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# Sharon Academy Starts Big Fundraising Effort

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From a classmate who serves on The Sharon Academy's board of trustees, Alicia Freese knew that her alma mater was embarking on the first of two campaigns to raise a combined \$5 million over the next 20 years.

He just didn't tell Freese, a 2006 graduate who grew up in Tunbridge, that Phase 2, a \$3.5-million plan to rearrange and expand the physical plant at TSA's high-school complex off Route 14, calls for removing the four yurts where, since 2005, students in grades 9 to 12 have spent much of their classroom time.

"Omigod! I had not heard that," Freese, now a reporter for the Burlington-based *Seven Days* weekly newspaper, said during a recent phone interview. "No way!"

Then she laughed at the memory of what preceded the insulation-free classrooms serving the high-school branch of the grade 7-12 independent school, on a former cornfield above the White River.

"When we moved into the yurts, that was luxurious," Freese said. "At that point, we were coming from the Army tents."

The tents were one more bridge in the journey of TSA. When it opened in 1996, two teachers — including academy founder Judy Moore — worked with 12 students in grades 6 to 8 in two classrooms of the former public elementary school in Sharon village. Academy

parents subsequently decided to expand to include a high school, and TSA acquired the property outside town.

Today, with some 35 students attending grades 7 and 8 in Sharon village and 125 at the high school, The Sharon Academy is positioning itself for a future in which its main source of funding — tuition payments from surrounding towns with no middle or high schools of their own — could change, while the school strives to continue offering what it describes as “collaborative” and “hands-on” learning, with a focus on building “social and emotional skills.”

Vermont’s Act 46, which encourages small public school districts to merge, “raised uncertainties about sending towns: Would our traditional ones still be there?” John Roe, vice president of the board of trustees, chairman of the capital campaign steering committee and father of one TSA alumnus and two current students, said recently. “We were suddenly in doubt. That was the reason to break the campaign into two phases.”

After several years of brainstorming and planning among staff, faculty, students, alumni and parents, Phase 1 began this past January, with the goal to raise \$1.5 million by January 2017, more than half of it to shore up the academy’s financial aid system, bolster teacher training, establish a writing center and, according to Jennifer Hayslett, the school’s senior director for development and communications “solidify what we’re now offering in special education; making sure we’re able to continue doing what we’re doing.”

The current academic year is the second in which TSA has had a special educator on staff for students identified as having learning disabilities and other health impairments.

Of the \$1.5 million goal for Phase 1, \$150,000 would go toward creating a trail system, improving parking, developing a second athletic field and preparing a plan for a possible move of the middle school to its own building on the high-school property.

Overall so far, Hayslett said, TSA has raised nearly \$800,000.

Depending on how Phase 1 plays out, Phase 2 would begin in the fall of 2017. The \$3.5 million campaign would fund improvements in energy efficiency, building a kitchen, improvements to and expansion of science labs and of space for arts and other creative works.

“It’s the little school that’s pushing a large rock up the hill,” Roe said. “It’s amazing. Just surviving 20 years is a challenge for a non-profit.

Eighty-five percent of TSA students come from school districts that don’t have designated middle or high schools, and that pay tuition to send students to area public or independent schools.

TSA charges the tuition rate set by the state Agency of Education, this year it's \$14,297. Tuition students at TSA hail from Hartland, Pittsfield, Sharon, Strafford, Stockbridge, Tunbridge, Washington, Weathersfield and West Windsor.

Hayslett said that in addition to making up the gap of about \$2,000 per student between the state-mandated tuition rate and the actual cost of educating each student, TSA plans to use some of the money raised during Phase I "to make the school more affordable to students outside our sending towns."

Brad James, finance manager for the Vermont Agency of Education, described the school's effort to make up the tuition gap as "good policy. It makes good sense, from their standpoint, to help offset those costs."

As for the possibility that Act 46 will lead to towns in newly-consolidated districts to stop offering students the choice of attending independent schools such as Sharon, James said such schools shouldn't feel threatened.

"Choice is completely up to the district," James said. "The state's not going to make anybody do it. They're feeling like the state is saying they have to give up choice."

However consolidations and school choice decisions evolve, TSA is pledging to maintain roughly its current enrollment.

"To exceed that capacity, we would have to seriously rethink what we do and how we do it," Head of School Michael Livingston said recently. "We want to be able to serve a cross-section of our communities and we strive to always keep that a priority."

Added Roe: "One of the key components of this school is its size. We had those discussions about whether we should try to enroll more, and the answer kept coming back 'No.' The 150-plus or minus is about the maximum where you can maintain that depth of connection."

Soon they'll be doing it without the yurts.

"In the end," Roe said, "the world of regulations took all the agonizing out, as we were told that they had been intended to be temporary, and if we wanted to change the building, they had to go."

Livingston described the yurts as "really emblematic of TSA. Representing frugality as well as functionality, they have served us really well over the years and in ways that we could never have imagined or expected. They have, in their own way, come to symbolize the school for many people. From UPS drivers, to visiting families, and returning alumni, they have become a symbol of the school. They are a reminder of how much you can do with so little."

Ten years after graduation, Alicia Freese is more impressed than ever with what the school's faculty, staff and parents have built.

"It created this really welcoming, comforting environment," said Freese, who went on to study international relations at Pomona College in California. "Once you were in that and accustomed to it, you were asked to step outside your comfort zone. ... They are really committed to giving a holistic education."

And now that times have changed, they're continuing to adapt.

"When I was there, it would have been out of reach to launch such an ambitious campaign," Freese said. "It's encouraging where they're at the point where they're planning for the future."

For more information about The Sharon Academy's capital campaign, visit [sharonacademy.org/supportingtsa/](http://sharonacademy.org/supportingtsa/).

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