

HISTORY OF SPRING GARDEN WALDORF SCHOOL



What is the intention involved and what kind of commitment is needed, for the great endeavor of starting a school? How does a school grow, change and thrive over 40 year's time? We spoke with founding Spring Garden Waldorf School members and teachers, Jennell Woodard and Marie Paul, to find out.

A group of parents wanted a different kind of education -- this was the impetus of the founding of Spring Garden School. The parents were connected by a local church and a co-op and included Ron and Jennell Woodard, Carol Brick, Marie Paul and many others seeking an alternative to what was offered locally for children. The original group grew to as many as fifty families.

Some were considering homeschooling which was forbidden by the state of Ohio at that time, and others began considering starting a school which Ohio would allow. Jennell Woodard and her husband, Ron, were active leaders of this group and took to researching different alternative education models, which included attending a local conference on just that topic. But it was an article in the East West Journal about Waldorf education that piqued their interest, so they decided to take a small group (including founding teacher Carol Brick) to visit the Detroit Waldorf School and a Waldorf training institute in the Great Lakes region.

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The experience was both inspiring and daunting.

Jennell says, "When you walked into the Detroit Waldorf School you knew something really unique was happening. You could sense and feel it. You could see and hear it in the recorders and the art displays. We were super inspired."

After the inspiration and excitement of visiting the Detroit Waldorf School, they attended a training institute in the area and encountered a different spirit all together. The leader of the institute said they would need years of training and between \$100,000 and \$300,000 to start a Waldorf school. The Woodards were initially deflated, but then decided to move forward with moxie.



According to Jennell, the drive home was reinvigorating: "We just said to ourselves, 'Why couldn't we do it? What's the worst thing that can happen?' We'll just end up homeschooling.' So we began looking for an available Waldorf curriculum to teach students."

Jennell adds that finding that curriculum was not easy. "Now they hand you all this material when you attend training and conferences. Back when we started, there was almost no formal material created and circulated for Waldorf curriculum. But we were able to find and purchase the Oak Meadow homeschool Waldorf curriculum."

The next step? Finding a place to call home for the interested families and their 17 children for that following school year.

The 1980s

The school's very first home in 1981 was a rented house on Oviat Court in West Akron where student classrooms were housed on the first floor. The rooms were large and spacious and looked wonderful, but according to Marie Paul, large rooms meant sound issues.

She says, "This was an era in elementary schools where classrooms were open and then divided by partitions. But we quickly discovered that wasn't going to work for us."

Realizing they needed to be farther apart, they sought new spaces for rent and Marie's husband, John, had a friend with a business who had space for rent on the second floor of a more spacious house on West Market street. They moved their three classrooms mid year.



The 1980s Cont.

There was a Kindergarten taught by Jennell, Monday through Thursday, while Marie Paul and another parent taught artistic Fridays. The first grade was taught by Carol Brick and a combined second and third grade was taught by Bonnie Holden. Although the school had only 17 students, even the West Market Street house, while better, proved too small.

The following school year, in 1982, the school rented the basement level of Margaret Park United Presbyterian Church on Russell Avenue in Kenmore. During this time the school kept growing but had no administrative staff, which became difficult for the teachers to manage.



Jennell says, “We had to install a phone in my classroom because no one knew how to get a hold of us. It would ring and I would have to answer it during class!”

According to Jennell, at the time, the Waldorf movement was in favor of keeping administration staff to a minimum to preserve the integrity of faculty-led governance. Understanding our place in the Waldorf movement led us to become Associate Level members of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) in 1985.

Jennell explained that AWSNA, in its earlier years, had not yet fully finalized the details of accreditation. “They would come to the school, give you ideas, and meet to consult,” says Jennell. “Magda Lissau was the one who came to help us. She was wonderful and had taught at the Chicago Waldorf School. She would tell us, every year, that we needed to go to teacher training and every year we would tell her we couldn’t leave or relocate our families.”

At that time, teacher training was only available in U.S. coastal cities and required three to four-year relocation to complete the degrees in a full-time school setting. As Marie says, “We were starting this school for our families. We couldn’t just up and leave them. So every time they came and said we should receive training, we requested different training opportunities.”

Although none of the teachers were Waldorf trained just yet, they were offering an inspiring Waldorf curriculum and families in the area were taking notice.



Spring Garden School received state accreditation for grades one through six in the 1986-1987 school year and the staff had grown to include four classroom teachers as well as preschool, kindergarten, gym, and art teachers. Jennell says, “We looked around and realized, there are no more rooms in this church!”

The Early 90s - Pickle Road



In August of 1990, thanks to the help of parents Abba Kinsel and Steve Schmidt, the school moved to an elementary school building for rent in the Springfield School District on Pickle road. The home on Pickle Road was perfect! It was an actual school building that the district no longer needed.

It was at this time that the faculty began to realize that they needed administrative and leadership support. The school decided to form a Board of Trustees and hire Jennell an administrative assistant to help her with administrative tasks. No more phone in the classroom!

This was also the time that the school hosted its first festival. Handwork teacher, Marie Lim, kept talking about festivals other schools would host, and she organized the festival that would one day become our Children's Festival. Jennell was the original cookie fairy!

