

PEOPLE



Julia Putnam

By Amy Kuras

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A truism about Detroit is that it's the world's biggest small town – everyone is one degree of separation, at most, from anyone else. Some people find it stifling, but most of us find it at least amusing and even comforting to know that we're part of a larger ecosystem, working and playing and creating in this never-boring city.

Project



Boggs Educational Center

boggsschool.org



4141 Mitchell St.
Detroit, Michigan 48207

But how much of that Mayberry R.F.D. vibe translates to actual community – to a true, intentional interdependence on each other and the place where we live? The [James And Grace Lee Boggs School](#) aims to educate the next generation of Detroiters in building exactly that.

The school, which serves children in kindergarten through fifth grades, takes a place-based approach to learning with the ultimate focus being the community surrounding the school. That means directly involving the surrounding community in the education of the students, and encouraging them to really think about why things are the way they are.

The school is named for James and Grace Lee Boggs. Nationally-known authors and activists, Grace and her late husband Jimmy have impacted the culture of the city in true grassroots fashion, including founding the Detroit Summer youth program and the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership. Grace

Lee Boggs has been a role model and hero for several generations of activists in Detroit and beyond, and was the nucleus around which the group that eventually created the school was formed.

Principal Julia Putnam was one of a team of educators who met at Grace Lee Boggs's home (which has long served as something of a clubhouse for activists) to think about how education could be done differently. Those talks began in 2002, and led, eventually, to the formation of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Education Center. The school opened in fall of 2013 with grades K-4 and next year will go through sixth grade; their plan has been to add another grade every year until they get to grade 12. She has been the school's principal since it opened.

One thing that's been a pleasant surprise, Putnam says, is just how quickly they've been embraced by the surrounding community and have created a supportive, nurturing environment for both the children at the school and their families. Parents

have confided in her that the school helped them weather crises, because they knew at least their children were in a caring environment during the school day. "We're not saving kids," she says. "They come to us so sweet and smart and wonderful, and we feel lucky to be able to share the kids with their families."

Another highlight of the year was the publication of a book of student writing accompanied by illustrations from Dave Eggers. The Detroit chapter of Eggers's national 826 kids' writing program runs an after-school writing club, and the students made a chapbook of their writing. Eggers was quite taken with it, and would read the stories to his own children. He's always wanted to illustrate a children's book, and chose the Boggs School book as the project to make it happen. The celebration when the book was published was an absolutely delicious experience, Putnam says. "It took a lot of relationships we had been building over a lifetime as educators to get the school open, and we are continuing to build them, which opens up these wonderful opportunities for students. It's magical how that happened."

Detroit parents are always looking for the right school environment and will go far to get it, which could lead to a temptation to let the school grow faster than it should. But Putnam says they know the kind of community they want to create and adding one grade a year, limited to a class of 24 children, is exactly the right way to achieve that.

Next year will mark their first foray into middle school. They're thinking a lot about how to translate the "whole child" approach they take with younger children to older kids who are beginning to navigate who they will be in the world. "One of things we noticed is there are lots of really vibrant elementary schools, and then it seems like the spirit of celebrating kids' work seemed to fade," she says. "We want to avoid that phenomenon – kids are kids, and so often [middle school and high school students] stop being treated like kids."

At the Boggs School, they want to graduate people with grit, a sense of mastery, good health, and an ability to do community work. "Grace Lee Boggs has always taught that the purpose of education and one of the ways to turn the city around is to use the energies of young people in a true community-based school, and use the problems and assets of the community as the curriculum," Putnam says.

All photos by Marvin Shaouni.

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