HEART OF THE



A charter school in Center City Philadelphia brings warmth and safety to an urban environment

Bernice Sherman's students sit scattered on the floor of their bright classroom. "*The Keeping Quilt*," one girl says. "*Chicken Sunday*," a boy calls out. Sherman, who manages to be motherly and no-nonsense at the same time, tallies the votes on a white board.

On this chilly early March morning, the students in Sherman's fourth-grade class were deciding which of children's author Patricia Polacco's books they liked best. After counting the votes, the students planned to put the results in graphs.

Though the atmosphere at the Russell Byers Charter School is lively, it is far from chaotic. From the extra-wide classroom windows that let in abundant sunlight to the gleaming blue and white floors, the school is an oasis of peace in the middle of Center City Philadelphia.

You would never guess it was born from a senseless act of violence.

Honoring an education champion

The school was founded to honor the memory of Byers, the *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist who was murdered in 1999. His widow, Laurada, and their two children spearheaded the effort. Byers championed education and urban reform in his columns and advocated spurring public school competition with vouchers and charters.

Byers, 59, was stabbed in the chest during a robbery attempt at a Wawa convenience store near the couple's Philadelphia home. His 21-year-old assailant is serving a life sentence without parole.

Laurada Byers says she and her husband had spoken frequently about what could be done to improve education for children in inner-city Philadelphia. During one such discussion, two weeks before Russell died, Laurada suggested opening her own charter school, but he advised against it. "You'd have no life," Russell told her.

After Byers' death, Laurada decided that a charter school would be a fitting way to honor her husband's memory.

Of the 25 applicants seeking charters, which must be renewed every four years, Philadelphia's school board accepted three in early 2001. One was the Russell Byers Charter School.

Pennsylvania has one of the country's oldest charter school laws, having passed legislation in 1997, six years after the first charter opened in Minnesota. Today, Pennsylvania has 109 charter schools with nearly 42,000 students, and Philadelphia alone is home to more than 50 of those schools.

The chartering authorities in the state are school boards. However, when the state took over the Philadelphia schools—only a few months after the Byers charter was granted—the duty went to an oversight group known as the School Reform Commission. The five-member, state-appointed body is made up of community, business, and higher education leaders.

Russell Byers Charter School, like all charters in Philadelphia, enrolls students through a lottery. The 335 students, who are served by 23 teachers, come from 38 different ZIP codes. Most of the students are from families with incomes below the poverty level.

Next year, the school will add its final level—sixth grade. Byers says she would like expand to seventh and eighth grade, but there's not enough space in the building. The school has a healthy waiting list of 600 students who'd like to enroll.

Expeditions in learning

Byers says she thought a great deal about the kind of person her husband was when she started looking for a curriculum for the school. She finally settled on Expeditionary Learning Out-

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Michele Sabatier

CITY



By Kathleen Vail

ward Bound, in which students learn through "expeditions" or projects. She believes the curriculum reflects some of her husband's strengths: his intense sense of curiosity, his ability to communicate, and his diligence in going to the source in his reporting.

Students leave the building frequently to visit the neighborhood and beyond. With their parents, they also can attend Saturday School, where they go to the ballet, theater, art galleries, and museums.

The school also brings in speakers and visitors for the students. During last year's fourth-grade expedition, "Whose Neighborhood Is This, Anyway?" Pulitzer Prize winning author H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger spoke to the children about researching their neighborhoods. Bissinger is the author of *Prayer for the City*, in which he followed then-Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell for his four-year term in office, and *Friday Night Lights,* about Texas high school football.

For two years, the school was located in the Spring Garden section of the city but outgrew the building. The past two years have been spent in a converted three-story office building in Logan Circle that is sandwiched between two parking lots. The immediate surroundings don't appear impressive. However, within walking distance is a rich array of cultural resources: the Moore College of Art, The Academy of Natural Sciences, The Franklin Institute, The Horticultural Society, the Please Touch Museum, and the Free Library.

"If God asked, 'Where should we put a school?' it would have to be here," Laurada Byers says.

Raising the bar

Students greet visitors with a handshake, introduce themselves, and welcome the visitors to the school. The school emphasizes teaching the children good communication skills, so they can function well in the outside world. "Our students ask incredible questions. They are very comfortable with themselves and with adults," says Byers.

Byers organized and planned the school down to the smallest details. Outside each classroom are spaces with tables and chairs where students meet and work in small groups. Every classroom has interior and exterior windows. A two-floor atrium is in the middle of the building, with a small indoor garden where students and staff can read, work, or chat. Over the atrium hangs an imposing portrait of Russell Byers. All the visual and design touches, down to the color of the floor tiles, are meant to make the school look less institutional and more welcoming and safe.

The school receives $6,400 per student a year from the district, but Byers says she easily spends $10,000 per student. She makes up the difference through tireless fundraising.

The school's charter is nearly up, and Byers is working busily to get it renewed. One task is to document academic improvement. About 75 percent of the students are reading at or above grade level (the school's goal was 70 percent), and standardized test scores have improved for the most part (with some exceptions in math and science, particularly for the fourth-graders).

Starting a charter school is difficult, with many barriers to overcome, and Byers says, that is how it should be. After all, she says, young people only get one chance to go through school.

"The bar should be high," Byers says. "This is serious business."

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