

Modern History of the Eliot School

An Interview with Charlie Sandler

By Bonnie Evans
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The Board of Trustees and staff have made every effort to provide low-cost, high quality instruction to the Boston community... The costs of maintaining the building, providing safe and useful equipment, developing outreach and publicity about our programs and keeping all of the other administrative tasks running smoothly cost well more than the income provided by the tuition from classes.

- Nathaniel J. Young, Jr.

President, Board of Trustees

Letter to Eliot School students and teachers

January 1994

Since its inception in 1676, the Eliot School in Jamaica Plain has been a nonprofit learning institution devoted to enhancing the intellectual integrity of its neighborhood students. The school started as a place of traditional academic learning. The Reverend John Eliot donated the land used for the school and made the stipulation that it be used “for [the] teaching and instructing of the children of that end of town (together with such negroes or Indians as may or shall come to said school).” In the beginning, neighborhood residents paid teachers in bushels of corn. Later, to insure attendance, a small tuition was put in place. Despite tuition revenue, the school’s non-profit status has not only remained, it has been a major force in shaping the curriculum and mission of the school.

In the 1870s, the Eliot School made a break from the Boston Public School system, gaining freedom in curriculum design. After gaining independence, the Eliot School shifted away from academia towards practical trades and skilled arts. Classes were open to anyone, but mostly ran for adults interested in practical learning such as woodworking. These classes acted not only as a creative outlet for city-dwellers in the thick of the Industrial Revolution, but perhaps also as vocational training.

As the 20th century wore on, practical learning classes continued at the Eliot School. By the mid-60s, woodworking and cabinetmaking had heavy enrollment in adult evening classes and Saturday children’s classes. At this time, Herb Forsell was the superintendent of the school. The current superintendent, Charlie Sandler, describes Herb as “a very pleasant and smart gentleman... He had a lot of patience. He was very intelligent.” It was Herb’s devotion to the school and connections to vocational teachers that helped bring in new programs and teachers.

Charlie Sandler was one such teacher. Formerly employed at the Sarah Greenwood School, Charlie was recruited to teach nights at the Eliot School by Forsell, who also worked for the Boston Public Schools. Charlie was 32 when he started working for the Eliot School in 1966. “I did adult classes to start, for the first two months, and then I taught nights and... children’s classes. Mostly woodworking.” Charlie fell in love with the Eliot School and became active in the school’s small community.

When he started working at the Eliot School, Charlie lived in Hyde Park, on the Mattapan line. He would commute to the Sarah Greenwood School on Glenway St. in Dorchester, but stop by the Eliot School in Jamaica Plain before starting his workday. He says, "I used to swing by here at five o'clock in the morning to check the building, then I went to school." His self-appointed duties were to "make sure that everything was off with the lights, make sure that nothing was wrong with the building. Then I'd make sure it was locked up the way it should be and go on my way to school. Then I'd check on it on my way home." In this way, his relationship with the school began to grow.

Forsell had been superintendent of the Eliot School for over 40 years, but was approaching his late 80's. When Charlie Sandler came on the scene, Forsell began to groom him to take over as the school's superintendent. Charlie explains, "Herb would bring me to board meetings. He introduced me to the board and I'd sit in the board meetings until he appointed me superintendent and the board approved me." Charlie explains that it was his dedication to the school that caught Herb's attention. That, and he was younger than everyone else, and seemed willing to stick around a long time.

Twelve years after he started teaching at the Eliot School, Charlie became the superintendent. He fell in love with the school because of "the people that come to the school. They give a lot of satisfaction. They have the person-to-person teaching with the students that came here. And even the young children that came here were excellent young gentlemen."

By the mid-1970s, the dynamics of the school started changing. More women enrolled, and interest in leisurely crafting increased. Charlie explains that "it changed very much. In fact a few times we had more women than men [after the 60s ended]. And it's also when we introduced upholstery. Well, we introduced more programs. I brought an upholstery program into the school."

The upholstery program was not only Charlie's brainchild; its sole existence was due to his dedication. The equipment used in those upholstery classes was salvaged by Charlie from Madison Park High School, a vocational school in the heart of Boston. He explains, "At one time, Madison Park was dismantling their sewing classes. And they had beautiful... brand new sewing machines up there." A teacher at the MPHS in the early 80s, Charlie knew about the extra equipment and the failed sewing program that was being abandoned. Soon he saw his opportunity. He explains, "At Madison Park, they were throwing sewing machines in the dumpster. And I was crawling in the dumpster *even in my suit*. I dragged the machines up and brought them up and carried them over here to the Eliot School. I could only carry so many. So I got four or five of them over here before they got rid of the rest of them." The almost-new machines were put to use immediately at the Eliot School and upholstery became one of the most liked classes. Later, in a January 4, 1992 letter from Charlie to James Watson, Headmaster at MPHS, Charlie requested a permanent loan of an additional 6 upholstery machines. The request was granted and the program continued.

The upholstery program has grown in size since the new equipment was brought in. Only ten years after its inception, class size increased dramatically. Charlie explains that teacher Paul DeVito is partly responsible for the success of the program. "He started up with about 4 or 5 people... Paul was building up to 6 or 7 people, and people were complaining to where we had to bring in an extra instructor to help him out. He was teaching about 16 people in the class and that's too many." Due to the success of Paul's

teaching, more classes have been added. Charlie explains, “Paul made upholstery so prevalent that we also run daytime courses here by another instructor. That instructor’s name is Seymour Beckford.”