In fact, it was during a different festival, the advent celebration in 1993, when the Springfield superintendent made a surprise visit.

Jennell says, "We were told the school district never wanted that building back, so when he came in I pressed: I said, 'What's going on? Are you planning to take the building back?' And he said, 'No, we're just looking around.' But they were absolutely deciding to take the building back."

They let Jennell know, formally, with only four and a half months to vacate the premises. So the scramble was on to find a new home, yet again, and this time the Board agreed, it ideally would be permanent.



1994 Move to Copley

The hunt for a suitable home led to an old Copley Elementary school, Indian Springs, built in 1961 and for sale by the McKim Institute of Heating and Cooling. McKim ran a training center out of the school and used the building as a literal training ground -- taking pieces of it apart and having students work on it, and in it, simultaneously.

Ron Woodard, Jennell's husband, says, "You could scrape grease off all the floors with a putty knife. They had troughs hung from the ceiling by ropes to transport water throughout the building."



"The parents, students, teachers, board members and friends of the school spent over 6,000 hours that summer in 1994 to get the school ready."

All to say, the property was in rough shape, but it was something the school could afford with much fundraising, grant writing, major parent support and renting a wing out to Copley Day Care. Perhaps the most impressive support, however, was given through time. The school took possession of the building the first week in August and had to get it ready to accept students in September of that year.

Marie Paul says, "The parents, students, teachers, board members and friends of the school spent over 6,000 hours that summer in 1994 to get the school ready. It was so much hard work, but everyone came out and did what they could."

Windows, ceilings, floors and walls needed repair and everything needed deep cleaning: not to mention painting and the other work such as getting the grounds ready for recess. Everyone pulled together and the work got done! Students started school at 1791 Copley road in the fall of 1994.



Settling in; Ready to Grow

Once settled into our new home here in Copley, administrative needs were again brought to the Board of Trustees and it was decided that the school needed more administrative support. Waldorf schools across the U.S. were growing in popularity and size, and the movement generally was acknowledging the need for more robust administrative positions to help faculty with leadership and help schools manage growth and sustainability. A Coordinator (now our Director of Administration Position) was filled by Board member, Mike Connelly.

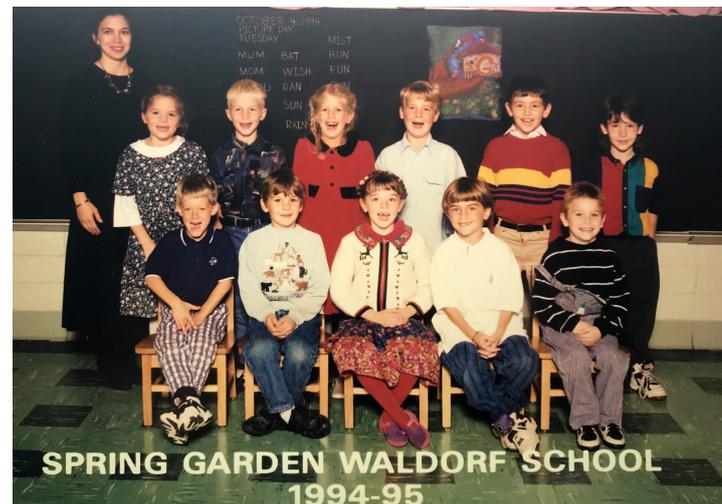


It was around this same time that faculty were taking on Waldorf teacher training in earnest. This was because it was not only Jennell and Marie asking for different training opportunities in North America. All the schools in AWSNA were asking for summer training options.

In the mid-90s, that need was met as summer teacher training programs were offered up throughout the country, including in the Ann Arbor region to serve the Great Lakes area schools. This opened up the potential not only to train our faculty but also to begin seeking accreditation in earnest through AWSNA, which was then formalizing their accreditation process.



Spring Garden School became Spring Garden Waldorf School in 2006 after we successfully completed our accreditation process with The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America. We remain, today, the only accredited Waldorf School in Northeast Ohio and one of only two accredited Waldorf schools in all of Ohio -- the other being The Cincinnati Waldorf School.



In that same year, Copley Day Care relocated, and our school expanded to fill all of the classrooms in the building. By this point, the school employed one main lesson teacher for each grade and began looping teachers as AWSNA recommended. We also had a staff of five in the Early Childhood classes, and subject teachers for Spanish, Music, Physical Education, and Handwork, as well as tutors and speech therapist services.

Settling in; Ready to Grow Cont.



With the leadership of a dedicated Board of Trustees and a faculty committed to finding a governance structure to allow the school to grow while still preserving faculty leadership roles, a series of administrative models were formulated. Full-time and part-time employees in administrative positions were hired, and this structure was reviewed and revised until we decided upon our current governance model. Ongoing work toward the development of our personnel, programs, and organization continues to drive the growth of our school today.

Now, in its 40th year, Spring Garden Waldorf School is home to 170 students, plus 32 faculty and staff members and 16 Board of Trustees -- all working together to continue offering quality Waldorf education to children living in Northeast Ohio.

But most importantly, the school has graduated over 450 students who have gone on to contribute to our world and our future.

As Jennell says, "I believe Spring Garden Waldorf School provides a foundation for students -- fostering creativity and imagination for their thinking and building strength for future endeavors."

