

Following is a small sampling of parent and student musings; a reminder of what is at the heart of this campaign.....

“Providing a community and culture such as NBS plants an attitude of thoughtfulness and a willingness to grapple with difficult questions, situations, and experiences, large and small, so deeply in the fertile minds of 13 year-olds that I do not think it can ever be fully eradicated. Today more than ever, I feel lucky to have this attitude rooted deeply enough that I won’t let it go, regardless of how strongly outside forces of the universe attempt to pull it away.”

~ Abe F. '06

“At North Branch, love was celebrated as a fundamental human value. We didn’t shy away from trying to understand the horrors of the world (although our exposure was necessarily limited by our privileged vantage point) but we were constantly reminded to love the world and one another regardless. It’s a pity that so much of public education is geared toward other goals; in an ideal world, all schools would look more like North Branch. But places like North Branch give me hope that our society might survive until we are able to create that ideal world.”

~ Anonymous

“There are many things I could say about the integrity of the North Branch School as a place of learning. I could mention the practicality of hands on science and math projects, like our to-scale model of the solar system, which, among other philosophical lessons, promoted a healthy dose of perspective for the anthropocentric teen. Or I could talk about how writing the play each year directly contributed to my continuing pursuit and love of political art and theater. But something happened to me a year after I left North Branch that solidified its importance to me. And although I wasn’t still a student, I found myself looking nowhere else but to my old school; to the community I was still a part of, by way of heart.

In April of 10th grade, after graduating from North Branch, my dad passed away and I was lost by all means. I knew exactly where to find hope, love and a safe place to feel. Within days, I came back to North Branch with two other alums, and we, with the whole school, sat together in the big room. I spoke a bit, but mostly listened to the hum of the conversation around our sacred big table. There was a lot of crying, some silence, and many long hugs. I think Tal read some poetry, and a story, and together we spoke about loss and family and love. Had I not had my North Branch family to lean on to celebrate or mourn with, it wouldn’t be a matter of hypotheticals—I would not be the same human being.”

~Hadley M. '08

“When we were looking for an alternative to public school for our son, we found North Branch. What we experienced was so much more than I could have imagined - A school where differences are celebrated not ridiculed, where students write about themselves and break down some of those already-forming walls of protection that our society fosters. I believe that even a small degree of shift in a person’s thoughts and beliefs can result in a totally new trajectory, a totally different life. What a gift to give our kids, our community, our world.”

~ Gary R. (Nick '04, Devlin '06)

“North Branch is my ability to express myself emotionally and put those feelings down on paper. North Branch is the refined sense of sarcasm my friends and I share. North Branch is the scrapbooks, photos, and novels I keep on the shelves of my childhood room because North Branch is the thing that shaped everything that came after it.”

~Zoe W-N '04

“The wonderful environment and staff at North Branch School opened my son to himself, and the world, and has enabled him to fulfill himself in ways neither he nor I could have imagined otherwise.”

~ Nick M. (Quincy '07)

Dear NBS Families,

Driving up to Ripton on Cassie's first day at NBS, we had to stop for a bear crossing the road. It was my fear manifest. Cassie didn't know any of the other kids. Tal was kind of scary. The door was too heavy for Cassie to open. Cassie was younger than anyone else there. We were a whole family of non-participatory types. We didn't have ties to Ripton, to Middlebury College, to the other families, to anything that would explain how Cassie ended up enrolled in this school. We weren't even sure it was a good idea. Okay, Randy was more sure than I was, but he didn't see the bear in the road on that first day. Cassie was so reserved and quiet, I didn't know if she would even be noticed. I knew if she were to ride on the attached extra seat to a tandem bike and it started to slip sideways, she wouldn't say a word. She would just try to hang on and make the best of it. Like it was no big deal.

We had heard the school was tough with high expectations – and not just academically. This was a good thing, we thought. Cassie had been nurtured but not really challenged by her previous school. Even the first week when Cassie came home with 18 pages of math homework due the next day, or so she said, we just thought whoa, okay, fasten your seat-belts, here we go. Every day felt like that; a giant leap of faith, adjustments, corrections, realignments, hope and exhaustion. But every day Cassie got better at understanding her teachers. Rose meant 18 problems, not pages. Eric could be talked down from each kid creating a meal for the school, researching where each ingredient originated, calculating how much energy it took to grow, store, and ship each ingredient versus how much energy the ingredient provided for your body, and then cooking the meal for the entire school – and all by next Tuesday – to each class providing a meal and each kid researching one ingredient. And Tal. Well, Tal. He tried to trick her into swearing, but she was on to him in very little time. But, she wrote non-stop. She's still writing.

