

## Seeding the Future

One Tigard teacher's dream for a public charter school without boundaries

By Naomi Inman

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Debi Lorence wants desperately to catch kids.

It was by her best friend's deathbed that Lorence and Michelle (Mitch as she was known) began to envision an innovative school to serve students of all learning styles, as well as Michelle's own soon-to-be motherless children. They dreamed in terms of "catching the kids"—many of them boys—who were falling through the cracks of traditional education or who were just plain disinterested in showing up.

"One of the things we would dream about, during her hospital days, when I was nannying her kids full-time was, 'What would be the perfect school?' 'How would you catch a kid?'" Lorence recalls.

"While she was really sick we started to develop the farm concept. We thought, 'What would really capture little boys?' Because little boys are the ones that are lost." She points to the extraordinary number of boys in her school district. In her daughter's first grade class of 26 children, 21 of them are boys.

Maybe Michelle found strength in the middle of her physical pain with a numbing dose of hope for children—hers and others. Together they began penciling out the vision for opening a school with a working farm, and integrating a hands-on learning environment with a rigorous curriculum. They dreamed of seeding the future with scores of children who would be academically and culturally literate while learning a love for the land and their environment.

"On her deathbed I was telling her, 'Don't worry about it. It's going to happen. I'm going forward,'" says Lorence. At the time she only intended to start a private school. "I didn't know anything about charter schools."

In September 1998, at the still girlish age of 32, Michelle lost her battle with lymphoma cancer.

### **ROLLING THE BALL UP A VERY BIG HILL**

Between Michelle's death and January of 1999 Lorence started calling around and exploring the idea of starting up a private school.

Then came the headlines.

The Oregon legislature was embroiled in the charter school debate (see Brainstorm Dec/Jan 1999, "Shootout at the Charter School Corral"). When the legislation, SB100, passed in May of 1999, Lorence noticed the headlines. That was all the motivation she needed to serve the kids she was really after—the public school population who couldn't afford a private school.

So she started the ball rolling.

Uphill.

Being the first one in her Tigard-Tualatin School District (TTSD) to build bridges with the school board for a charter school was a big hill. Sometimes the very mention of the words “charter schools” causes eyes to glaze over. Very smart people—school board members and teachers—tend to scratch their heads and look perplexed. There’s the “we’ve never done it before” obstacle. What, essentially, is a charter school? Why would you want to do it? What’s the motivation?

“Many people have asked me why I don’t consider starting a private school. But the whole reason I’m doing this is so every child can come,” says Lorence.

Lorence is the type of person you can’t say no to, because her love and passion to catch kids in the early school years drives her like a locomotive through a series of roadblocks, long, dark tunnels, and even a few derailings.

Ask anyone who knows Lorence, from advocate to adversary, and you will hear the same story: she’s a driven lady who just won’t quit. But why?

“It was a personal conviction.”

Lorence could see the day coming when so many families were sending their kids to private schools that dollars for public schools would dwindle. Lorence strongly supports public schools and sees charter schools as a way to improve and build on their strengths. Bringing the opposing sides of the public charter school discussion together became nearly full time work for Lorence.

## **LEARNING EQUATIONS**

On one side of the equation is the official stance of the Oregon Democratic Party’s 2002 legislative agenda: the anti-charter stance.

On the other side is the increasing number of Democrat Party members, public school officials, public school superintendents, and teachers who recognize the potential for innovative schools to pull in disenfranchised families and renew taxpayers’ vote-of-confidence, literally, for tax dollars for schools. MITCH’s own acting principle for the 2002-03 school year will be Jim Thomas, the Superintendent of the Scio School District which already has two charter schools up and running.

Positive working relationships with school districts is the duty of every charter school pioneer, even though it is tempting at times to become frustrated, if not downright angry with the stalling tactics.

State Superintendent Stan Bunn, whose legally defined role it is to provide leadership in the charter process, has been criticized for his lack of participation. It’s old news. During the charter school legislative session, BrainstormNW reported, “Bunn was unwilling to talk about what elements of charters, if any, he would oppose or support,” (Dec/Jan 99). He hasn’t made any promises he didn’t keep about charter schools.

Nevertheless, public charter schools are happening—and succeeding. And districts, which are new to the process, are warming to the idea that charter school supporters mostly desire to support public education and will eventually bring in more dollars.

