

A Love Letter to a City School: A Love Letter to a School on the City's Lower East Side

By DOLORES DOLAN

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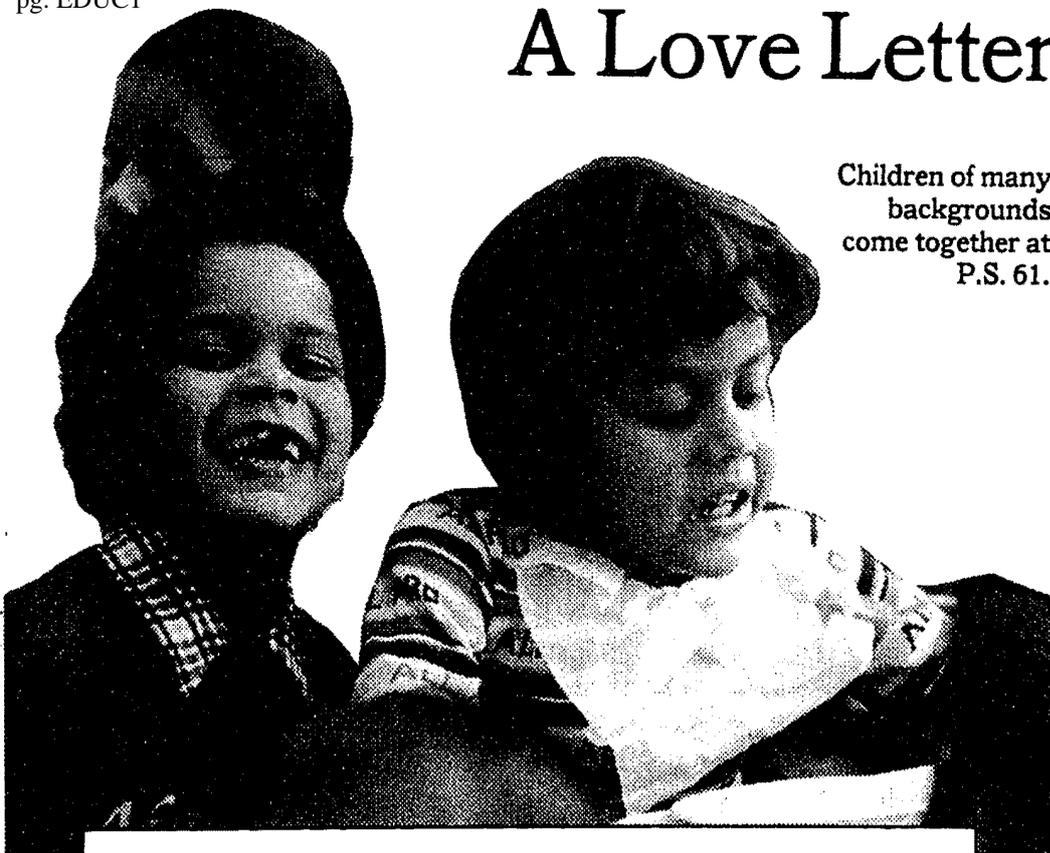
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Children of many
backgrounds
come together at
P.S. 61.



PEOPLE my age often return to the schools of their childhood, basking in nostalgia as they tread the remembered hallways. But a few weeks before my son Robert's graduation from Public School 61 in New York City last June I went back not to my old school in Flatbush, but to the school that my three children had attended on Manhattan's Lower East Side. I went because my children's total of 10 years there had affected me deeply, and I wanted, quite simply, to say thank you.

A walk down Avenue B from 14th Street, the dividing line between the middle-class private housing development of Stuyvesant Town and the beginning of the Lower East Side, passing unbagged garbage, broken sidewalk and boarded-up buildings, is not the pleasantest way to get to the beleaguered school on East 12th Street. One could cut through the parking lot of the new public-housing project on 13th Street, and cut out the worst block. Betty Machol, principal of P.S. 61 since 1973, refuses to do so. "I walk down Avenue B every school day," she said, "to remind myself that the city has promised to renovate this block."

In the middle of the block from Avenue B to Avenue C stands P.S. 61, a five-story brick and glass building, built in 1913, first attended by immigrant families from the Ukraine, Italy, Ireland and Poland.

Twenty years ago, more than 30 percent of P.S. 61's enrollees were from Stuyvesant Town. Today the figure is barely 5 percent. P.S. 61, mirroring many city schools, is now mostly Puerto Rican, with some blacks.

