

Welcoming New Challenges

A small, supportive school that is committed to helping students who are challenged find success and fulfillment in their lives.

THE NAMES OF THE PEOPLE at its helm have changed over the years since Rock Point School was founded in 1928, but the school's core principles have remained the same: Rock Point, poised near the promontory on Lake Champlain that it takes its name from, is a place where teenage students are encouraged to become their best selves. It is also a place where young people come to change their lives.

Many Rock Point School (RPS) students come here after becoming disillusioned with large, impersonal high schools; some come to build skills for living in harmony with others. They are creative, self-aware teenagers who have found themselves off track academically and personally, and who are ready to make positive changes and to get a clear sense of what is real and good in themselves.

The RPS main building and the grounds surrounding it actually date to a much earlier time than 1928. It was 1888 when Bishop Hopkins of the Vermont Episcopal Diocese founded Bishop Hopkins Hall, a finishing school for young ladies, on 150 acres of land two miles north of Burlington now occupied by Rock Point's campus. The school, much like the trappings of the Victorian era (and its outbuildings, quarters for servants of the young ladies) came to an end as times changed. It closed quietly in 1910, and the buildings settled into disrepair until Bishop Booth founded Rock Point some 18 years later as a school "for girls aged six to eighteen who came from unfavorable

PHIL JORDAN



The portico of Rock Point School's stately main building, built in 1888, still bears the name of the finishing school that preceded it, Bishop Hopkins Hall. The building is owned by the Episcopal Church but operated by Rock Point School.



Administrative assistant Lonnie Edson (known affectionately as “Radar”) juggles myriad responsibilities in the office while keeping a smile on her face and keeps this busy contact point for visitors as well as student and faculty traffic buzzing with activity.



Rock Point School’s Head of School is C.J. Spirito, who has 23 years’ experience on staff and attests that the school’s dorm programs “are vehicles [for the students] to instill confidence in who they are as whole beings.”



Art teacher Jeannie Waltz says, “We create an experience where you can’t be constantly on Facebook or the internet. Instead, we ask ourselves: what fun can we have?” The challenge of not having TV in dorms brings forth creativity both in class and out, not boredom.

situations,” says Charlotte Blend, Rock Point’s Director of Development.

Charlotte, a native of Oxford, England, has been with RPS since 2004 and tells the story of Rock Point’s founding well: “The Bishop tapped someone he knew, Doris Wright, an experienced nurse who lived in Philadelphia, for the headmistress position at a time when ‘the buildings were falling apart and there was little or no money,’” states Charlotte. “I believe that when he called her, he simply asked, ‘Why don’t you come up?’” Rock Point’s early days and another piece of that conversation were also documented in 1944 by Episcopal cleric Bernard Bell, who wrote that part of the Bishop’s pitch to Doris was the daunting promise of “no salary to start with, only your living, if indeed you get that.”

Doris, who quickly became affectionately known as “Aunt DoDo” by the girls, worked wonders under incredible budgetary constraints; \$158.77 per year in expenses allocated to each student, according to Bernard. At the time, the school was funded almost entirely by donations. “She established new families once she got here, and basically rescued those girls,” says Charlotte, who tells the tale of how Doris initially made the rounds of local merchants and food producers, among them the people at a local Maltex plant, when she convinced the management to make an

edible donation with the flat-out pitch: “I’ve got a lot of hungry girls—what are you going to do about it?”

Bernard, who also served as president of St. Stephens College in New York State, came away from his 1944 visit to Rock Point amazed: “When I went up to Rock Point I was not prepared to find but did find one of the best schools I have ever run across.” Today, it can be safely said that his words still ring true after all these years.

Currently, Charlotte explains, “The building is owned by the Episcopal Church but operated by the school. We don’t teach religion or require it...but if students want to pursue a religion, we are happy to take them to services in downtown Burlington.” The church still does run summer camps here and hold summer conferences in cabins on site, in addition to fostering a program called Kids for Peace, open to children of all faiths to cultivate good relations between those of various religions.

Good relations are also enjoyed at the school’s chapel, a meditative sanctuary and unstructured gathering place in Bishop Hopkins Hall where kids frequently come to play (and record) music. Here there are the fixtures of an Episcopal chapel but also prayer flags of other faiths and other mementos of service trips students have made to countries such as Cambodia, Costa Rica, and El Salvadore to teach English to

young children and pursue local service opportunities. “We have a strong sense of community service,” says Charlotte, perhaps an extension of Rock Point’s basic tenet: “Take every opportunity to make yourself and your life better.” Indeed, Rock Point’s students may be found out and about Burlington clearing fire hydrants of snow in the winter, sorting clothes for resale at a goodwill depot, or even traveling farther afield, working on Habitat for Humanity projects as far away as Washington, DC.

At the helm of RPS today is Head of School C.J. Spirito, who lives on campus with his family members. While now in his second year in this position, C.J. is no stranger to the school; he has spent 23 years on staff, in the process transitioning from a position on dorm staff to Director of the Dorm, then to Dean of Students, to Assistant Headmaster, and now Head of School. He is not just speaking about himself when he says, “We have incredible retention. The quality of the work is what draws people to stay.

