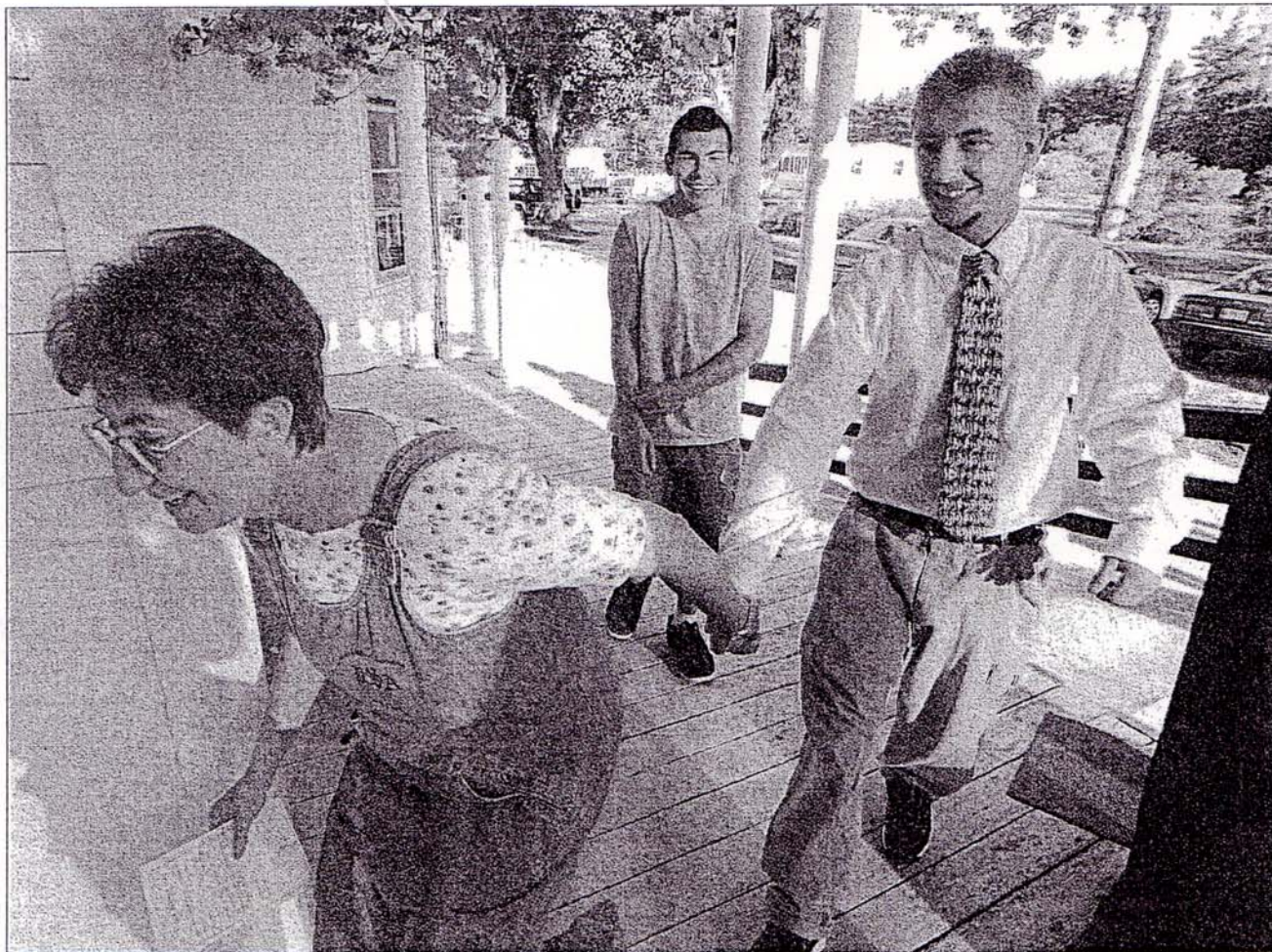


Poland Spring Academy graduates first class



CUTTING IT CLOSE: Robbie Howard, left, takes graduating senior Nicholas Barry by the hand to go get into his cap and gown after he arrived late at Poland Spring Academy Wednesday. Barry was one of seven students in the academy's first graduating class. Howard and her husband, Gary, opened the alternative school in the fall of 1999.

PHOTOS BY DARYN SLOVER/SUN JOURNAL

Blood, sweat and diplomas

Robbie Howard was in her office when one of her teachers called from a different building. The teacher had some bad news: She had caught a group of seniors smoking.

Howard, the founder and president of Poland Spring Academy, couldn't believe it. Smoking on school grounds? The day before graduation? How dare they?

She was too mad to react. She tried to send another teacher to deal with it, but everyone insisted that she go. Unsure whether to cry or scream, she made her way to the classroom.

When Howard opened the door, the students and their teacher greeted her with a loud "surprise" and a cake decorated with a special message: "You never gave up on us."

The tears fell instantly. But Howard didn't start to weep uncontrollably until the students handed her their gift: a new Bible signed by each of them.

When Howard and her husband, Gary, mortgaged their home and spent their entire life savings to open Poland Spring Academy in September 1999, they knew they were taking a risk.

The past two years haven't been easy for the couple. Bill collectors call their home almost every night.

"Every once in a while, I wake up in a cold sweat," Howard admitted. "I think, 'What am doing? I have all of these people depending on me.'"

Graduation day

But on Wednesday, Howard wasn't thinking about money.

She was too busy getting ready for 7 p.m. when she and her staff would say goodbye to their first graduating class: five boys and two girls who have shown Howard that her commitment to Poland

BY LISA CHMELECKI
Staff Writer

POLAND



THANKS AND THANKS AGAIN, DAD: Nicholas Barry hugs his father, David, after presenting him with a flower. The members of the class of 2001 each spoke and gave a flower to someone who had made a difference in their life. David Barry also received a flower from Nicholas' brother and fellow graduate Ryan.

Spring Academy has been worth every sleepless night.

When the Howards decided to open the school, they were at a point in their lives when they could have retired.

"We could have lived easily," Howard said Wednesday, dressed in sneakers and shorts that re-

vealed the cuts she sustained from shaving her legs (something she rarely has time to do) for the special occasion.

"But it isn't what God wanted us to do."

Instead, Howard firmly believes, God wanted her to open an alternative school for students who weren't suited for the structure of public and other private schools.

Located in an old farmhouse on a country road off Route 26, Poland Spring Academy serves students in kindergarten through 12th grade. It develops individual curriculums for each child depending on their learning styles and personalities.

'A miracle school'

For Nicholas Barry, one of the graduates, that personal approach made all of the difference.

Barry joined Poland Spring Academy in September 2000 after struggling at a public school for four years and nearly dropping out. He was home Wednesday afternoon, ironing a pair of pants, a dress shirt and his tie.

"This is the biggest achievement in my whole entire life," said Barry, who plans to attend a technical college next year. "This was a miracle school for me. I wouldn't have graduated without it."

Howard has heard the same praise from many of her students and their families. In many cases, she said, parents start by sending one of their children to the school. Within a month, they enroll other siblings.

The school opened in the fall of 1999 with 16 students. A year later, the number jumped to 34. Since then, the school has been accredited by the National Association of Private Schools and 14 more students have joined what Howard refers to as her family.

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