When Stuyvesant Town was built, after World War II, most of its Roman Catholic children went to the three parochial schools in the area. The Jewish and Protestant children went to P.S. 19, P.S. 61 and P.S. 40, depending on which side of the 75 acres of Stuyvesant Town they lived. Those few blocks made a lot of difference some 10 years later. By the mid-1960's, when more Puerto Rican families had moved into the tenements that once housed European immigrants, more and more Stuyvesant Town families stopped sending their children to the public schools below 14th Street.

Mrs. Machol, a 30-year resident of Stuyvesant Town, understands the reluctance of Stuyvesant Town parents and their children who have been zoned for P.S. 61 to leave their well-maintained private area. She began teaching at P.S. 61 in 1956 while her two children attended it. It's the school where June Schofield of Stuyvesant Town and Ellen Muller of nearby Peter Cooper Village still teach after many years there. And where my husband and I have sent our three children since 1970. If you ask Robert, or Moira or Diane, who preceded him, what they think of P.S. 61, you'll get some fiercely loyal replies.

A dozen of my building neighbors had sent their chil-

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The New York Times/Paul Hoesfros

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dren to P.S. 61 years before, but some of our friends said, "Aren't you afraid to send your children down there?" "Down where?" I asked. "Why, Avenue B is a jungle," they said. I had explored the blocks below 14th Street when my children were in strollers. I had shopped in the Polish meat markets and the Italian delicatessens, and I took notice of the variety of people. Many of them looked poorer than my Stuyvesant Town neighbors, but the children going to and from school seemed liked children everywhere.

So, with a dozen or more Stuyvesant Town families, we decided to stick with public-school education. Many of our friends had moved to the suburbs; others to other areas of Stuyvesant Town so that their children could attend P.S. 40, on East 19th Street, in another district, which takes some Stuyvesant Town students. Families even lied about their Stuyvesant Town addresses so they could enroll their children at P.S. 40. As a result of this, some adult friendships were strengthened; others were broken. But the children who went to different schools from 8:30 A.M. to 3 P.M. played with neighbors whether they were classmates or not.

During those years, the P.S. 61 parents who lived in Stuyvesant Town tried to ignore the criticism from other parents. Lydia Brown, whose eldest girl, Melanie, graduated from P.S. 61 and started at Stuyvesant High School this fall, said, "We were asking parents in the beginning to come over and look at P.S. 61, meet some of the teachers, give it a chance, but they wouldn't come to 12th Street." Lydia, who is white and whose husband, Joe, is black, said one mother told her, "Well, I can understand why you'd want to send your children there."

After two years of talking to parents on the benches, in Kaffeeklatsches, inviting them to open houses at P.S. 61 to show off how bright our children were, some of us quietly gave up.

