Turning Spoiled Kids into Citizens
THE Founder of Danville's Athenian School Marks 40 Years of Nurturing Leaders

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On September 12, 1965, Dyke Brown brought the noble ideals of an ancient Greek classroom into the 20th century. He opened the Athenian School, a pioneering private school at the base of Mount Diablo in Danville. Speaking to the 65 entering ninth and 10th grade students, the East Bay-bred Brown shared his bold vision for the school.

“Our goal,” declared the gently charismatic six-foot-five-inch Brown, “is to prepare the leaders of tomorrow.”

Back then, his ideas were considered radical. Besides making the boarding school racially integrated and coeducational—unusual for a private school in the 1960s—he stressed the ancient values of intellectual rigor, civic duty, and fitness of mind and body. Brown believed that adolescents, especially those from privileged backgrounds, tended to be spoiled and self-absorbed, and that they needed to be nudged out of their complacency.

Brown knew a thing or two about teen self-absorption. Born in 1915, he came of age in the "fairly laissez-faire community" of Piedmont, where, he admits, “the kids … ran a little rampant.” After a year at UC Berkeley, Brown’s parents sent him off to Europe to broaden his horizons.

He found his way to the Salem School in Germany, created by Kurt Hahn, who later founded Outward Bound. Hahn’s school promoted character through physical fitness—including crack-of-dawn exercises in the garden—and by having students do chores such as chopping wood or mucking out horse stalls.

The young Brown found the discipline and chores onerous. He had such trouble adapting, in fact, that at the end of his first semester, Hahn told him, “Brown, I think that you are one of the three most spoiled people that I’ve ever met, but I think the raw material is excellent.” Brown was soon sold on what Hahn was trying to do, and, after ultimately graduating from UC Berkeley with a degree in social philosophy, he struck out on a path toward civic and educational leadership.

He attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, got a law degree from Yale Law School, and worked briefly with John Francis Neylan, one of San Francisco’s great trial attorneys. But he quit after three years to join the nascent Ford Foundation, whose mission included strengthening democratic values and reducing poverty and injustice around the world. After watching his own three children develop in both public and Quaker schools, Brown decided to establish a school inspired by the Salem School model.

“I wanted to do something that would come more directly to grips with my interest in how you replenish good citizens and leaders in each generation,” he says.

He got to work, traveling all over the country, touting his idea to powerful individuals and foundations. Pretty soon, Brown had a faculty lined up, a board of wealthy San Franciscan trustees, and enough money in grants and private donations to buy the land for the school and to allow 25 percent of students to come on scholarship.

He was able to attract students like Andrew Wistrich, who, back in the 1960s, was a smart Orinda teen bored at his public high school. “[My parents] thought it was risky to go to a school that was just started,” says Wistrich, who is now a federal court judge. “Looking back, I think the decision to go to the Athenian School was one of the best decisions I ever made. The faculty was very demanding. They made me think about what I wanted to do next with my life.”

Today, with 450 students in grades six through 12, Athenian is much larger and carries an Ivy League price tag—for grades nine through 12, annual tuition is $36,846 for boarding students and $23,202 for day students—but it remains devoted to the same ideals. Students face a challenging curriculum and must contribute to campus upkeep by participating in regular Town Hall meetings or cleaning up in the kitchen. They also do service projects around the world. Athenian students have helped build a water-supply system in a Thai village and establish a reading program for farm laborers’ children in South Africa. And juniors participate in a 30-day wilderness trip to Death Valley or the Sierra Nevada mountains that is, by all accounts, life changing.

In an era when public schools are increasingly pressed to perform on standardized tests, Athenian offers a strikingly alternative vision. The school values moral, social, and artistic development as much as it does academic
achievement. Said Brown at a 90th birthday party thrown by the school in April, “The whole of what you do, 24 hours a day, is your curriculum.”

For more information about the Athenian School, visit www.athenian.org or call (925) 837-5375.