

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 Coons
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"The most valuable thing to have is free time," says Warren (Bill) Wilhelm Jr. of Cambridge. "Then you're able to take the initiative, to make choices."

Ask him how he spends his free time and he says, "Well, I represent the Pilot School in Cambridge on the Student Advisory Council (SAC) at the regional level, and the Boston area students on the state level. Weekday afternoons, I'm the coordinator at the Student Service 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've felt that school systems discriminate against students, and the way to do something about it is to work through people to change the system."

The senior at the Pilot School, a school within a school at Cambridge Rindge 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, revamp the curriculum and recruit applicants with wide geographic and ethnic backgrounds from elementary schools in Cambridge.

"Bill is unique among all the kids I've worked with in both urban and suburban schools," says Ray Shurtleff, dean at the Pilot. "He gets through to 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 chosen to serve on a teachers' commission headed by Robert Dentler, a dean at BU."

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 6-foot-5 student rights advocate, leaning at his desk at the Student Service Center at 31 St. James av., Boston.

"It was when I was in the 6th-grade, and I was talking back to then-President Nixon while I was listening to him on television and disagreeing with his economic and Vietnam policies and all the inequalities happening to people



BILL WILHELM: "I've felt that school systems discriminate against students."
(Globe photo by Ted Ancher)

that I suddenly thought 'Why am I complaining instead of doing something about unfair things?'"

"We started by revamping 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 I liked the mix of backgrounds. Just working on sets for a play taught me a lot about how other students saw things... Portuguese, Greek, Chinese, Spanish."

"I'm half Italian; my mother's parents, the de Blasios, came from the boot of Italy and started a dress shop in New York. I felt very close to them. They made me realize how 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've 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, so I have a lot of pent up feelings, but I go jogging or listen to music, soft rock or opera. You can't let your problems get into your whole life."

"Enough people have listened to what I have to say about students to keep me working at it. We sent SAC reps into about 100 schools in the state to see if student rights were being enforced."

Circulating questionnaires on equal access for students to electives and extra-curricular activities and on how clearly regulations were spelled out, Wilhelm and SAC colleagues found evidence that many schools were not in compliance.

"We decided that making sure that what had been enacted was really being followed was more important than drafting 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. Glen Koocher, a school committee member, calls the paper "one of the best, with very perceptive in-depth articles."

"What next? A college where I can definitely build my own major around social science, politics, urban studies, and community planning. I'm definitely interested in government."