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Obituaries

Eleanor W. Orr, 81; Co-Founded District's Hawthorne School

By Adam Bernstein
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, October 30, 2008



Eleanor Orr and her husband opened Hawthorne in 1956 to get students "personally involved in their learning." (Washington Post File Photo)

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Eleanor Wilson Orr, 81, an educator who co-founded the Hawthorne School, a private high school in Washington known for an experimental and progressive curriculum, died Oct. 10 at Inova Loudoun Hospital. She had melanoma.

Mrs. Orr once said that she and her husband, Alexander, had opened their school out of a sense of desperation about the learning needs of students they had known early in their teaching careers.

"They didn't really care about school," Mrs. Orr, a math and science teacher known as E.O. to her pupils, told The Washington Post. "They had no excitement about learning. Our most important aim has been to get the students personally involved in their learning."

The Orrs started the coeducational Hawthorne School in 1956 with 14 students and a part-time staff in rented basement space. Over the next 25 years, the Orrs built the school into a bustling enterprise while demanding adherence to rigorous teaching standards. Mrs. Orr began the workday by giving students a current events quiz.

The coursework emphasized classic literature, language study, current events and the arts. The Orrs initiated a music program that brought to the school jazz and folk artists, including Duke Ellington and Jean Ritchie.

Mrs. Orr worked with U.S. poet laureate Richard Eberhart, whose son was a student at the school, to create a poet-in-residence workshop. There was also a course on opera.

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The school provided accommodations to protesters of the Vietnam War and participants in the 1968 Poor People's March, a demonstration against poverty and joblessness organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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The Orrs introduced the themes of those campaigns into the coursework for what was then a mostly white student body. But at the same time, the very tolerance the school preached bred problems both financial and academic.

By the late 1960s, Mrs. Orr told The Post, the school "was full of students who thought of Hawthorne as the symbol of whatever their understanding of protest was."

Also, she said, "we had come to symbolize God knows what. Nobody worked. . . .

Many, many kids appeared to be over-involved with drugs. We simply hung on, feeling like foreigners in our own home."

She criticized parents who sent their children to Hawthorne as a "last resort" for their troubled youths, only to blame the administrators when their children suffered academically because the standards had not been lowered.

In the 1970s, the school formed a cooperative arrangement with the Washington school system that allowed public school students to attend Hawthorne tuition-free.

To Mrs. Orr's dismay, the public school students failed most of Hawthorne's math and science courses. This phenomenon arose, she wrote in her 1987 book "Twice as Less," despite the fact that many were "some of the most diligent and determined we had ever taught."

The book, published five years after the school closed, put forth a controversial thesis: that for students whose first language is inner-city black vernacular, "language can be a barrier to success in mathematics and science."

She wrote that knowledge of grammatical English is essential to understanding precise mathematical concepts. A Post review said the book would be "of major interest to linguists and educators," but "Twice as Less" was swept up into the larger cultural debate over street dialect and led to accusations that Mrs. Orr was denigrating black culture.

"It's a highly sensitive issue because black English touches at the heart of black identity," she told the Los Angeles Times in 1993.

Eleanor Louise Wilson was born in Chicago on July 12, 1927. She graduated in 1949 from Wells College in Aurora, N.Y., and married in 1950. Before operating Hawthorne, she taught at Georgetown Day School and started a summer ranch in Taos, N.M., for teenagers.

In addition to her husband, of Herndon, survivors include four children, Douglas Orr of Washington, Leslie Orr of Dubai, Meghan Mulvihill of Northbrook, Ill., and Duncan Orr of Mansfield, Ohio; a brother; a sister; and nine grandchildren.