Cambridge senior stands up for students

EXTRA CREDIT
This weekly series focuses on Massachusetts high school students in the classroom and their EXTRA CREDIT — the hobbies, jobs and interests which round out their lives.

By Phyllis Cion
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"The most valuable thing to have is a free voice," says Warren (Bill) Wilhelm Jr., of Cambridge. "They're you're able to take the initiative, to make choices."

As he has, he says he spends his free time and he uses. "Well, I represent the Pilot School in Cambridge," he says. "I'm on the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) at the student level, and the Boston area students on the state level. I'm a student of the Student Services Center at the state Department of Education. We try to help students to know about and see that their rights are enforced."

"Why? Because I feel that many students aren't getting a people-oriented education. I feel that school systems discriminate against students, and the way to do something about it is work through people to change the system."

The senior at the Pilot School, a school within a school at Cambridge High and Latin High, doesn't have to fight the system at his own school.
One of the earliest alternative schools in the country, the Pilot has encouraged Wilhelm to serve on committees to hire teachers, review the curriculum and recruit applicants with wide geographic and ethnic backgrounds from elementary school in Cambridge.

"Bill is unique among the kids I've worked with in both urban and suburban schools," says Ray Shreffler, director at the Pilot. "He gets through students and adults because he's very down to earth. He's an extremely good listener and a very organized worker. He's the only student I've ever seen serve on a teachers' committee headed by Robert Dexter, a dean at BC."

But student power wasn't what it is now when Wilhelm was in elementary school.

"I remember that I kept asking about school policies and I couldn't find out," says the 18-year-old student rights advocate, looking at his level, the Student Services Center at III St. James st. facebook.

"It was when I was in the fifth grade, and I was looking back to him, President Nixon, which I was listening to on television and discussing with my economic and Vietnam policies and all the implications happening to people that I suddenly thought, 'Why am I complaining instead of doing something about these things?'"

He started by reversing the discipline code with two students from each 6th and 7th grade homeroom, so that each student got a hearing from the student government if he had a problem.

"I picked the Pilot for a high school because the administration and teachers are very open to students' ideas and 1 liked the mix of backgrounds. Just working on sets for a play taught me a lot about how other students see things. Portuguese, Greek, Chinese, Spanish."

"I'm half Italian, my mother's parents, the Biondi's, came from the best of Italy and started a dress shop in New York. I feel very close to them. They made me realize that if it is to start in a new country with all the odds against them."

"My parents are divorced, but my mother has always worked. She's a business manager and she has seen a lot of discrimination against women."

"She and I went to Italy last year and to Yugoslavia. You could see the difference in the amount of freedom people had."

"Of course you can get into things which dominate your life right here and keep you from feeling free — like taking home bunches of papers you're put off dealing with."

"Sure, I get discouraged sometimes about trying to get students more closely involved with school. I don't get into yelling at people. I have a lot of pent up feelings, but I go jogging or listen to music, and now and again. You can't let your problems get into your whole life."

"There are people I can talk to who can say about students to keep me working at it. We sent SAC reps into about 170 schools in the state to see if student rights were being enforced."

"I can't talk to students in schools where students are working on extracurricular activities and on how they are informed."

"We decided that making sure that what has been enacted was really being followed was more important than drafting a new legislation."

"Wilhelm reported recently to the state Board of Education and student newspaper editors."

"Wilhelm also edits a paper at the Pilot School, and writes profiles of city officials. Glass, Keesler, a school committee member, calls the paper "one of the best, with very perceptive in-depth articles."

"What tools? A village where I can definitely build my own major around social science, politics, urban studies, and community planning."

"I'm definitely interested in government."

(Bill Wilhelm) - "I've let that school systems discriminate against students."

(Globe photos by Ted Ancher)