Jolaine Davis, former public school teacher for nine years and current board member for MITCH, is resolute and optimistic. “Charter schools aren’t here to attack the public school system; we’re here to enhance it. TTSD is starting to see that we’re here to help. There are a lot of wonderful people in the district and they’re starting to warm up.”

Lorence explains her passion this way. “Even if I’m only able to run 200 kids through MITCH charter school every year, there’s that many kids who will leave our district that will already be entrepreneurs. They’ll have self esteem, and be invested in the public school system and grow up and fight to make sure public education and charter schools stay alive.”

It’s part of what she is counting on to happen in her district, and statewide. Every new charter school can influence hundreds of voting families.

### **OUT STANDING IN THE FIELD**

MITCH charter school is still in negotiations to operate its first year at the well-equipped, new facility at the First Baptist Church of Tigard. But Lorence’s dream for implementing agriculture and entrepreneurship into the classroom is what excites many parents about MITCH. After hearing out Lorence’s vision during a congregational meeting, one parent who was initially against the MITCH charter school left the meeting having registered his children.

In a sense, the farming piece of Lorence’s vision has been temporarily demoted. “When I first introduced this farm idea, the district and a lot of other people were laughing at it. They were saying, ‘Come on Debi, grow up!’ In April ‘01, at the first meeting with the school board, I got very puzzled looks and questions about ‘How are you going to use the farm to educate kids?’”

“I asked them, ‘Is it the farm aspect that’s holding you up?’” she narrates, “and they said, ‘Absolutely. It’s really the farm thing that’s holding us up.’ So I said, ‘Okay, the farm is gone. Now let’s talk about curriculum.’”

As soon as she talked about the Core Knowledge Curriculum (see Sidebar) they had fewer objections. “They thought the farm idea was too hokie—that I couldn’t prove children and animals and responsibility and learning were connected; so I made the curriculum my sticking point.”

While curriculum is her sticking point, for many parents, farming is her selling point.

The long-term goal for MITCH Charter School is to locate on a farm that will fully integrate the environment, curriculum and instructional strategies to provide an educational experience not traditionally available to students in the district.

The statistics that surfaced in Lorence’s marketing study of TTSD were an added shove to pursuing her dream. She noticed the 43 percent passing rate in the district and wondered, what’s up with the other 57 percent? In addition, she noticed that 30 percent of the kids were dropping out of the district altogether.

In her research, Debi also looked at the nation’s top schools and noticed they operate with a four-day, 32-hour instructional week, Monday through Thursday from 8-4. She looked at it and thought, “God, that’s it! Friday’s are my farm program under Learning

Adventures.” Learning Adventures is the 501©(3) non-profit Lorence established to support the MITCH curriculum with before and after school activities.

“Special Friday” activities will be structured around a quality curriculum and include everything from farming and entrepreneurship to Music and Tae-Kwon-Do. Activities will support the curriculum and be hands-on. The separate but connected program on Fridays will offer a package deal, but more importantly, it will be open to all Tigard-Tualatin students, not only those enrolled in MITCH.

The integration of the farm is where Lorence’s dream comes alive.

“The agricultural piece is what excited me the most,” says board member Davis. “It will take a while to implement, but once it is working I see the possibilities as being endless in working with the community and giving the kids ownership in their school.”

Community ownership is Lorence’s passion. “I don’t want it to look like a school. Kids don’t take ownership in schools that look like institutions. They take ownership in things that look like homes.”

The plan is for the exterior to appear like a 1930s-style farmhouse and barn. Inside the “farmhouse” would be modern, up to code classrooms. Inside the barn would be a gymnasium, and of course—barn stuff. It would be landscaped to typify a Tigard farm of the 30s with rows of berry fields, potato fields, flowers, and small animals like chickens and goats.

Even TTSD Associate Superintendent Maryalice Russell is sympathetic to the idea. “The farming aspect will supplement and enhance the MITCH curriculum by building on real world experiences,” says Russell. “I see it as a very positive addition, and in fact a draw for many students.”

## **A COMMUNITY BARN RAISING**

Lorence hopes to energize the community to make full use of the farm for Scouts, special events, or after school care. She hopes for a place for kids to belong during winter, spring and summer breaks. Says Lorence, “There will always be something going on for kids at the farm.”