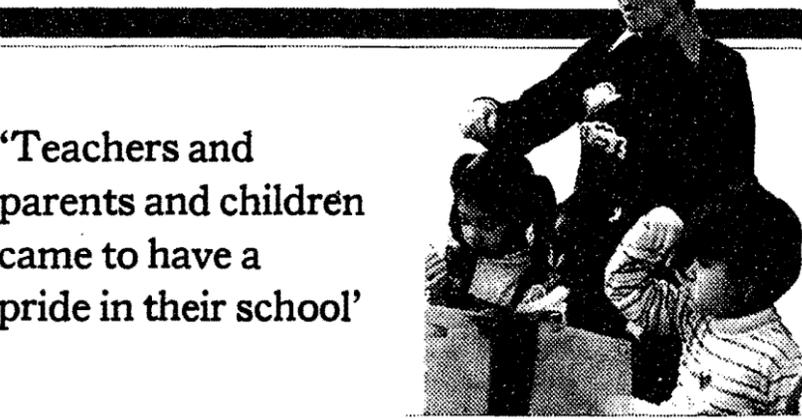
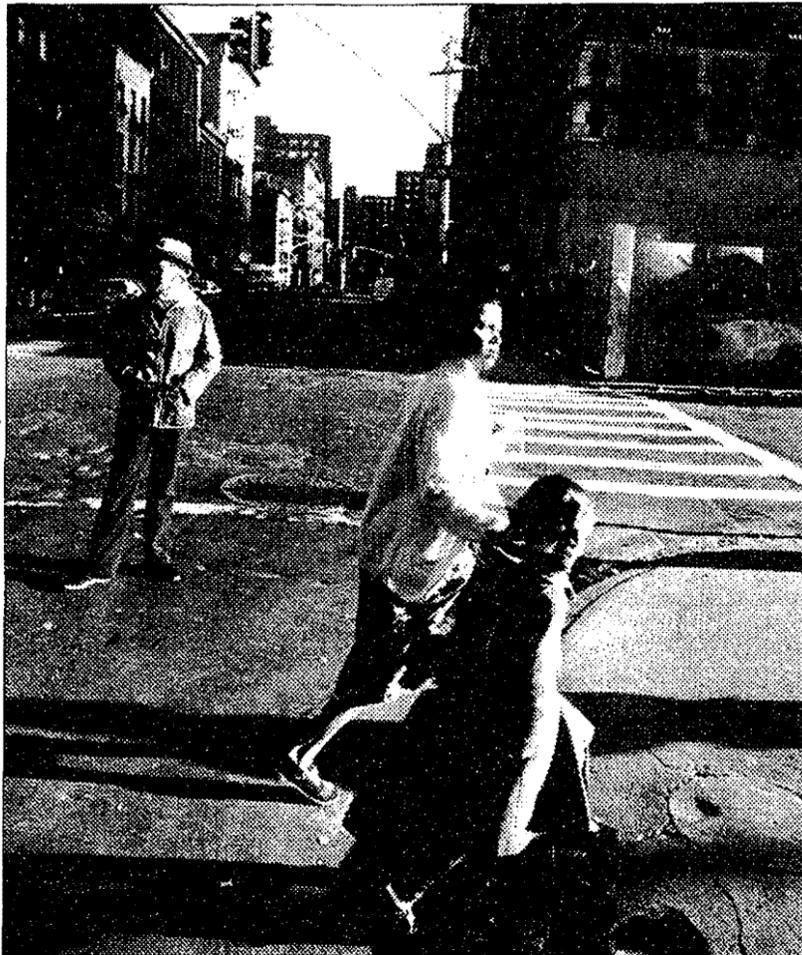
Not all the Stuyvesant Town parents with children at P.S. 61 wearied of the fight. A few mothers called the district office and demanded that an official be posted at registration time at P.S. 40 to check the addresses of new students to verify that in fact they lived in that school's district. An official was sent to P.S. 40; several mothers and their children were turned away. One mother had lied some years before to get her first child in. Now she was horrified that school officials were telling her that while she could keep the first child in P.S. 40, she could not enroll the other child. Within the month she moved to an apartment with an address within the P.S. 40 lines.

I can recall three mothers telling me that they had requested that the Stuyvesant Town renting office move them as soon as possible so that they could be in the P.S. 40 district at the start of school. Two families moved to the suburbs sooner than they had planned.

Only one family stayed where it was. The parents sent their son to P.S. 61 and three years later they sent their daughter, who graduated with my son this year.

So, during the 1970's, a few dozen middle-class children each day left the litter-free sidewalks, the neatly trimmed grass areas, the rows of daffodils and crocuses in spring to walk the two Avenue B blocks to mingle, to learn, and to play with the children of parents who, at best, had low-paying jobs or, at worst, were on welfare.

Their mothers would wait for them outside the school, when they were too young to cross the few streets alone. They would talk of vacations, of apartments soon to be painted, of new movies, of new babies, and watch the



'Teachers and parents and children came to have a pride in their school'

groups of women much younger than they, talking in Spanish. Little by little, the women who couldn't speak Spanish and the Spanish-speaking women who could speak some English became friendly; never quite friends, as their children were, but more than strangers. And the teachers, and the parents and the children, came to have a pride in their school.

As I walked up the few granite steps to P.S. 61 and pulled open the heavy brown metal door for my appointment with Mrs. Machol, I peered through the oval glass windows of the auditorium door on the first floor to watch several classes of first- and second-graders listening to a group of visiting musicians.

There were bad memories: the Community School Board meetings during the height of the decentralization years. Friends would ask after reading about the stormy District 1 school-board meetings, "How can your children get an education with all that discord?" We would answer, patiently, that in spite of factions for and against the city's only Puerto Rican district superintendent, Luis Fuentes; in spite of the punching of Adolph Roher, the board president, by Henry Ramos, a school-board member; in spite of eve-

