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Gerry Boyle
Colby College

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A School Across the Bay

By Gerry Boyle '78



Kristine Young and Barney Hollowell are moored to their island students

School is in session, and in the middle of Penobscot Bay this is music teacher Kristine Davidson Young's morning routine:

After seeing her three children onto the Vinalhaven school bus, Young '87 climbs into her yellow Jeep and drives eight miles of winding roads to the northern tip of the island. Young pulls up to a spartan boat ramp on the shore of the Fox Island Thoroughfare, the passage that separates Vinalhaven from the island of North Haven.

On the far shore are a cluster of frame houses, a boat shed, lobster boats swinging on moorings. To the west across the bay are the Camden Hills. Young takes out her cell phone and punches in the number, letting the boatyard on North Haven know she's ready.

Leaving the Jeep unlocked, her cell phone on the front seat, Young waits on a small wooden dock, dressed for school in khakis and clogs, book bag in hand. On North Haven, a small aluminum skiff pulls away from a float and heads across the passage.

Foy Brown, a North Haven institution, pulls up in the skiff, one hand on the tiller of an outboard. Young steps in and sits, and her "little taxi" pulls away. On the North Haven side, Young steps onto the dock in one effortless movement and makes the bow line fast to a cleat. She then walks to the end of a boat shed and heaves the big wooden door open, exchanging hellos with the workers inside as she moves through the shed. At the far door, she takes a car key off a hook on the wall and heads for a beat-up Oldsmobile named Florence that she keeps for the short drive to North Haven Community School.

Before she had the car, Young would hang around the store up the street from the boat shed until someone bound for the school happened by. "Kind of like Colby Corner used to be," she said.

Young grew up on Vinalhaven, 10 miles off of the coast. Her father was a lobsterman, and her parents now own the island store; she studied piano with classical musicians from Boston and Europe who had island ties. At Colby, she majored in music, studied piano with Bill Wallace, then returned to marry Steve Young, another Vinalhaven lobsterman. They have three children—Matthew, 7, and Alex and Libby, 12-year-old twins whose names grace the stern of the Youngs' new lobster boat—and they have no plans to move to the mainland.

Why? "I think it's what keeps everybody here," Young said, "and that's the community. There's a real strong sense of community. As I get older, I get more passionate about it. I realize how fragile these islands are."

The islands themselves are rugged outcroppings, the islanders rugged, too. But the year-round communities on them face pressures that, if ignored, could threaten their centuries-old existence.

Vinalhaven's year-round population is growing. A new school is nearing completion, with \$2 million (including \$1.2 million from credit-card giant MBNA) raised for an auditorium. "The

fund raising, it sounds like it's all about money but it's not," Young said. "It's about preserving what we have."

What could take it away?

If the schools are poor, year-rounders will leave. If the year-round community isn't vital, it will be usurped by the seasonal one. It's less of an issue on Vinalhaven than on smaller North Haven, where the year-round population holds at 350 and 80 percent of the land is owned by seasonal residents. The little available real estate fetches exorbitant prices. "There's a great fear here that there simply aren't going to be the opportunities for young people to come and live here if they want to," said Barney Hollowell '64, principal of the North Haven Community School.

Hollowell came to North Haven 30 years ago as an Outward Bound instructor in search of a more permanent mooring for his family. With six children, he has seen his older kids leave North Haven. Hollowell has no plans to leave. "There's this emotional attachment to North Haven, and Vinalhaven," he said. "It's very powerful."

And yet the North Haven Community School strives to prepare students for life beyond the island. During Hollowell's tenure the school has changed from a tension-fraught place to a thriving community hub. With just 72 students in grades K-12, the school has the New England champion ocean-rowing team and a van-sized entry in a national solar-vehicle contest. With New York director John Wolpe at the helm, the island school supplied the subject and cast of the original musical *Islands*, which played on Broadway last year. A new \$3 million island community center is in the works. "We're not just an offshore, isolated, little community of no importance," Hollowell said.

Indeed, after some time on North Haven, the island can seem like the center of the world. Hollowell, whose school aims to prepare students for life off the island, is acutely aware of the island's pull. "This community is not like many that people find themselves in these days," he said. "Everybody knows everybody here. Even with friction and strife, everyone watches out for everyone else."

But that isn't North Haven's only distinguishing characteristic. This is a community at sea, where days are regulated by the tides and the ferry schedule. It's a place where Young teaches Debussy and Grieg to first graders but knows when to draw on their own body of knowledge.

One day last spring, during a lesson that included a song about cowboys, she tried to explain branding cows to her young charges. "How do people keep track of their [lobster] traps," Young said.

"Buoy," the class responded in unison.

"What is the difference in the buoys? Is everybody's blue?"

"No," the children of lobstermen said, chiming in with their father's identifying buoy colors. White with a blue stripe. Black stripe, white stripe, black stripe. White with green.

"What's your dad's, Leita?" Young said.

"It's pink," a small blond girl said. "It's pink with a yellow star."