New teachers at MITCH are already making plans to attend OSU’s Summer Agriculture Institute, to be trained in using the “Ag in the Classroom” curriculum developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and focusing on agriculture as the theme for teaching math, science, social studies, English and environmental responsibility. The Core Knowledge curriculum also provides a thorough agriculture unit that teaches history, economic development and life skills to support Lorence’s concept.

Lorence jokes about how many tubs of cookie dough she has purchased for fundraisers. In her student-centered worldview it doesn’t fit. She looks to fundraising activities that are represented by real things that the child has learned, and that give parents something real to buy, such as eggs, flowers, or produce. It’s hands-off for teachers and hands-on for students to manage and market the country store, including bookkeeping, customer relations, and, of course, making and selling their line of goods.

Rob Kremer points to Lorence's model as just one of the many possibilities. "It is so satisfying," says Kremer, "to see this law result in people like Debi Lorence having a vehicle to turn their dream and innovation into reality."

Lorence has focused her real-estate hopes on a six-acre parcel on Bull Mountain, with a second property on the radar screen. So far, neighboring property owners have voted to welcome MITCH and Learning Adventures, but for now the \$500,000 price tag is a "small problem." She is optimistic saying, "We're waiting for that piece of the puzzle."

## **TILLING THE SOIL FOR NEW IDEAS**

Oregon School Board Association's Jim Green first introduced MITCH to the TTSD at a school board meeting in the Spring of 2000. A year later, in April, Debi and the Oregon Charter School Service Center met with Superintendent Steve Lowder, and the TTSD School Board to get the charter application going. And by December '01 MITCH had won a unanimous board approval for a two-year contract. They are currently reviewing the final contract and expect to have signed agreements within the month.

That's the short version.

One of the first questions she was asked in May 2001 by the board was "What are you doing in your community?" Most people might respond by signing up to volunteer in the classroom.

Instead, Lorence thought big. So, last summer she organized a staff under her Learning Adventures non-profit and ran nine weeks of camps, with as many themes, at Cook Park in Tigard, serving 108 children. This summer, she will build on last year's success with six weeks of camps employing the teachers for MITCH as a hands-on introduction to the community.

Then she lined all her ducks in a row for the public hearings in September.

Which was postponed to November. Which was postponed to December 6<sup>th</sup>. Finally MITCH was voted on at a School Board meeting on December 13<sup>th</sup>. Unanimously.

Supt. Lowder commented on Lorence's determination, and encouraged school board members by noting something to the effect of, if we don't approve her, she's got just enough daring to take it to the state. Under the charter school law the state has the authority to sponsor a charter school if it is denied by a school district.

Assoc. Supt. Russell has been assigned by Lowder to oversee the charter. If she is reluctant about welcoming the MITCH charter school into her district, it doesn't show. She remains somewhat skeptical but is upbeat about her relationship with Lorence, offering a swift compliment. "Working with Debi has been terrific. She's very energetic and enthusiastic about the program and it will result in a very positive charter school relationship for MITCH and TTSD."

Board member Davis affirms, "She really has this vision and she won't let it go."

## **THE MASTER GARDENER**

Kremer, currently running for State Superintendent of Schools, describes Lorence as tenacious. He's known Lorence since she first stormed into his office about two years ago with her concept for starting a school. Kremer launched the Oregon Charter School Service Center in '99 to help charter school supporters in all aspects of writing the proposal and approaching the school districts.

He remembers their first meeting, saying he was a little nervous at first about her aspirations. "By all appearances she was another passionate mom wanting to start a school—maybe even a little dizzy." He changes his tone. "Then every step of the way she has proven that she had everything it takes to make it happen. It has been an amazing journey with Debi."

Lorence has everything it takes, including a good education (B.S. '92 George Fox, plus graduate studies), grant-writing skills, and administrative know-how. She has a sense of professionalism in dealing with school and district officials. And she has an overarching vision with the passion to sell that vision to everyone she meets.

But Kremer is right. It is easy to mistake Lorence as "dizzy" at first glance. What's dizzying is her pace of activity: meaningful activity.

Lorence was never diagnosed with hyperactivity disorder, but she was one of those "break-the-mold" kids some teachers may remember having around. These are the kids who experience very real difficulties, or just sheer boredom, learning by traditional methods, but whose brilliance, ingenuity and talent is expressed in so many other ways.

With the dizzying pace of this last year she admits, these days, she feels like the world's worst mom. "I'm constantly pawning off my kids on other people," she laments. It is just one price she pays to keep appointments, make meetings and baby-sit every facet of making her dream happen.

