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## ***THE PEOPLE AND THE IDEAS BEHIND MAKING ROEPER A SCHOOL FOR GIFTED CHILDREN***



*“We have gone into that with great enthusiasm and interest but also with the bewildered feelings you have when stepping into a mysterious darkness.”*

*George Roeper  
1957*

At the May 1957 PTA meeting, as was his practice at the last meeting of the year, George Roeper recapped the year’s accomplishments: fundraising for scholarships, square dances, library improvements, and the change that was on everyone’s mind. “Of course, the most important development of the past year was our ‘Gifted Child Project,’ the second school in the nation,” he said. “We have gone into that with great enthusiasm and interest but also with the bewildered feelings you have when stepping into a mysterious darkness.”

While George may have described himself with his usual modesty, the truth is that it was a remarkable achievement. The only other elementary school in the country that was explicitly educating gifted children was Hunter College Elementary School in New York City, a lab school affiliated with Hunter College. After only a year, this small private school in Michigan already had a national profile. Roeper’s status today as the oldest independent school for the gifted in the country was only possible because of the thoughtful process George and Annemarie implemented, and the dedicated supporters they inspired.

The process began with a change in the school’s legal status. In May 1956 George transferred the school, which he had owned solely until then, into a non-profit educational trust so he could solicit grants and donations. He, Annemarie, and their attorney, Morris Stein, of Butzel, Levin, Winston & Quint, became the Trustees of the new organization. As George told the PTA with some amusement, “Of course, the school never made profit before and operated always as a non-profit institution. But now it is the legalized purpose not to make profit.” While the Trustees were the only voting members of the new organization, they also established for the first time an Advisory Board of parents and supporters to give advice and assistance.

It was a daunting prospect to give up control of his school, so George wrote into the Trust agreement the values he wanted to prioritize. The school could not discriminate based on race, creed, or gender, and the highest priority for spending should be for scholarships, so anyone who would benefit from the school could attend.

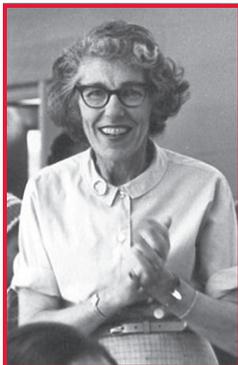
Next was a gala dinner on June 1, 1956, to officially launch the Gifted Child Project (GCP). The keynote speaker was Gunnar Dybwad, another German intellectual refugee who had come to this country in 1934. At the time, Dr. Dybwad was the executive director of the Child Study Association in New York City, a national parent education group. More famously, he was an early and prominent advocate for the idea that meeting the special needs of children was a civil rights issue, not a medical or social work issue that was solely the responsibility of individual families.

In his speech that night, George extended that idea to gifted children, who many believed were being underserved. “There were many gifted and talented ones among (the school’s) children, but we never thought of them as a national resource,” said George. “Today we know we need these children. We have to go out and try to find them ... It is for this reason we embark on the specific task of reaching and educating gifted children where we can find them, regardless of creed, race or socioeconomic status.”

A number of parents were foundational to the success of the GCP, but there were three families whose long-term support warrant special mention. Henry and Susan Moses, whose daughter, Carol, attended Roeper, could be counted on to provide seed money for projects and quietly fill holes in the budget. Henry was President of Performance Measurements Co., and Susan’s family founded Peoples Outfitting, at one time the largest department store in Detroit. One of the classrooms in the Quad Building is named for her parents, Andrew and Elsa Wineman. Susan was co-chair of fundraising for the Gifted Child Project, and Henry took charge of publicity. Both served on the Advisory Board from its inception.

As George commented 10 years later at the school’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, “The school could not have had the physical development without the very generous assistance of Sue and Henry Moses. Henry has in many talks with us set our sights in the right proportion, taught us to think big, to think ahead and try the unusual. But we did not only get advice, we also got financial support to such a degree that new additions and new buildings could not have been possible without Sue and Henry Moses.”