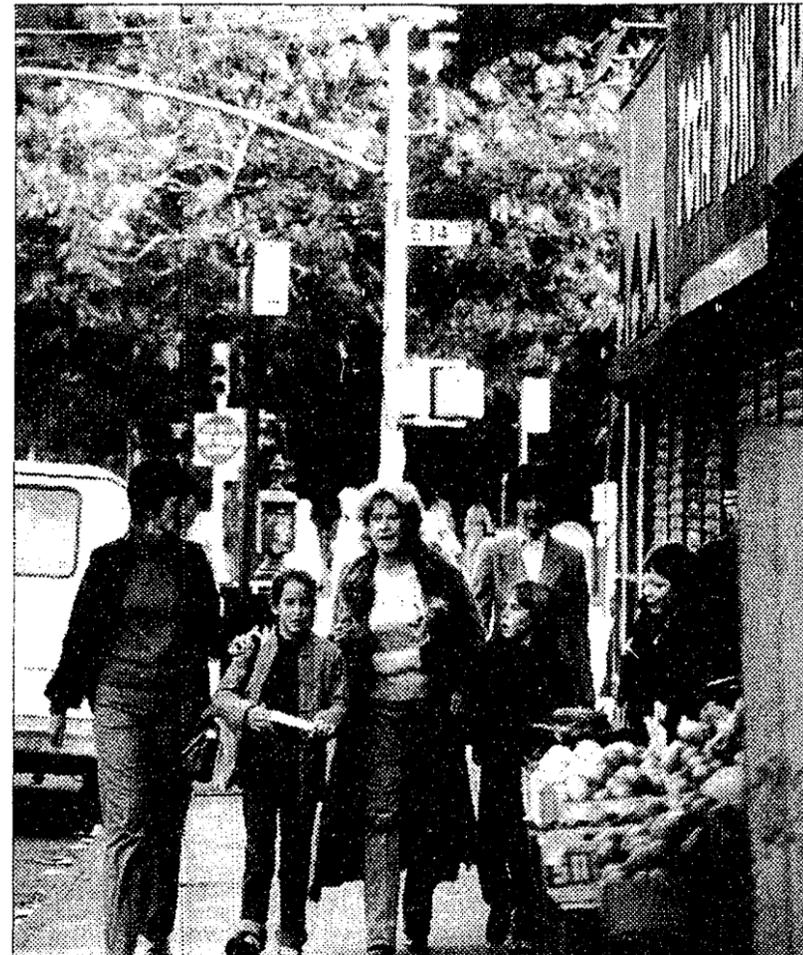
ning meetings ending in chaos, somehow, during the day, teachers were teaching, children were learning and parents were watching it all closely.

Community control came to a test at P.S. 61 in 1973, when Mr. Fuentes became the superintendent of District 1 and the year a new principal had to be chosen to replace Jack Silverman, who was retiring. Because the district was heavily Puerto Rican and black, the pressure from some members of the school board was to select a principal from one of those two groups.

One spring evening in 1973, the auditorium of P.S. 61 overflowed with parents, teachers and children. Shouts and cheers rang out in Spanish and English when the District 1 school board voted Betty Machol, who was supported by blacks and Puerto Ricans, as principal. She is neither Puerto Rican nor black.

That was when my first daughter was in the second grade. As I walked the stairs to meet Mrs. Machol, I thought of all the visits I had made in those early years to see class plays, visit with the children's teachers and attend meetings.

Joyce Perelman's class was our first stop. Miss Perelman was sitting cross-



Parents from the Lower East Side, top left, and from Stuyvesant Town, above, escorting children to P.S. 61. Left, pupils at lunch.

legged on the floor in the middle of about 25 5-year-olds. Holding up colored pictures of fruit and vegetables, she asked the children to identify them. "Right, Maria, that's a cucumber," she said. There was a little difficulty picking out the zucchini until she told them it started with a Z. Someone said "zucchini," and another child said "yuk." Then Miss Perelman said with mock seriousness, "Hold your yuks until you taste it — you know your yuks sometimes turn into yummys."

We stopped to talk to Mrs. Schofield in the hall as she was complimenting a little girl on the design she had just painted on a bulletin board celebrating spring. Mrs. Schofield had taught my children in the early grades. "Hello, Mrs. Dolan, how nice to see you," she said. "I see Moira and Diane on the street and I hardly know them, they're so grown-up now." Ingrained in my memory is a day when I visited Mrs. Schofield's class several years ago during Open School Week. One boy, about 8 years old, was acting up in the back of the room. After asking him a few times to keep quiet, to no avail, she asked him to sit in the front row. When he came up to her, she put her arm around him and held his unresisting head in the crook of her arm for a few moments. Then she said as gently as I've ever heard anyone talk to a child not her own, "Julian, I think it would be nice if you sat near me for a while."