Though her daughters—ages five and seven—see less of her these days, she knows that in the long run she'll be able to pass on something much bigger than herself to her two daughters and her community.

The only part of "everything it takes" Lorence doesn't possess is money. But she has sold her vision to the Walton Foundation and the Challenge Foundation, as well as securing federal grant money. One little known fact is that charter schools are responsible for all the start-up costs until the day the door opens. And yet, under current Oregon charter law, the school district gets a percentage (5-20 percent) of every startup dollar.

## **HIRED HANDS—WITH TALEND AND A PASSION FOR KIDS**

"I love her. She is so passionate for children it is impossible to miss it," says Jolaine Davis. While searching around Tigard for education options, Davis heard about Lorence through a friend. As a teacher in the North Clackamas School District for nine years, and a curriculum specialist, she had high standards.

"I went to the board meeting just to see what it was all about. After Debi shared her vision, I had volunteered to be on the board before I left," Davis recounts with zeal.

Since leaving that December meeting, Davis has poured many bleary-eyed, late night hours into curriculum development, staff development and training, and preparing for statewide assessments and benchmarks.

Davis is a steady promoter of public education, having taught in an at-risk school in Milwaukie and witnessed first-hand how a project-based, hands-on, learning experience turned unlikely students around at Ardenwald Elementary.

“Because of her passion and vision, some very wonderful people are coming on board,” says Davis. “Very veteran teachers—with 10 to 20 years experience—are willing to take huge pay cuts because they want to be a part of this. Those kind of quality teachers don’t show up unless somebody is very worthy of their talents.”

One of those teachers is Amy Halverson, who taught full-time in Gaston for five years and has a Masters degree in Education from Portland State University. She looks forward to being involved in MITCH because, “You’re free to dream and implement that dream, and that is exciting as a teacher.”

“Public School teachers are coming to me,” Lorence says, after her first round of hiring interviews. “Because we are teaching the most sought-after curriculum of many parents: Core Knowledge, Saxon Math, Simply Science by Barbara Banister of our own district, and the Riggs Institute language arts program. This is not a worksheet driven school that we’re after, it is a school that incorporates activities for lifetime learning.”

## **THE FIRST CROP**

This fall eight MITCH teachers and directors will tentatively welcome 80 new students at a modest facility in town. But, like everything else, Debi Lorence has her sights set on the big dream—six acres on Bull Mountain to secure by way of a minor miracle, or a half-million dollars, whichever comes first.

Since the death of her friend Michelle, Lorence thinks and acts seriously about leaving a legacy—making her life count for other people. “The more you know, the more accountable you are to do something. When I die, what have I really done?” Lorence’s dreams are big, but she can’t get off the hook—Michelle’s children, Miles and Natasha, are living reminders.

## **SIDEBAR 1: PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR MITCH**

Although Michelle passed away in 1998, Debi and Michelle’s lifelong friendship (since the age of 14) survives today in her vision for a public charter school, nicknamed after her friend during the first organizational board meeting. The name worked out almost by accident.

“At that meeting they wanted to remember someone whose character would remind us of the vision,” Lorence recounts. “We knew we wanted it to be multi-sensory and we wanted ‘Children Hands-on’ in the name, so M.I.T.C.H. was born.” Multi-sensory Instruction Teaching Children Hands-On, or M.I.T.C.H., has a dual-edged meaning for Lorence and packs twice the punch in her own motivation for making it happen. Michelle’s children, Miles (eight) and Natasha (five) will be two of the 50 children already enrolled in the new venture.

While brainstorming the “farm concept” with Michelle before her death, she did something that is pure Debi. “I set myself up in the dairy section of the Tigard Safeway and took a survey of kids for a [graduate] research paper. I asked kids, ‘Where does milk come from? Why is it white? Where does butter come from? Where do eggs come from?’ and took the hilarious answers back to my friend Michelle.”

Most children knew that eggs came from chickens, but they had no ideas that eggs could turn into baby chickens. Some thought the eggs had been through a special coloring process to make them white; same thing with milk—some thought it had been bleached to make it white. The best kids could do about butter is what they remember from the food pyramid—butter is a dairy product.