As parents we wanted Cassie to be able to go as far into something as she wanted. We loved that math and art intertwined. That science was so hands-on. That kids were teaching each other with passion. That writing was so important a focus of the curriculum. It was a dynamic, engaged, thriving environment where Cassie could go as deep as she wanted. She was the driving force of her education, surrounded by people who cared and supported her.

One of the best things about NBS is that it didn't change Cassie. It grew her. She is still quiet. She is still reserved. But she can be that way with the utmost confidence. She knows herself. NBS helped her explore the depths of who she is, who she strives to be, how she can best learn in the ways that are important to her. She doesn't have to be what other people need to be. She can love who they are, while loving herself.

There are so few alternatives for education in this area. To find a school with a staff as dedicated, as hard-working, as invested in each kid, so willing to challenge, provoke, augment as they see fit, is unusual. It is the chance to have an individualized education in the truest sense. I mean, if Cassie was a kid that wanted to work until the words on the page turned into crawling ants, they were all for it. She had that opportunity. Okay, not really. That was actually going too far. But during those years her education was alive.

When I think what if Cassie had not had the opportunity to attend North Branch, I just shake my head. No, actually I feel a little panicky tightness in my throat. I imagine how awful, how stifling, how miserable, the alternatives would have felt and I have trouble breathing. I know there is no perfect school, but some are way better than others. NBS is at the top of the spectrum. I'm sure she would have survived. We would have done *something*. But the fact that NBS was out there in its imperfect, evolving, engaging way at just the right time for Cassie, was fortunate for us, fortunate for her.

This capital campaign is a way to set the school on more solid footing. To have the opportunity to spread funds to more areas – teacher compensation and benefits, scholarships – by paying off the mortgage, can only enhance the school and the lives of future students. Going to school at NBS is an opportunity I wish every kid could experience. I used to want to hang out outside the windows, seeing if just by listening, I could become a better person, too, but that would have been creepy. Instead, I'm asking you to remember what an exceptional school this was for your family and to support its future. You know this school, your kids attended. Let's give back. I urge you to donate, and to donate as generously as you can.

Janet Fancher (Cassie '10)

The North Branch School has been significantly enriching for both of my children over the last six years. Our son was a child who had always struggled socially, but when he attended NBS, the teachers and students helped him to feel accepted and loved. He felt a part of a supported community and, over time, felt more secure and safe which allowed him to stretch himself, take more social risks, strengthen connections, and work on increasing his ability to self-reflect. For the first time he was able to talk about his social difficulties and practice new skills that he has taken with him to the high school. Our daughter feels so loved and in turn expresses her love for all of her classmates. She often uses the refrain, in what other school can we... She is talking about the kids hugging and talking about how they love each other and also the activities that they do (i.e. bringing items to share to school, cooking for all of the school and being outdoors 50% of the time). We have been so pleased with the understanding and support that all of the teachers and students have provided for her.

~ Kim W.

The year before I started middle school, my parents took me to visit North Branch. I saw a science room full of kids actually excited to learn science because they were getting muddy building model ecosystems, learning the science behind each piece of the environment along the way. I saw a math room of kids learning geometry through storytelling, and understanding statistics through fantasy football. In literature and school conferences, I saw a group of brilliant, scared, shy, awkward teens bloom into life because they were listened to and respected. Laughing, yelling, and making music was encouraged. Someone cried when they read a personal essay out loud. Someone else hugged them. By learning things that mattered and were beautiful, they were learning that they themselves mattered and were beautiful.

~ Mitchell W.

The North Branch School, a small middle school that is powerful for what it imparts --curiosity, the love of learning, and the patience to see clearly and connect the self to the natural world. Thank you, Tal Birdsey, for sharing this with my boys.

~ Marion B.

When we wrote the North Branch School play my ninth grade year I saw with clear eyes what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. The afternoons I spent with my classmates huddled around a computer writing jokes and coming up with “pee your pants” worthy scenes were the happiest moments of my adolescent life. Every day I woke up excited to go to school so that I could rehearse our play under the bright light of a chicken coop lamp in the schools basement. Now I go to college in New York and I study drama and creative writing. This year I was in my first Off-Broadway show, and I’ve seen my own, self-written, comedic plays staged before an audience. I still have the same dream I had in ninth grade.

~ Tsering C.

One of the best things about NBS is that it didn’t change our daughter. It grew her. She is still quiet. She is still reserved. But she can be that way with the utmost confidence. She knows herself. NBS helped her explore the depths of who she is, who she strives to be, how she can best learn in the ways that are important to her. She doesn’t have to be what other people need to be. She can love who they are, while loving herself.

~ Janet F.