



Welcome to this 21st edition of the Summerhill News

In this bumper edition you can read about Alexander Khost's visit to Summerhill during International Schools week, Zoe's update on Summerhill's continuing fight with the Dep't of Education and there are interviews with Isabel and Tristan, two former Summerhill pupils who left school at the end of last term.

Happy reading, *Steve Fawdry (Editor)*

A Visit to Summerhill....

Possibly the Happiest School in the World?

By Alexander Khost



Summerhill students along with students and staff from five countries during International Schools Week 2015.

"When people come here, they don't say that Neill's writing inspired them, but rather, that Neill's writing changed their life," I heard Zoe Readhead say in a meeting I attended last week. Zoe is the principal of [Summerhill](#), a ninety-four year old boarding school in Leiston, England and the daughter of A. S. Neill, the school's founder and the author of many transformative books. I am one among the self-proclaimed life-changed people.

Many years before, across a huge ocean far away in the suburbs outside New York City, Summerhill seemed like an unattainable fantasy to my fifteen year old public-schooled mind, but the very thought of it, just the possibility that a school could be as such made me come alive and has had me so for the twenty-five years since.

A life's dedication

I have dedicated my life to Neill's simple philosophy, Freedom not License. At Summerhill, children can do as they please (freedom) so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others (license). That means, for example, students only go to the classes they are interested in attending, but cannot play their guitar at 2am while everyone else is sleeping. It is a century old self-governed school run predominantly by the young people living there.

An invitation from Summerhill

My partner, Amanda Rose Wilder, made a documentary entitled [Approaching the Elephant](#) about the first year at a school I founded in New Jersey based on Neill's principles. The film debuted last year and was discovered online by Philipp Klaus, a Summerhill teacher and house parent. Philipp invited Amanda and I to attend the school's annual International Schools Week and so, among thirty-six staff and students from free schools in South Korea, Italy, Spain, and Germany, we found ourselves immersed in a week long sampling of what life is like at Summerhill.

Getting there

Neill once said that "Summerhill is possibly the happiest school in the world." If I had any doubts of that claim, I was certainly assured that it was true last week, as I joined the ranks of the happy community. Amanda and I arrived at the Saxmundham train station and took a fifteen minute cab ride to the small village of Leiston on the eastern shore of England and onto the many acres of land that houses the Summerhill community.



Kids taking time out to chat

So many rules!

After being shown our tent among the many tents to house the international guests in the horseless horse field, we were shown around the grounds by P., a thirteen year old student and member of

the committee that put together this International Schools Week. P. briefed us on the most important of the school rules.

Paradoxically from the school that has inspired so many stories of freedom, my first feeling at Summerhill was one of panic should I break any of seemingly many stringent rules. One of the most common misconceptions of Summerhill (and other free schools alike), is that it lacks structure. The massive law book and specific visitors rules I reviewed were the confirmation that quite the opposite is true. Summerhill has a great deal of structure, perhaps twice that of a typical community. To successfully allow everyone to have an equal voice there, it must be that way. Whereas in the more conventional top-down environment many of us are used to, less rules are needed, since authority presides. Just think of any decision-making environment you have been in, where you try to give equal voice to each member of the group— it is perhaps much easier in the short term to have one person make all of the decisions but is it as fair that way, is it respected and obeyed? Self-governance is indeed governance, just a form of structure many of us are not accustomed to, having been raised to do as we are told, not as we all decide together.



Toasting marshmallows during International Schools week

Bedtimes

Amanda and I learned of the complex system of bedtimes at the boarding school (which I could not accurately repeat without a rule book cheat sheet in front of me). It began with the youngest children being in their rooms at 8:30pm and lights out fifteen or so minutes later, working its way up to the older 11pm bedtime children and the oldest of whom have no curfew at all but need to respect the quiet time mandated by after hours.

There are Beddies Officers, community members who are over thirteen who are elected to the Beddies Officer committee, who go around and lovingly tuck in all of the children each night. In my questioning of many in the community, the bedtime rules seemed to be some of the most important to them. And not once in a school of more than seventy sleeping children and a dozen or so staff, did I ever witness the bedtime rules being broken.

...and more rules

There are laws to regulate meal schedules, class schedules, event schedules, the mandates of how the two trampolines and various skateboard ramps can and cannot be used and so on. But somehow within this blinding list of laws, time there seemed so simple, so... un-bureaucratically just and efficient.