The answers were proof that our connection with the land has almost become a museum piece in the urban/suburban rat race. Kids have lost touch with how things get to the table. She jokes, “Oh, look Johnny, there’s Mr. Farmer. He actually grows food. You know, back when I was a kid, most of our food actually came from farms.”

She worries that every last stitch of farmland in Tigard will be paved over, and worse yet, every last child in Tigard will have no connection to the land.

“What’s the scariest day for our culture?” she asks. “It’s when we lose all those people who were born and raised on farms. That’s a scary day for me. Why? Because they were taught responsibility. They were taught to take care of the land and the environment. They were taught that you prepare for the next generation that comes, and when you die your family will inherit it. You feel connected to the future. When you have no connection to the land you lack responsibility for the future.”

## **SIDEBAR 2: OREGON’S PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS**

Charter equals “new.”

School equals “public school.”

Think new public schools. Think of a new public school in Tigard: a public school that absolutely must perform or go out of business.

That’s a charter school.

It’s a new public school, serving public school students. And, most likely, kids who are not currently in a public school but want to be.

The Northwest Regional Educational Library website defines charter schools as encompassing “autonomy for accountability.” They are public schools of choice granted a specific amount of autonomy (determined by state law and the local charter) to make decisions concerning the structure, curriculum, and the educational emphasis of the school.

In return for this autonomy, “charter schools must attract students, achieve academic goals, and operate on less money than a regular school or they are shut down” (Brainstorm Dec/Jan 99).

Two charter schools, McCoy Academy’s two locations, recently had their charter revoked when they failed to meet financial and academic goals of their charter. To critics, this might seem like failure, and some argued that McCoy deserved to keep their charter.



But failure of one school to meet the conditions of its charter is really success for the charter school concept. Proponents of charter schools think all public schools should be held more directly accountable for their results—or go out of business.

The biggest, buzziest, word in the NWREC's definition is the "C" word. Choice. And it takes some getting used to. Already there are 17 charter schools operating in Oregon and about five more are slated to open in September 2002.

### **SIDEBAR 3: CORE KNOWLEDGE SEQUENCE CURRICULUM**

One example of a Core Knowledge School in Oregon is the Franklin School, a K-8 magnet school in the Corvallis. There are now 1100 Core Knowledge Schools in the United States.

The founder of the Core Knowledge Curriculum is Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. who created a rigorous, sequential, and structured curriculum designed to give all children the advantage of a solid foundation in "cultural literacy."

The Core Knowledge curriculum is a sequential, knowledge-based system that teaches mastery in core academic subjects, such as mathematical reasoning and numbers sense, orientation in time, scientific reasoning, physical world, music and arts, history and geography and all the language arts.

Core Knowledge Sequence Curriculum is a sequential outline to teach children K-8 in every subject. For instance, Kindergartners learn (through many avenues) about the pilgrims coming to America; then 1<sup>st</sup> grade starts in with American heroes. Core Knowledge has just passed its first national evaluation of the program by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Memphis.

Free overviews of the Riggs Language Arts Program are offered every Tuesday night from 7:30-8:30 p.m. at The Riggs Institute next to Beaverton's new library.

### **SIDEBAR 4: WEBSITES TO EXPLORE**

[www.mitchcharter.org](http://www.mitchcharter.org) - Official website of the MITCH Charter School. Contact information for Debi Lorence, PO Box 230575, Tigard, OR 97281. Phone: (503) 524-5411.

[www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org) - Official website of the Core Knowledge Curriculum developed by Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

<http://edreform.com/charters.htm> - The Center for Education Reform tracks charter school grassroots efforts, legislation and laws, research, and how charter schools are improving academic standards and educational choices for students and parents.

<http://www.osba.org/hotopics/charters/progress.htm> - Oregon Charter Schools Resource Center Home Page. Charter School Laws Policies/Rules/Regulations Charter School Funding The Application Process How to Get Ready

<http://www.nwrel.org/charter/specifics.html> - NW Regional Educational Laboratory, Charter Schools Definition and Specifics.

[www.riggsinst.org](http://www.riggsinst.org) - Official website of the Riggs Institute Writing and Spelling Road to Reading and Thinking, a non-profit publisher and teacher/parent/tutor training agency.

<http://aitc.orst.edu/> - Oregon State University's "Agriculture in the Classroom" Foundation site.

[www.agclassroom.org](http://www.agclassroom.org) - The national clearinghouse for all the state Agriculture in the Classroom programs, sponsored by the US Department of Agriculture.