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# THE VILLAGE SCHOOL

GREAT NECK, NEW YORK

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## AN EVALUATION-DOCUMENTATION

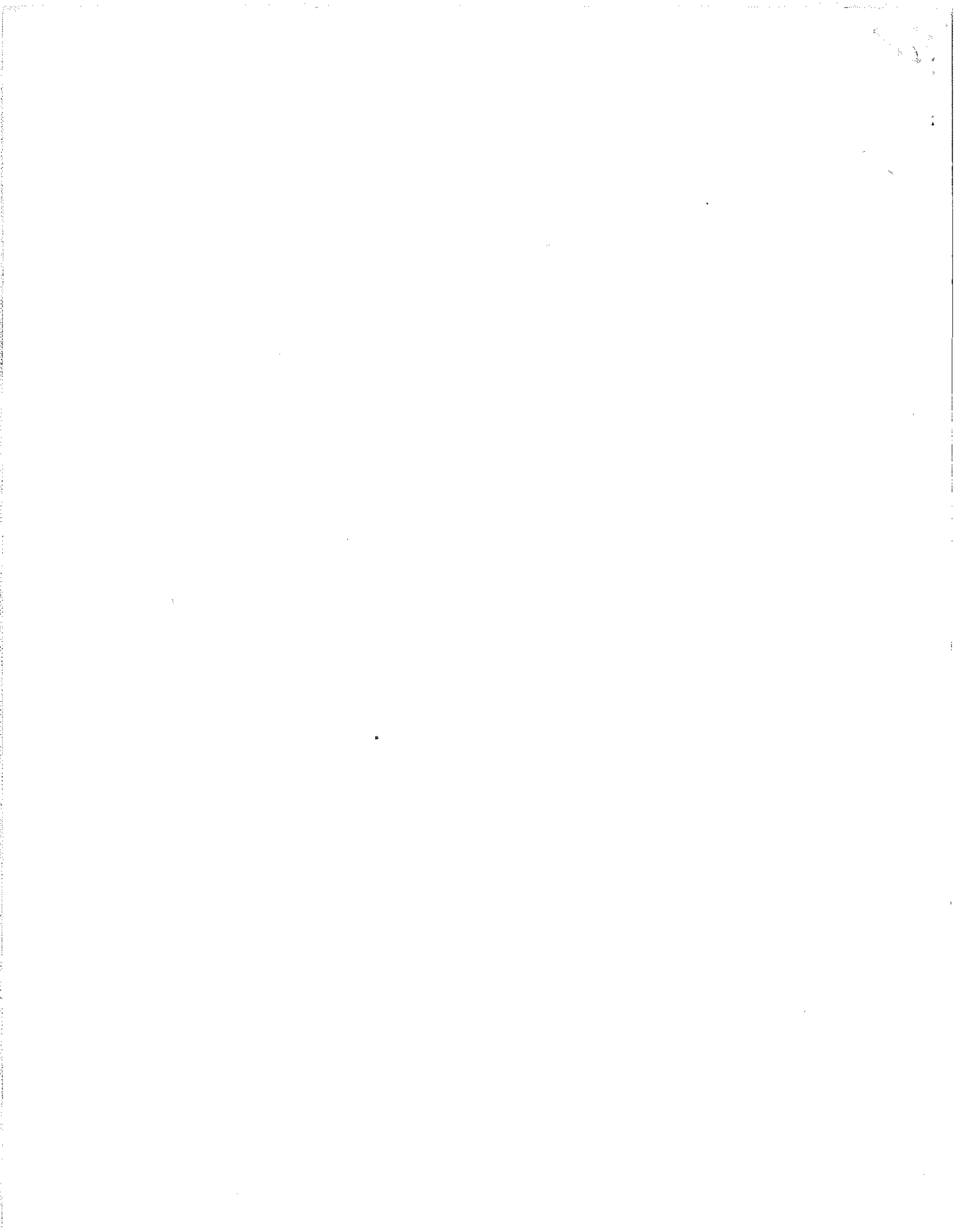
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**HOFSTRA**  
UNIVERSITY



## INTRODUCTION

"The Village School is a special place, a real school for people who want more. It is not just for bad students, or good ones, or weird ones, or artsy ones, it cannot be categorized. But I, and many others, are living proof that it can provide a unique, a better, education for those who want it."

Keith McGowan

The Village School is, indeed, "a special place," as both the words and the experience of Keith McGowan testify. Keith left V.S. this year, at the end of his junior year in high school, as one of several Village students to take their senior year in high school as college freshmen. Keith will enter Brown University in September. He came to the Village School as the third member of his family to do so, and he is clearly one of the school's success stories.