I thought of Stuyvesant Town residents who had grown up in the development and whose children would soon be ready for school. Where would they be sending them? The pattern, which began in the mid-60's, of preferring the public school on East 19th Street to the one on East 11th Street or the one on East 12th Street remained the same. But not always. Two families, the Whites and the Stimaks, who had sent

their children to P.S. 61, finally got a few years ago what many Stuyvesant Town families wait eagerly for — three-bedroom apartments. Their new apartments were in the P.S. 40 side of Stuyvesant Town, but Andrea and Chris White and Melissa and Nicola Stimak remained at P.S. 61. Melissa, Nicola and Andrea graduated last year and Chris will graduate this June.

I asked Judy White why she didn't transfer her children to P.S. 40. "Ted and I didn't see any reason to change when Chris and Andrea had good teachers, were doing well and had such good friends at P.S. 61," she said. "Judy," I said, "did that neighborhood ever bother you?" "No," she said. "What bothered me was people thinking education only goes on in the classroom. That's part of the real world, that neighborhood, and I want my children to grow up in the real world, knowing all kinds of people."

Iris Garcia, a former parents association president who has lived on the lower East Side for 27 years, asked how she felt about the fact that so few Stuyvesant Town children went to P.S. 61. "I always thought all our children got along, we never had any problems," she said. "It's a good school, the kids learn."

As Mrs. Machol and I climbed the staircases and walked the hallways, Mrs. Machol talked about the Resource Room, where children with reading or learning problems received 45 minutes a day of individual help; about the all-day kindergarten classes; the first-grade classes with only 25 children, all of which she expressed concern for if proposed budget cuts by the Mayor became a reality.

Mrs. Machol said she was proud that the school now had a full-time music teacher, and a few minutes later we heard the Brazilian samba performed

by a group of boys and girls earnestly playing violins, drums, trumpets, bass violins, trombones and clarinets. Watching the violinists with a paternal air was Tom Rosati, the husband of a school aide.

I had spent about three hours visiting classrooms with Mrs. Machol, and while she didn't seem a bit tired, I needed to sit down. Just then, the halls began to fill with the sounds of children and the voices of teachers telling them to line up. It was lunchtime. Some children were going to the lunch room, some of the older ones were going home or to the neighborhood pizza place.

We went to Mrs. Machol's office for a cup of coffee. Aides came to ask her questions, phones rang, teachers came to talk to her. One teacher was bursting to tell her that one of the children had let the hamster out of its cage. She wanted to know, because the child had done this before, if she should perhaps be transferred to another class. Mrs. Machol said she'd think about that later, but now she was concerned about finding the poor hamster because the last time one got loose they couldn't find it for days, and by then it had died of starvation.

An art teacher, Rita Dachman, came in to tell Mrs. Machol excitedly that her class wanted to paint the impressions they had had that morning when a group of musicians from the Young Audiences Program played for them in the auditorium. Mrs. Machol thought that was wonderful.

She thought teaching was wonderful, that children were wonderful, that being a principal in a Lower East Side school was wonderful. How, I asked myself, did she maintain this enthusiasm about education when the cries of failure of the city schools were bombarding us daily.

Out loud I said, "Mrs. Machol, I know, the middle-class children that go to this school will be all right, but what about the rest of them, will they make it?"

For the first time that day, she didn't smile: "I had a girl who graduated several years ago come see me only a week ago. She was bright and has a job in a bank. But she wanted to know what she could do about her younger sister who wants to leave school. You ask me if they'll make it — I don't know, we worry about that all the time. Some will. We try, we encourage them as much as possible, but it's not easy for them. We're trying very hard with the little ones. One thing I constantly tell the parents is 'Read to your children, even read pictures to them, and talk to them, about anything, in any language.' One of the saddest things I've found out is that if you don't answer, they stop asking."

When I left P.S. 61 at 12:30 P.M., I had such a good feeling that as I walked down Avenue B to 14th Street, I felt like Teresa Wright in the movie "The Enchanted Cottage," because everything looked beautiful. The streets didn't seem quite so dirty and the sun was shining. A few out-of-work black men standing near a stoop nodded hello as I went by and I nodded hello back. I remembered that for years men just like them had kept a protective eye out for the children, going back and forth to school, as had the fruit-store man, the liquor-store man, the dry-cleaning man and the supermarket workers.

Then a group of four boys, about my son's age, came by arm in arm, returning from the pizza shop. Two of them I recognized from Stuyvesant Town and two were from the Avenue B neighborhood. They were laughing and roughhousing a bit. I couldn't help thinking of Miss Perelman's words that morning: "Don't say yuk till you taste it; sometimes your yuks turn into yummys." ■

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