Co-chairing fundraising with Susan was Carolyn “Curly” Levin, who taught in the nursery school from 1949 – 1964, in addition to an extensive volunteer career in anti-poverty programs for children in Pontiac, as well as many other causes. Curly and her attorney husband, A.J. were close personal friends as well as philosophical companions to George and Annemarie in their passion for social change and commitment to equity. When Curly passed away in 1966, Annemarie observed, “All were of equal rank to her and worthy of her greatest efforts. This in turn brought out the best in them. It is wonderful how many faces light up when her name is mentioned.” When the Domes opened in 1969, a classroom was dedicated to Curly.



for a group of children — to give them a kind of experience which they could remember as a glimpse of the fun that life could hold — in some unique and magical expression of it which they were not likely to see in the same way again.” For a number of years, Dr. Thomas hosted an end-of-the-year party for the Roeper faculty and staff at his estate on Marion Island in the Detroit River.

#### **THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

After the gala announcement of the launch, the next step came on June 18 with the start of the week-long meeting of the Gifted Child Institute. Earlier that year, George had reached out to Dr. A. Harry Passow at Teachers College of Columbia University, the most prominent contemporary academic in gifted child education. George persuaded Dr. Passow, who became a close friend of George and Annemarie’s, to assemble and chair a group of educators and psychologists to develop a curriculum for gifted children according to the best ideas of the time.



Dr. Passow and his family drove out to Michigan in their station wagon, thinking to make a vacation out of it. Later he recalled arriving at the school on a summer Sunday afternoon to the surprising sight of the June Fair, the school’s annual fundraiser and community party, when the Bloomfield Hills campus was transformed into a circus. He hadn’t met Annemarie, so they made their acquaintance amidst the cotton candy and games. The next morning, with school over and the campus shifting into camp mode, the Institute went into session.

The group included national and local members. Dr. Passow invited Dr. Miriam Goldberg, also of Teachers College and his frequent collaborator, as well as Marie Spottswood, the former Headmistress of the progressive Fieldston School in Manhattan, who was currently heading the Oakwood School in North Hollywood, California, a start-up school founded by a group of left-leaning parents in the movie industry. From the Midwest came Dr. Robert De Haan, a faculty member on the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago; Dr. Anton Brenner of the Research Staff of the Merrill-Palmer Institute in Detroit, known nationally for its research into

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Dr. Alfred Thomas was an early, generous, and loyal supporter of the school who provided an important connection to the African-American community in Detroit. A prominent physician in the city, Dr. Thomas was on the Detroit Board of



Commerce, a member of the first Human Relations Committee of the Detroit Police Department, and an originator of the annual Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner for the Detroit NAACP chapter, the first such event for an NAACP chapter and still a nationally renowned annual dinner. He agreed to serve on the first Advisory Board in 1956, providing valuable validation for the school. His daughter Linda graduated from the school’s first ninth grade in 1965. A former Tuskegee Airman and a dashing man who loved to entertain, Dr. Thomas was a man who lived life fully. Linda recalls the many occasions her father “spontaneously took it upon himself to provide some extraordinary experience



*Dr. Elizabeth Monroe Drews, consultant to the school in gifted education. Photo courtesy of Portland State University.*

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early child development; Dr. Marie Skodak, head of psychological services for the Dearborn Public Schools; and Dr. Elizabeth Drews, a gifted young feminist who was an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo and director of the psychology department for the Lansing Public Schools. George and Annemarie and several members of the school faculty rounded out the group.

The group took a holistic approach to their task, concerned about both intellectual and emotional well-being. They contemplated the meaning of learning, rejecting a curriculum that emphasized acquisition of facts and information for its own sake, choosing instead to acquire fact and information “as a means for interpreting and understanding the present and predicting the future.”

