

**2023: Annual Report of the Mary McDowell Friends School to the New York Quarterly Meeting**  
January 13, 2023

This year marks the ninth year of the MMFS- BMM Care Relationship Committee. During the 2021-2022 school year the committee met virtually for all of our meetings. At our first meeting of the 2022-2023 meeting in October 2022, we met in person at 110 Schermerhorn Street in the Meeting Room with some members joining virtually. For those of us in person, it was an emotional return to the Meeting Room. Seeing each other in person was a wonderful balm to the lengthy period of virtual meetings but throughout the past year, our committee continued to connect, collaborate and plan together as we work deliberately to strengthen the ties between the Meeting and the School through several ongoing and new programs.

Since our last report, the MMFS-BMM Care Relationship Committee membership has continued to include: Jill Waldman, Heidi Wexler and Richard White representing Brooklyn Monthly Meeting and Kristin Siciliani, Mark Doty, Ted Erhardt, Becky Givan and Beth Schneider, representing Mary McDowell Friends School Board and Faculty. Sue Wolfe, former MMFS Board of Trustees and member of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting, continues on the committee in an ex-officio manner.

During the 2021- 2022 school year, the Committee met four times and continued to discuss the ways that the school and meeting were navigating and managing during the pandemic. The committee considered how to maintain our previously built programs that fostered a relationship between the school and Meeting allowing for the deepening of MMFS' understanding of Quaker values and practices. We have also begun to discuss ways that MMFS might contribute their understanding and knowledge of working with young people with learning disabilities to the life of BMM Meeting.

Report on Past Programming (2021-2022):

Cemetery Work Days:

MMFS continued to participate in Cemetery Work Days. In the Spring 2022, families participated in a Cemetery Work Day that included a tour led by Bob Wilbur. In November 2022, middle school students returned to the Cemetery for a morning of raking leaves and clearing fallen branches. All participants also took part in a Silent Meeting.

Quakerism and Neurodiversity Group:

While discussing how MMFS might contribute and support BMM through our knowledge of learning disabilities, one of our committee members expressed an interest in building a space for families at BMM who are supporting neurodiverse family members. MMFS joined BMM at the inaugural meetings of these groups and will continue to provide any resources we can to this effort.

Historical Sleuthing

Last year, we hoped to find information or the minute in the Meeting records regarding the announcement of MMFS as a school. Our focus shifted when we were directed to other

historical documents. Through the leadership and collaboration of one of our BMM committee members, we have been in touch with a librarian at Swarthmore College who oversees the Peace Library which houses many of Mary McDowell's papers including several pamphlets she authored, articles from the New York Times ([article 1](#) and [article 2](#)) regarding her "firing" and reinstatement and most interesting, a document entitled, "[Board of Education of the City of New York: In the matter of the charges of conduct unbecoming a teacher preferred against Mary S. McDowell before the Board of Education of the City of New York.](#)" We are hoping to arrange a school visit to Swarthmore to visit the Peace Library and see these documents in person! What a treasure trove.

In addition, MMFS has located some information related to the announcement of the forming of Mary McDowell Friends School. Linked [here](#) is a copy of the program and below is a photo from the announcement ceremony.

#### 2022-2023 Activities Thus Far:

In person silent meetings have returned in all three MMFS school buildings. We are now meeting at the Lower School in the new Meeting House that we have been talking about since 2018. In late November, the benches arrived for the new Meeting House and we are now gathering and sitting on them. Our benches are designed based on the ones at 110 Schermerhorn Street.

In addition, we have traveled to 110 Schermerhorn Street for a Silent Meeting with students from the Upper School. The Middle School will be visiting the Meeting House for silence on November 15th. We hope to bring the Upper School back and have the Lower School attend a silence later in the Spring. As one Upper School student shared, "If I could have silent meeting in this room all the time, I would look forward to it". The 110 Schermerhorn Street Meeting Room carries a weighty spiritual history that even our newest high school students feel upon entry.

#### Future events:

- MMFS Families Invitation to Silent Meeting in January 2023
- MMFS/BFS/BMM Faculty and Staff Appreciation Day in April 2023
- MMFS Family Cemetery Work day in April/May 2023

#### Debbie's 30th Year

This year marks the 30th and final year of Debbie Zlotowitz's tenure as head of Mary McDowell Friends School. Debbie announced her retirement in December of 2021 and in June, the school announced the hiring of Andre Del Valle to succeed her starting in July 2022. We are all preparing for Debbie's retirement knowing that she leaves a lasting legacy at our school. In late October, Debbie was asked to speak at the Friends Council on Education on the Value of a Quaker Education. I have attached her speech here for your review. In her speech, Debbie echoes many of the core values that have guided her work at MMFS for the past 30 years demonstrating the powerful link between the Quaker beliefs in the Inner Light, Continuous Revelation and our commitment to teaching students with learning disabilities. As we celebrate her extraordinary career, we invite the NYQuarterly to join us in recognizing the impact Debbie

Zlotowitz has had on not only the students, families, staff and faculty at MMFS but also the wider community of Quaker schools.