Rock Point is a school for kids who have struggled...each has challenges in their life and has gotten to the point where they’ve got to make changes... and want to make changes,” attests C.J. “They appreciate school more in later years...they find that people believe in them. These kids...are looking for meaning—not to jump through hoops



Prom night (above) is celebrated with a group photo taken on the front porch of the main school building. In the summertime, after regular classes end, a new program offers a boarding experience and chance to earn any missed credits, plus enrichment activities. In the cafeteria (right) two students, Jake Kisslinger and Stephen O'Leary, collaborate on solving a tough crossword puzzle over lunch.

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just to jump through hoops.” One of the things that the school builds, besides self-esteem, is a sense of caring for others. And part of that is learning—and then learning how to teach.

At a new maple sugarhouse on campus, students learn in a three-week program how to split firewood, gather maple sap, care for the trees, and make maple syrup (there's homework, too). They made 30 or so gallons the second year of the program, but besides enjoying the fruits of their labor, they gave tours to some 300 local schoolchildren to show them how maple syrup is made. Gus Buchanan, a history teacher in charge of the project, later summed it up this way: “Students could...understand the effort and labor necessary to make maple syrup, and they connected with the rhythm of nature and thereby educated other people about the process.”

But there is more to this school than hands-on learning and community service. At the student lounge in the main hall, there is a large window that opens into a state-of-the-art computer lab classroom where seniors are bent over keyboards, hard at work in their English class. Do students here socialize? Of course, but their social activities aren't based on the internet. “There are restrictions on the use of personal laptops,” says C.J. “Also, kids have to work their way up academically

to earn the privilege—which is also based on dorm level and behavior—of using personal laptops and the internet.”

Lonnie Edson (affably known as “Radar” for her administrative foresight and prowess) is Rock Point's able administrative assistant. She is known on campus as the keeper of myriad details and pieces of information, and will probably be the first face you see once you step inside the school building's front door and ask for directions. “People tend to stick around here,” she says, and she should know; Lonnie has worked at Rock Point for 37 years. “Back in 1975, we didn't have too many boys here as students...most kids were wards of the state. They came here from foster homes—there was very little parental support. Now, we have more intact families and no kids from state custody.” However, many of the core issues and the students' searches for meaning remain the same.

On Lonnie's desk are lollipops, rewards of sorts for kids who stop by. What are Lonnie's rewards? “Seeing the change in kids,” she exclaims with a smile, “from low self-esteem to being more confident—these were kids who were ready to drop out when they came here. Now, they're making honor roll for the first time, and they've reconciled with their parents. That's my reward:



knowing they're going to succeed.”

Downstairs in the school cafeteria, there is of course a chef, Kevin Douglas, but there's no outside help; everyone from faculty members to students clears tables, washes dishes, and does the chores on a rotating basis. Upstairs, students are planning a Thanksgiving Day celebration, lining up speakers, singers, and decorating the hall in advance. “It's a tradition,” explains C.J., “and a change from faculty-driven events to student-driven. It teaches kids to be contributors instead of spectators.”

Classrooms are set up with desks in a circle, so no one can remain hidden or not part of the group. Every faculty member has one or two students who he or she serves as an advisor to, and it is required that every student have an emotional check-in with their advisor once per week. The arrangement allows ample time for mentoring and the process of assessment necessary for each



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Steven M. Legge, Sr.
Lyndonville, Vermont 05851

(802) 626-9600

Cell: (802) 535-5939

steve@stevelegge.com

www.stevelegge.com



student to move forward socially and personally, as well as academically. It is part of the school's mission statement of providing a small, supportive, educational community for teenage boys and girls, where they can become successful students and learn skills for living in a community with peers and adults.

In class or out, there is plenty to do at the school. There is a weekly wellness class that focuses on healthy living, stress reduction, and nutrition, in addition to a weekly school-wide meeting—a forum for students and staff to plan future activities and network to build a sense of community within the school. Many students choose to take art classes that teach, among other things, photography and traditional darkroom printing skills, creative writing, architecture, stained glass, digital animation, painting, and fabric arts. Work is displayed at a yearly art show downtown at Rose Street Gallery. There are also field trips throughout Vermont to go skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and camping, and to see plays or movies, perform at open-mike night events, pick apples, do volunteer community work, and just have fun!

Ryan Weiland, who came to Rock Point in 2000 and is Dean of Students, adds, "I feel this population of students is so creative...they're looking for justice and what's right in the world—and it's hard to find what's right in the world." Posted on the bulletin board in Lonnie's office is a photo of a smiling Rock Point graduate, now confidently making his way in the world he once penned as being "pretty scary." On the photo are written his words: "I couldn't have done it without Rock Point." Aunt DoDo would be proud. 🍷

Just the facts

Rock Point School

1 Rock Point Road
Burlington, VT 05408
Call (802) 863-1104
or visit rockpoint.org.
Space is still available for the 2012–2013 school year. For information, please contact Hillary Kramer, director of admissions at (802) 863-1104, ext.12 or e-mail her at hkramer@rockpoint.org.

