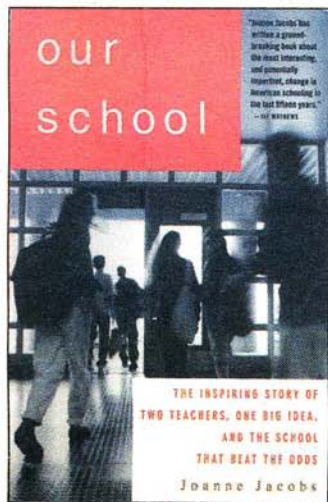


Title Pages

A monthly section on local books and authors, edited by Don Kazak



"Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea, and the School that Beat the Odds" by Joanne Jacobs; Palgrave Macmillan; 240 pp.; \$24.95

by Jennifer Deltz Berry

In 1999, when Silicon Valley was at the height of the Internet boom, two San Jose high school teachers decided that if everyone else was launching start-ups, they might as well give it a shot too. Only it wasn't an Internet company they wanted to build; it was a better high school.

At the time, Greg Lippman was 30 and Jennifer Andaluz was 27. The two teachers had been outspoken activists for

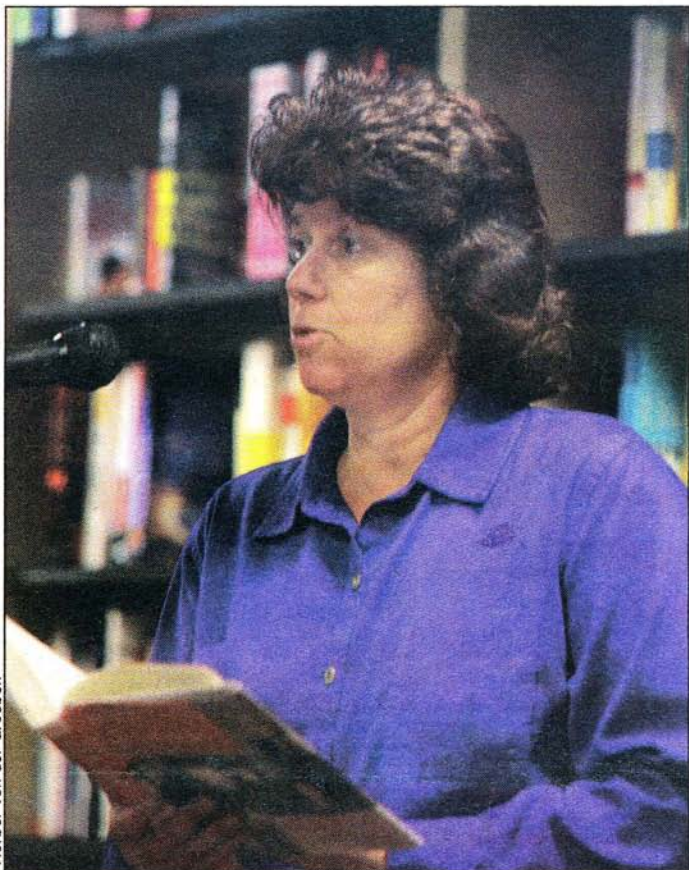
change in the large public high school where they worked, and both felt their ability to make a difference in students' lives was hampered by the entrenched way of doing things in the traditional public school system. So they decided to take a risk. They both quit their jobs. They relied on spouses, savings, or loans to get by, and threw themselves into the effort of building a high school from the ground up.

The result was the launching of Downtown College Prep in San Jose, a small charter high school that opened with a class of 100 ninth-graders in 2000.

Joanne Jacobs' book, "Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea, and the School that Beat the Odds" is a fascinating look at a year in the life of this start-up school, which sought to give a second chance to students failing in traditional public schools.

Jacobs, a longtime Palo Alto resident who had been an award-winning education writer and columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, had been intrigued by developments in the charter school movement. She had been following along with interest as leaders from Silicon Valley and elsewhere pressured the California Legislature to loosen up restrictions that would allow more charter schools to open across

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Education writer Joanne Jacobs reads from her book, "Our School," at a recent appearance at Books Inc. in Mountain View.