The organizing and integrating aspects of the curriculum focused on two areas, paying attention to the specific needs of gifted children: motivation (how to nurture a love of learning), and self-awareness (developing a grounded and comfortable sense of self). A moral objective was also assumed. As the summary of the proceedings noted, “The development of the personality should also entail the growing desire of the child to develop his talents for their own sake (the need for self-understanding and self-fulfillment because of the talent he has) coupled with a sense of responsibility for the application of his talents for the benefit of society and the service of mankind.” Finally, the group called for special attention to encouraging gifted girls to envision contributing to society beyond home-making.

The classroom curriculum was a multi-cultural and multi-dimensional program called, simply and appealingly, *People and Their Problems of Living*. Students would study a wide range of cultures past and present, incorporating myths, culture, technology, and aesthetics, and develop skills in writing, research, experimentation, critical thinking and physical manipulation. The goal was to acquire a broad understanding of how the world works and how they could engage with it, which largely followed the philosophy already in place at the school. As an admiring Dr. Passow commented years later, “The curriculum was essentially what George and Annemarie believed in. We just put a little patina on it.”

George and Annemarie hired a school psychologist to do IQ testing so they could bring that expertise into the school and learn from it. Actually, “hired” probably isn’t the right word, since the school psychologist was the remarkable Margaret Littmann, mother to Paul, Marianne and Terry, students at the school, and another one of the energetic and visionary people who helped make the school what it is. Margaret came on staff in 1959 and retired in 1974. She turned first her fees and then her salary back to the school for scholarships, contributing \$100,000 over the years. She funded and organized the first school library, and quietly purchased needed items all around the school. One of the founders of the National Association of School Psychologists, Margaret was an active and effective advocate for children all her life. Her husband, Sidney Littmann, Chief Engineer at Giffels & Rossetti, was also a valued advisor and friend to George and Annemarie. He was on the inaugural Advisory Board and served as Chairman from 1958 – 1971.



*Annemarie and George flanked Sidney and Margaret Littmann at a farewell party for the couple.*

## SETTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

When classes resumed in the fall of 1956, City & Country was officially a school for gifted children. Anyone who was already a student could remain (60% of the current students tested at an IQ of 130 or above), but all new students were gifted. At the PTA meeting at the end of the year, George expressed his satisfaction that initiating the Gifted Child Project had not altered the atmosphere of the school. "Relationships and friendships were formed across the lines of giftedness," he said. "Several children were elected in the student government who are not among our gifted ones, and friendships have been formed regardless of the special abilities of the children. This is important, yes, it is essential, and the whole project might stand or fall upon this issue. I believe we would fail if the children would begin to think they are something better as human beings because they are superior academically."

As George listed the work that had been done during the year to implement the program, the carefulness of his planning was clear. First, he had responded to the widespread interest in their work. Harry Passow had written a detailed summary of the Institute's findings and recommendations. The Birmingham Board of Education generously printed copies for distribution to the many schools that requested copies. George presented a course in gifted children during the year, and he noted that the school's parents were greatly outnumbered by teachers, principals and superintendents from area schools.

Second, a robust professional development program had been provided for the teachers. According to Sally Booth, a teacher at the school since 1947, some of the teachers were intimidated by the thought of teaching gifted children (although they'd been teaching them already — just not labeled as such). A few were also still struggling with the idea of elitism and what felt to them like an abandonment of children who would have benefited from the developmentally-based program at the school but would no longer qualify. They were aided with their concerns when Dr. Drews came down from East Lansing for weekly in-service trainings about the characteristics of gifted children, their psychological and motivational differences, and classroom practices such as individualization of teaching reading and math.



*Professional Development seminar at Roeper with George (left) and Annemarie (to his right) and Jo Shotka (to his left). To the right of Annemarie are Elizabeth Drews, Charlotte Whitney, Margaret Littmann, and Bernie Cohen (bowtie). The other teachers are unidentified.*

Dr. Drews became one of Annemarie's closest friends as they conducted a years-long correspondence about humanistic psychology, giftedness, creativity and moral values, and feminism. Highly gifted herself, Dr. Drews had graduated from college at age 18, and earned her PhD in Psychology from the University of Michigan. An early feminist, she was the only full-time scholar on the American Council of Education's Commission on the Education of Women, which ran from 1953 – 1961. She was named to the President's Commission on the Status of Women established by John F. Kennedy, Jr., in 1961. Betty Friedan credited Dr. Drews with providing the intellectual foundations behind the formation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966. Upon Dr. Drews's untimely death in 1976 from a brain tumor at age 61, Annemarie expressed to the school her sadness because "this is a great personal loss, but also a loss to the school, or at least its past, and the gifted child movement in general."