The standards of the Eliot School ensure that students not only learn a new skill, they become immersed in the quality and standards that go along with that skill, allowing students to be more educated when purchasing or selling furniture.

One class that taught students how to make valuable work was a carving class taught by an instructor named Peter Johnson. Charlie describes him as a mean teacher, loved by all his students. Charlie explains, “He hated women. And everybody in his class was a woman. But he was an excellent teacher.” Charlie continues, “He didn’t think [women] could learn carving and he wanted to teach his way. He only wanted it done his way. And they had other ways of doing it. He would correct them every time they didn’t do it his way... They still came because he was such a craftsman. The work was impeccable.” The carving program had been in place for many years at the Eliot School. In fact, a carving made by one of the female students was displayed at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. This piece still hangs in the entryway of the school today.

Another class that was met with great success was the gilding class taught by Nils Johnson. Charlie boasts that people “came from all over the world to take his class... We had a woman that flew in every Tuesday night to take the class from New York. Took a cab, go over the school, take the course, take the cab back to the airport and flew back to New York.” Interest in the gilding class was prompted after The South End News ran a feature article on Nils in late 1993. Nils had a physical disability, Charlie explains, and had to walk with crutches. Despite this condition, his work was top notch and he was considered one of the foremost gilding teachers in America. Charlie says, “[Nils] could tell you an antique, when it was made, and who made it. [Students] came from New Hampshire and Maine where they do all the antique work and fix the antiques. The class was popular.” Though Nils retired in 1995 and passed away in 2004, his legacy lives on at the Eliot School. One of the administrative offices has been dedicated the “Nils Johnson Room,” and many of his students are still active in gilding, including Michael Gleason, of local business Gleason, Hendricks & Devine, and Nancy Dick-Atkinson, who apprenticed under Nils and teaches at the school today.

Around the time class enrollment in gilding and upholstery was booming, technological advances led to better administrative work. Former director Helen Hummel wrote in a September 2, 1993 Board Report, “I got a push button phone, lamps, and the essential coffee machine at various yard sales and we have gotten desks and file cabinets donated.” Prior to these miniscule but affordable changes, the Eliot School had to find creative and resourceful ways to run administrative tasks. Taking advantage of his dual positions as superintendent for the Eliot School and teacher in the Boston school system, Charlie employed the shop students he worked with in a mutually beneficial arrangement. He explains, “I had to get the printing done to advertise the programs. And the way I got the printing done was I worked at a vocational school and they had printing, so I used to write out the schedules and they would print them. It used to cost us [the Eliot School] something like \$60 a year to print. All we had to do was pay for the paper and ink.” In this way, Boston Public School students had a customer to practice their skills on, and the Eliot School had free printing labor.

Charlie also used his resources for professional assistance. Charlie has a lengthy resume, making him qualified in the field of vocational education. After many years as a technical teacher, he says, “then I became a guidance counselor. Then for 18 years I was a vocational guidance counselor... I had my masters. I started that part time. You won’t believe this, but I used to take part time five courses at once. While I was teaching and while I was doing work on the side, I did five classes.” Despite his extensive background, one thing he never mastered was typing. So again, he reached out to students of the BPS and enlisted a young woman to type for him. He explains, “I was a tradesman. I could not type... So I was working at Dorchester High School and I went to the business class and I found a young lady that was very good at typing. And I paid her a dollar a page, so I wrote everything out by hand and she typed everything in.”

The associations with students at the vocational schools allowed Charlie to become fully immersed in both his position as a teacher with the BPS and the superintendent of the Eliot School. He says of the Eliot School, “It became part of me. It was like my second home. Actually, my wife said it was my first home because I was here more than I was home.” Rather than resent the school for occupying her husband’s time, Mrs. Sandler became active in supporting it. Charlie admits, “It’s because I had a wife like I did that I could do it.” At times he would enlist his whole family in helping him to organize mailing lists and stuff envelopes. He explains, “My wife and I would sit on the parlor floor and we’d both lick stamps. She was licking stamps and sorting mail on the floor. And my kids too. I’d spread it all out and say we have to file this and fold this.” This was before the advent of word processors and online database coordination. Charlie would also take all of the bookkeeping and scheduling home on the weekends and run it all with paper and pencil.

Now, the school has two fully equipped administrative offices in the back of the wood shop. The Nils Johnson room, combined with an adjacent office, allows for more practical administrative work. Though the business end is no longer a family affair, the intimacy is not lost. As Charlie was being interviewed, and when the offices are open for business, the sounds of table saws buzzing, children laughing, and students learning float in through the office doors. The new set-up, along with expanded staff and the School Partnership Program, has proved extremely successful for the school. Charlie boasts, “[Our new staff] has expanded this place to almost its capacity. I’ve never seen it so big. Children’s classes, adult art, woodworking, upholstery.”

Today’s success has allowed the school to ensure it follows the Reverend Eliot’s original stipulation that the school be all-inclusive. A general information packet with class schedules from 1985 states, “The Eliot School is desirous of serving all who may be interested in its courses. Classes are open to men and women; and some are conducted for boys and girls. The Eliot School admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin.” Now more than ever, the school reaches all kinds of people. Through the School Partnership Program, art classes are reaching over 1,100 students in the Boston Public Schools, many of whom have never had access to this kind of learning before. In exposing new students to different kinds of learning, the school is succeeding in enhancing the intellectual integrity of all of Boston’s students.