Norbert von der Groeben

'Our School'

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the state.

As she explains, a charter school is technically a public school, offering education to students free of charge and drawing funding from taxpayer dollars. And yet, because charters are freed up from most of the rules and restrictions that govern most public schools, they operate more like private schools. Curious to understand how the theory behind charter schools played out in practice, Jacobs quit her job and spent a year inside a charter school to see how it would work.

She sat in on classes, tutored a student, attended expulsion committee meetings and parent meetings and interviewed teachers, parents and students at length.

The result of her year's immersion into this school and its development is "Our School," an informative, balanced, well-reported and well-researched effort.

Jacobs includes the history of how charter schools evolved in California and a discussion of the conflicting data about how successful charter schools have been compared to regular public schools in the quality of education they provide. At the same time, "Our School" is simply good storytelling. It is a suspenseful and compelling read with characters who come alive on the pages and have you rooting for them by the end.

As Jacobs described, Lippman and Andaluz seemed to have everything they would need to be successful in their efforts to launch a charter school: smarts, dedication, stubbornness and ingenuity. Lippman held degrees from Princeton and Stanford, studied school administration, and worked for a short time in a charter school, learning the ropes. Andaluz caught Lippman's attention for being among the most feisty and outspoken of the teachers at the public high school where they taught together.

The goals Lippman and Andaluz set for their school were ambitious by any standards. In recruiting the inaugural class of ninth-graders, they targeted the most difficult students to educate. Most of them were Latino children lacking basic skills in English. Most came from poor families where the parents had had little or no formal education. Many of them were earning Ds and Fs or repeating ninth grade.

Faced with a climate in which only about 60 percent of Hispanics graduate high school and only 10 percent graduate from college, Lippman and Andaluz set their sites high: their goal was to have every one their students accepted into a four-year college by time they graduated high school.

And yet, as Jacobs describes, Lippman and Andaluz deeply underestimated the challenges they would face. They had expected their students to be behind, but hadn't realized just how far behind. Many were reading at a fourth- through sixth-grade level. The idea of pushing students into algebra was soon scrapped when they realized that most entering students could not do simple fractions.

And there were plenty of logisti-

cal and financial headaches as well. The per-pupil funding they received didn't cover the cost of a facility to house the school itself. The San Jose district had no building to offer them, and in Silicon Valley rental prices had blown sky-high.

They finally had to make due with a jury-rigged set-up: a few rooms in the back of a Methodist church were converted into classrooms using curtains as dividers. The other half the school was set up across the street at the YWCA. Students would have to be walked or bussed between the two buildings when they switched periods.

Lippman describes the first year of operation as "collective insanity." But the experience was summed up for them even better when a student misread the phrase "ride the carousel," as "ride the carrot salad." Turning their frustrations into humor, a teacher suggested printing t-shirts with what would become the school's unofficial motto: "Downtown College Purgatory: Ride the Carrot Salad."

Downtown College Prep offered small classes, an extended school day, individual tutoring, rigorous homework, and a strict code of conduct, including school uniforms. Students were monitored closely. Absences were followed up on and there were phone calls and visits to parents if grades were low or home-

work wasn't being turned in.

Despite the school's rocky start, things were settling into place. With strict rules, high standards, committed teachers and an openness to making changes, they began to see real improvement in most of their students.

Jacobs returned to Downtown College Prep three years later to find out what became of the inaugural class.

She found, not surprisingly, that the school did not work for all students. There were dropouts and transfers and students who were forced to leave for breaking too many rules. But she found that Lippman and Andaluz had kept the promise they made to parents and students who chose their school: Every student who graduated from Downtown College Prep had earned admission into a four-year college.

The message Jacobs leaves readers with as they finish this book is one that is echoed in her introduction: "There are lessons to be learned from (Downtown College Prep's) successes and failures that can be applied to traditional schools, as well as charters. Above all, there is hope." ■

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