During that first school year, Dr. Irving Siegel, the Director of Research at Merrill-Palmer, also led two sessions on gifted children's understanding of concepts and how it differed from the norm. Indeed, research that Dr. Siegel and Annemarie conducted together demonstrated that gifted children moved through Piaget's developmental stages at a different rate. They published a paper on their work in 1966 in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

The recommendations of the Institute helped sharpen the focus of teaching and curriculum throughout the school. There was a broader

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emphasis on critical thinking, which was a new enough concept that George took pains to explain to the parents that it didn't mean criticizing, but accuracy of thought through distinguishing facts from assumptions. Josephine Shotka, the long-time first-grade teacher, had introduced critical thinking units into her class. She presented a paper on it at a state education convention to great interest, and it was published in a national education journal in 1960.

Electives were expanded to provide a broader and more stimulating curriculum by adding classes in Art, Music, Dance, Shop, Science and Newspapers. Some of these, like Dance, had been after-school classes, but now they were available in more depth during the school day. Professor Ernst Scheyer, a nationally known art history professor at Wayne State University, traveled out from Detroit on a Greyhound bus to teach a Humanities class to the older students in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

By the second year, George's confidence grew, with no more references to "bewildered feelings" and "mysterious darkness." In his end-of-year speech to the PTA in May 1958, he observed, "We became more settled with our project, more sure of ourselves, and knew better where we are going. Our research thanks to Dr. Drews and Mrs. Shotka has taken a noticeable step forward. It begins to shape up more clearly what we can demand of superior students."

During that second year, the school continued to raise its profile and extend its outreach. Helen Barnes was particularly instrumental in those efforts, along with her husband Sidney, a banker at Michigan Credit Union. Their son, Bill, was a student at the school, and over the years Helen and Sidney were stalwart supporters at all levels. After the school waited a year for its non-profit status, Helen made a call to a Washington friend and the tax document arrived two days later. Helen organized a flower show and lecture to raise money for a color film of the school, and led the effort to fund and produce the Gifted Child Project's first brochures. Even when Helen was on vacation in Arizona, she networked for gifted child education and flew out to Los Angeles to catch up with Marie Spottswood, the Institute member who was at Oakwood School. There Helen persuaded actor Robert Ryan, who was a founder of Oakwood, to come visit City and Country

School and try to help develop a national network of schools for gifted children. As for Sidney, when Morris Stein, one of the original three Trustees, wanted to step down in 1959, Sidney took his place, demonstrating the confidence George and Annemarie placed in his advice and perspective. Sidney continued to serve as a Trustee until 1977, when he and Helen (who had also become a Trustee) retired and were named Honorary Board Members.

Thanks to the passionate commitment of academic experts such as Harry Passow and Elizabeth Drews, and parents such as Henry and Susan Moses, Curly and A.J. Levin, Alfred Thomas, Margaret and Sidney Littmann, and Helen and Sidney Barnes, the vision in George and Annemarie's heads took shape and stature in a remarkably short period.

"Time has proven us to be right with the Gifted Child Project," George told the PTA at the end of that second year. "This was particularly highlighted when Sputnik came (October 4, 1957). This has given the education of the talented an enormous life all across the nation. We have found increasing recognition for what we are doing and we have won in general the cooperation of the public schools, whose administrators often refer to us and watch our progress. Time is with us, and the future will justify even more the reorganization of our grade school as a school for gifted children."



*Hollywood actor and Oakwood School founder Robert Ryan (left) visiting Helen Barnes and George Roeper here in January 1958.*