



COURTESY PHOTO

Students work diligently at Sparhawk's School's second campus the first year it opened.

The flight of the Sparhawk

Now in its 10th year, local private school continues to grow

By **CHRISTOPHER BOLICK**
Staff Writer

The seven-acre Sparhawk School campus on Elm Street in Amesbury, a cluster of three aged buildings chinned up around a small grassy quad, has the veteran look and feel of a long-time private school.

Yet in actuality, the Sparhawk is but a fledgling. When doors open on Sept. 2 for the fall semester, the school will be just beginning its 10th year of operation.

In less than a decade, Sparhawk founder Louise Stilphen has watched her dream mature into a vibrant reality. Each passing year has brought continued growth for the institution, with a rapid addition of students, classes, teachers, grade levels and even buildings.

"Since I was 8 years old, I've wanted to start a school," Stilphen said of the Sparhawk's origin. As a young girl, she attended a small start-up in Boston of a similar mold. "What I've brought is an attitude of personal attention, of knowing the individual student. Now it just keeps rolling along, and I love it."

Starting with 11 students at her house down the road from the Elm Street campus in 1994, Stilphen has piloted the Sparhawk School through an explosive series of expansions. There are now almost 30 teachers and about 150 students in kindergarten through grade 12

at two separate campuses.

The Elm Street campus, formed in 1996 at a single small farmhouse there, gained two more century-old buildings in 1999 to house its blooming enrollment. (Both structures, including a four-gabled 1872 brick building, were donated and trucked-in as part of a local historic preservation effort.)

Last year, a new Upper School campus was created at the Memorial School building in Salisbury for the high school level.

With a teacher/student ratio of 1:7 at the high school, and about 1:12 at the lower school, an emphasis on personalized attention has been consciously built-in at Sparhawk. Most classes are structured around multi-age groupings, which Stilphen said allows students to "seek their own level, intellectually and socially."

The academic curriculum is innovative as well, with college-like semesters, broken into three distinct parts, devoted to a single theme supported by a variety of course offerings. High school students undergo an intensive two-week core-academic period, followed by 13 weeks of "thematic coursework" based on the skills

learned in the first session, and end the term with a "semester synthesis" and public presentation.

Last year at the high school, for example, students studied the Middle Ages through the Renaissance for the spring semester. They painted frescos, listened to Renaissance music, acted out plays, read Shakespeare and other literature and studied economics and philosophy from the period. Some students even participated in a two-day, hands-on blacksmithing workshop.

This year, the first semester theme will be "Indigenous Cultures," followed by "Imperialism and Expansion" in the second half of the year. There are 26 course offerings for the first semester alone, ranging from "Origins of Asian Religion, Mythology and Philosophy" to "Folktales of the World: Socratic Seminar" to "Guns, Germs and Steel."

"The idea is to create an experience so total that students have a comprehensive understanding of the period," Stilphen explained. "Multiple modes of communication are incredibly vital."

"Some people think the school is a 1960s free-for-all, but it's not at all,"

she continued. "It's a serious academic purpose; but with such small numbers (of students), we don't need to run things the same way. All humanities are taught in an interdisciplinary fashion from the 2nd grade on up."

Such individualized student learning comes at a price, but Stilphen said she tries to make the school as affordable as possible. Each year, she sets the Lower School tuition based on the going rate for local day care schools; to pay for staffing at the high school, which has a smaller teacher/student ratio, she charges more.

"If someone chooses a private school education instead of a public school, it should not cost more than day care," Stilphen said. "I want to maintain the realm of possibility." Tuition for kindergarten through grade five is about \$9,000 this year, \$9,890 for grades six through eight, and \$12,900 for the high school. Parents pay on a weekly basis.

Stilphen said she was plagued by hesitations when she first decided to start the Sparhawk School, as she had no building, no money, no real precedent to follow. But she made the leap — small at it was, working out of her house — and the rest has followed.

"My favorite quote is by George Bernard Shaw, who said, 'The true joy of life is being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one,'" Stilphen said. "It's a mighty purpose spending my life this way."

"The idea is to create an experience so total that students have a comprehensive understanding of the period. Multiple modes of communication are incredibly vital."

— Louise Stilphen, founder of the Sparhawk School