The Village School is an improbable sort of institution. Its home is a rambling two buildings which used to be a church, and which had reached an advanced stage of dilapidation before the refurbishing began this summer. It is likely to be messy and its inhabitants are casual, informal, and often astounding. To the uninformed visitor it must sometimes appear unorganized disarray. Patient observers are rewarded, however, with access to the elaborate though informal and largely unwritten structures which support and guide much of the activity taking place at V.S. One can identify a conventional school as to type by a look at its curriculum, table of organization, and regulations; not so with an alternative school. Its lifeblood is in its ethos and culture which remain largely unrecorded and unfold only slowly to outsiders.

To the uninformed visitor, there's a lot of hanging out and permissiveness at V.S. To the informed observer, much more direction and control become evident. But it is a control system far different from that of most schools. Its structure does not reside primarily in written rules and sanctions; it is expressed instead through the natural authority of adults, or in 'chance' teacher-student exchanges, or in conversations which may include several seemingly spontaneous questions a teacher puts to a student. There are occasional clashes, but staff deliberately try to render them minimally confrontational. As Lisa

Gardner put it in her graduation address, Village School teachers have mastered the ability to make the word "no" sound good.

And V.S. is committed to the principle of the maximum amount of individual responsibility for each student. Sometimes the estimates are off and a youngster cannot handle the freedom. There comes a day of accounting though: when his peers and advisor may decide that he has not earned credit and must repeat the quarter. The argument of whether such failure ought to be permitted -- or whether instead, requirements ought to be so structured as to deny a youngster the chance to fail -- is age-old. The conventional school strategy is to aid by sufficient structure to block access to failure. Village pursues an alternative strategy -- which is less confining and quite deliberately places the responsibility for success with the student. Is it wise? That is arguable, of course. Perhaps one of its strongest arguments lies in the logical difficulty of staying away from the water until one has learned to swim.

In any event, its nature and ambiance make the Village School a place of excitement and enormous possibility. A transcript from the conventional high school is ordinarily a formal sheet listing the courses, grades, and units which symbolize four years of work. Village School transcripts are essays in which students summarize their own course work and projects, and growth. The final, culminating senior transcript is an opus which can approach 25 or 30 pages. They suggest something of the vast possibilities the school makes available.

Some of this year's transcripts documented courses taken not only at Village School, and at North and South High Schools, but also at an array of colleges and universities. Some show internships -- one, for example, in biochemistry at Long Island Jewish Hospital, another in writing for the local paper, The Great Neck Record. Others show extended volunteer activity -- becoming a "grandchild" to a homebound senior citizen, working with dyslexic college students, tutoring handicapped elementary school youngsters.

Village is a place of tremendous possibility, where despite a small staff arrangements can be made for studying virtually anything. It is

part of the appeal of V.S. that the lines sometimes blur. As one of this year's transcripts put it,

At the Village School it is sometimes hard to define an extra-curricular activity. Being involved in projects, clubs, and other school-related but non-curricular programs is not only common place, but it is taken for granted. Going recruiting or being a mime on Children's Day are considered part of a V.S. student's responsibilities.

Thus, students have done science experiments (including one in test-taker performance which took prizes); have formed their own computer software corporation and produced, among other things, instructional programs for use in Great Neck's elementary schools; have taught regular classes for fifth-graders and for their V.S. peers; have helped in the making of a film that took prizes; have done cartoons for a children's book; have produced a slide show for presentation at other schools; and have formally represented their school, as the only student representatives to the Great Neck United Parent Teacher Council and the Great Neck Board of Education.

Learning about one's self is also a part of Village School. Here, too, the opportunities and possibilities seem unlimited. The sort of sophistication within the grasp of those who reach is evident from this statement from a graduating student's transcript:

It has been theorized that there are two ways a mind can work. Some people store all their information in neat little cubby holes, and access it in an almost computerlike manner, drawing what is commonly called "logical" conclusions. The modus operandi of the creative person's mind forces them to go looping through all sorts of weird connections and cluttered crevices to reach the same point. This describes me really well.

Another senior, looking back upon his Village school experience, reports

I have learned responsibility... In certain cases, the lesson learned was that if I didn't take my responsibilities seriously, no one would take me seriously either.

And finally,

In my ninth grade year...I did not take school seriously. The Village School changed this for me, and now, school is a top priority on my list. My standards are high...and I believe I can operate in any school situation successfully. I have accomplished a great deal in high school, academically, personally, and socially, and can honestly say that I am proud of the person I am.

Village School is, then, a school of enormous opportunity and possibility for adolescents to begin to realize themselves as scholars, producers, and young adults. It offers no guarantees -- but its accomplishment with and for young human beings is often remarkable.