Respectfully Submitted,  
MMFS-BMM Care Relationship Committee  
Mark Doty  
Mary Doty  
Ted Ehrhardt  
Becky Givan  
Beth Schneider  
Kristin Siciliani  
Jill Waldman  
Heidi Wexler  
Richard White  
Sue Wolfe

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

Debbie Zlotowitz, Panel Presentation/Speech to Friends Council on Education  
October 27, 2022

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I'm honored to be joining my esteemed colleagues on this panel, and I'm happy to be sharing my thoughts about the importance of Quaker education as it relates to the students of Mary McDowell Friends School, a school for students with learning disabilities.

In 1984, Mary McDowell Friends School opened with five students, in the basement of the Brooklyn Meeting House. It was named for Mary McDowell, an outstanding Quaker educator who was dismissed from her teaching position at the New York City Board of Ed when she refused to sign a loyalty oath in support of World War I. In attendance when the opening of our school was announced was civil rights leader and member of Brooklyn Quaker Meeting Bayard Rustin. We have a tradition of honoring notable Quakers by naming our classrooms after outstanding Quaker figures. To name just a few: We have the George Fox Room and the Lucretia Mott Room at our lower school, and Bayard Rustin House at our middle school.

To those of us who teach and learn here, the connection between Quaker education and special education is, hopefully, evident in everything we say and do.

Our mission statement lays out the relationship very clearly:

*Grounded in the Quaker values of equality, integrity, and social responsibility, we cultivate a diverse and anti-racist community in which all students can reach their full potential.*

“*A community in which all students can reach their full potential.*” That is the key to a Mary McDowell education. Our students come to us with a variety of individual skills, talents, and abilities, but also with a variety of challenges. We provide them with ways to reach their full potential by understanding how they learn, by drawing on their strengths, and by encouraging them to meet their challenges. At Mary McDowell Friends School, we ensure that every learner shines.

We talk all the time about “revealing brilliance” in our students. In fact, “Revealing Brilliance” is the tagline of our logo. And what, after all, is brilliance? *It’s light.* So when we reveal brilliance in a student, we are revealing their “inner light.”

And that is a fundamental Quaker belief—that anyone can have access to “inner light.” It reinforces our belief that any student can succeed, given the right support. Our students are smart, but their struggles with learning are real. We teach our students to say, “Yes, this is hard for me because I have a learning disability. But this is what I’m going to do to compensate for it, and this is what I need to do it.”

A fundamental Quaker practice that particularly benefits students with learning disabilities is Meeting for Worship, which we hold in large groups weekly. It is a vital part of our school experience. Silent Meeting teaches our students important skills like sitting quietly, calming their bodies and their impulses, and engaging in self-reflection during a stimulating school day. Plus, “sharing” gives them significant practice over the years speaking to a large group, a skill we all know is one of the most important for students’ futures. The Mary McDowell Friends School community, including our families, values Silent Meeting as a way to support one another and to grow together. In addition to our regular meetings, we hold Meeting for Worship in times of joy—such as on the eve on Commencement Day or to celebrate the accomplishments of members of our community. Our community also turns to Silent Meeting for solace: after 9/11; to mourn the death of a student; after the election of Donald Trump; and in the aftermath of January 6.

At Mary McDowell Friends School, we translate George Fox’s words “that of God” to the belief in “that of Good” in everyone. We strive to develop a community of learners who recognize “that of Good” in each other and work to ensure that our actions, both as individuals and as a community, foster this belief, in our school and in society.

As part of our adherence to the Quaker testimonies of peace, equality, community, and integrity, we are called upon to live our values by embedding social justice and social activism in our teaching, our training, and our policies. Throughout our community, we are learning to view our work through a lens of anti-racism, so that our curriculum, our hiring and admissions practices, and professional development all move us toward our goal of becoming an anti-racist school. When we assign reading, we ask, “Whose story is being told? Whose perspective is being shared?” We strive to amplify previously marginalized voices and build a community that actively and intentionally disrupts moments of racism, classism, and sexism.

We challenge our community and in return, our community challenges us. It was a student-led protest, for instance, that led us to change the name of a classroom originally named for William Penn—who was, after all, a slaveholder—to Benezet Room, after Anthony Benezet, a teacher and vocal opponent of slavery in 18th century Philadelphia. Our students have organized demonstrations against gun violence and participated in youth climate strikes. It is our families who organize our annual MLK Day of Service. And every other year a group of faculty, staff, parents, and students goes on the MMFS Civil Rights trip to Montgomery, Selma, Atlanta, and Birmingham, visiting monuments and museums of the civil rights movement and “walking in the footsteps of history.”

One of my strongest beliefs after 30 years as head of school at Mary McDowell Friends School is that both special education and Quaker education provide Excellent Education. They both start from where the student is, and they both help them reach their full potential.

I want to end on a personal note about Quaker education. At the end of this year, I will have spent 30 years as the head of a Quaker school. I did not set out to spend the better part of my career teaching and hopefully living Quaker values. I am the daughter of a rabbi. Nothing in my background prepared me to be the head of a Quaker school. But my life has been considerably enriched by my years steeped in Quakerism, and I will continue to carry the tenets with me. If I live my life finding and bringing **Peace**, acting with **Integrity**, contributing to a **Community**, working for **Equality**, and being of **Service**, then I will have reaped the same benefits of a Quaker education that I hope our students have. Maybe once I retire in June, I can finally add the first “S” — **Simplicity**—to my life.



Kay Edstene, Bayard Rustin, Pamela Wood el-Okdah and Lillie Pope  
March 13, 1984  
Mary McDowell Center for Learning is announced