learned much this year in a remarkable educational program everyone hopes won't ever have to be repeated. The Prince Edward Free School Association was organized as an educational renewal program for Negro youngsters blighted by four school-less years.

Preliminary testing indicates most of the free-schoolers have gained the equivalent of one and one-half years in reading skills since last September. Some have made up two years of schooling in reading and other subjects. Others — like 9-year-old Beauregard Lee, one of the prize pupils—have gained even more.

But the success story of the Free Schools also has a sobering side. The program has pointed up a tragedy of human waste: 1700 Negro boys and girls never can recapture completely the years lost since Prince Edward County chose to close its public schools rather than desegregate classes under court order.

"No child denied an education for four years is ever going to make it up. Only so much can be done. The older the child, the greater the loss."

NEIL V. SULLIVAN, the Free Schools' superintendent, made this assessment last week as he sat in his office at the Robert R. Moton High School. Sullivan is a top-flight educator who came from a Long Island community to fashion the Free School program in a whirlwind two weeks of organization.

The initiative behind the Free Schools came from the late President Kennedy, Justice Department officials, the National Education Association and a few concerned Virginians. They decided to do something before the school-less Prince Edward County Negroes became a lost generation.

The Negroes had been without schools since 1959. The white citizens of Prince Edward set up a private school foundation to provide segregated classes for their children. About 1260 are enrolled in the foundation's schools.

Sullivan, a tall, rangy man whose dedication and enthusiasm are contagious, faced tremendous problems when he came to Prince Edward last fall.

On short notice, he had to organize a school system for 1600 youngsters. They ranged in age from 6 to 22 years. Some had had a smattering of education in the last four years; most had just stayed home. Age levels had to be thrown out the school window.

"WE FOUND we had to clothe, feed and nurse the youngsters," he points out. "Prince Edward is a poverty pocket. Negro families earn less than $1800 a year. Children were falling asleep in class from anemia and malnutrition. We hired a full-time dentist to pull literally hundreds of rotten teeth."

The school staff found many of the youngsters had not had vaccinations and inoculations. When winter came, absenteeism went up because boys and girls didn't have enough clothes to venture out in the cold. The Free Schools rounded up underwear, coats and boots from Northern parent-teacher associations.

In the homes of their sharecropper parents, the Negro boys and girls have had no books or magazines to help fill the gap of school-less years.

"Children out of school two, three or four years without books, libraries or cultural opportunities quickly lose reading skill," Sullivan points out. "You must read to keep that skill. There must be an opportunity to use the reading skill."

This, he notes, may have great implications for voter-qualification tests. Negroes who drop out of school in their early teens are asked to take literacy tests years later when they have lost most of their skill.

SULLIVAN found Prince Edward County a "colossal wasteland" for the Negro community. The Free School program reached into the homes to help.

The youngsters are given dictionaries and a few books to take home. Evening movies and Sunday cultural programs bring music and drama to the parents as well as the children. At once-a-week night classes in homemaking, mothers can learn what their daughters have been taught in regular school classes.

On Saturdays, the Free Schoolers are loaded in buses for field trips to cities with art galleries, museums and historic places. They have gone to Monticello, Williamsburg and Appomattox ("most didn't know the Civil War ended there," Sullivan notes wryly). Groups have come to Washington to see a performance of "Hamlet" and to go to the Supreme Court and to watch the Senate civil rights debate.

"This is a deadly environment here," Sullivan says. "We have to give them a chance to see beyond it."

The Free Schools operate on a lengthened school year, school week and school day in an attempt to catch up on the lost years of education.

School will run through mid-August. At 5 p.m., it is not unusual to see teachers and students working together in classrooms at the Moton High School two hours after the formal day is over. The teachers put in overtime to tutor students. The school runs special buses for the pupils who want to stay late (their day often begins at 7:30 a.m. or earlier, waiting for a school bus).

"WE HAVE an unusual faculty that works an unusual day—and also unusual pupils," says Sullivan.

The success of the Free Schools has been a story of dedication and massive emergency efforts from many sources outside Prince Edward. Foundations, industries and private citizens contributed $1 million. An outpouring of contributions have included free textbooks, television sets, equipment, out-of-town newspapers and art supplies.

Sullivan recruited a faculty of 100: 75 Negro and 25 white teachers. Among them are several Peace Corps returnees who brought their zeal for good causes home from overseas.

The Free Schools leased four boarded-up buildings and buses from the Prince Edward County school system. In addition to the Moton High School, with 550 students, there are three elementary schools in operation.

Twenty-three seniors will graduate this year and as many as nine may go on to college.

From the outset, it was made clear that the Free Schools would welcome any child in Prince Edward County. Only eight white students—one the son of a college professor and four others from one family—have enrolled.

THE FREE SCHOOL Association experiment has attracted Nation-wide attention. Sullivan put such techniques as nongraded classes and team teaching to work with remarkable success. Educators and reporters have come to observe.

But like a prophet in his own land, Sullivan's Free Schools have been largely ignored by the white community of Prince Edward.

"We have been largely ostracized here," Sullivan says. "We are not asked to speak at the Rotary, Lions, Chamber of Commerce and other clubs."

The integrated faculty members have had to make their own social life. Farmville, the county seat, is a tight community. Although segregation is practiced there with Southern graciousness, it is still clear-cut.

Negro and white faculty members cannot eat together in restaurants or go to the movie theater together. Sullivan has tried to reach out to the entire community, but his efforts have been largely rebuffed. The open invitations to Free School movies and cultural programs have been ignored by the white community.

Under the small-town pleasantries of Farmville, the segregationist stand may have hardened over the years. The white community has accepted the Free Schools and leased school buildings to the Association "only because it took the heat off them for providing no schools for Negroes," one observer points out.

What happens when the free schools close in August?

Before its summer recess, the Supreme Court is expected to hand down its decision on the legality of the closing of Prince Edward public schools. Also involved is the issue of state tuition grants, which a lower court ruled illegal in Prince Edward as long as the public schools remained closed.

The year in Prince Edward has changed Sullivan's outlook, just as he has changed the world of the Negro pupils. He will go to Berkeley, Calif., to head a school system that he chose because it is multiracial.

"The great challenge for education now is race relations," he says. "We educators have moved into quiet areas like curriculum and techniques with new ideas."

"Now we have a section of our house on fire. We have to get in where the work has to be done."

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