School meetings

The school meeting proved to be the finest decision-making process I have ever been witness to. All free schools have a weekly school meeting (Summerhill has two) in which school rules are discussed and voted on (or come to a consensus on in some cases, depending on the school's decision-making process) and at Summerhill, where members of the community can be "brought up" by other members for breaking laws or personal grievances. I have been to the school meetings of perhaps a dozen different free schools and by far Summerhill's was the most impressive. Sixteen year old I. ran the meeting both times I was there (meeting chairs at Summerhill go through chair training and then rotate weekly upon election by the school meeting each Friday) and the meeting secretary, G.– with the kindest smile– who was about the same age, sat next to her keeping the meeting minutes.

Discussion included voting the international guests into the meeting (so I was told, as I stood outside hoping to get in!), a discussion on one student who was brought up for saying mean things to another student (who was given a "strong warning," which was recorded and could result in, for example, a work fine if there were subsequent offenses), a request to use £15 to buy a cake to celebrate the 70th anniversary of UNESCO (the organization that wrote the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)), announcements of the pool opening, and many other topics. Each meeting I was at lasted about forty-five minutes and was run so smoothly, I can only hope the U.N. takes note.

Getting to know students and staff

I spent my mornings sitting at a picnic table front and center on the school grounds, painting a picture for a friend's children we were to visit in London once we left Summerhill. I secretly sat there hoping children would approach me, ask to paint alongside me (with the many extra canvas boards I consciously brought along with me on the trip for just that purpose) and strike up conversation. On day one M. approached, a ten year old or so boy, and at the moment, the only student from the United States. He had just started attending the school half a year prior. He unfalteringly painted his vision on his canvas (a city skyline that cleverly reversed itself when held upside down), asked if he could keep it, cheered when I nodded yes, and ran up to his room to assumingly hang it. Our conversation consisted mainly of how he got here, how he felt about the school (he loved it but missed his family), and many bad jokes by both of us that continued throughout the week (and somehow lost me fifty pence in a fixed game of rock, paper, scissor, where M. pulled out "bazooka").

On the soccer field (football pitch), I secretly laughed to myself as I struggled to figure out who was staff and who was student. The game was intense and serious but aside from keeping score, I heard not one competitive remark amongst the players (even despite the fact that my team was crushingly defeated 11-1). In capture the flag the next day, I found myself most seriously stomping through stinging nettles on the enemy grounds, only to be discovered by Michael, one of the staff, who assured me he was not playing. It was at that moment that I, the forty year old adult I am, looked into the eyes of another adult who laughed at me in the bushes that I realized that I was finally fulfilling my twenty-five year dream. I had made it to Summerhill, warmly and kindly invited to share in a moment here.

The next day I had great success at the picnic tables, where a group of Italian girls joined me and painted sun filled skies and flowers while others stood around and braided coloured wire into bracelets. At lunch Amanda and I met F., who spent the rest of the meals that week giggling as she stole Amanda's seat when she got up for a drink and would poke me in the arm and say "dead." That evening, Philipp invited us to his house's bedtime, which was the warmest, most nice moment of the trip. Bedtime simply consisted of having perhaps a cup of tea and toast while sitting around and sharing stories before the brushing of teeth and the Beddies Officers coming for the lights out tuck-in.



At the picnic tables with some of the Italian visitors.

The highlight of the week, however, came most unexpectedly at dusk on Thursday evening, two nights before we were set to leave. Sitting with Amanda in my usual spot on the picnic bench but now listless, since I had finished the painting for my friend's children, we were approached by F. and E., a friend of F.'s, who inquired if we had been up Big Beech. We followed their lead after they saw our blank faces, anticipating not much more than perhaps a silly joke. We were led behind Class 2, the building housing the classrooms for the second youngest group of students at the school, where we looked up, and then up further to see the most giant beech tree I have ever laid eyes on.

Like a scene out of Alice in Wonderland, the two girls led Amanda and I up a ladder and sat with us out on an enormous branch twenty some odd feet in the air (I did not dare climb to one of the higher branches that our young counterparts more confidently walked along like trained tightrope walkers). They told us how the tree had been here since the school had begun and about the boys in the past who had presumably climbed to the highest branches, I want to say, a good fifty or sixty feet in the air. They told us of their time at Summerhill and of their families at home and made up stories for us. And as we walked away to attend an adult get together in the staff lounge we were invited to (again discovered by Michael, smiling, looking up at us in the tree, "I heard your voices...") we overheard one girl say to the other, "I like them." And my heart warmed as I felt, for a moment, as an accepted part of something bigger, something wonderful.



Goodbye Summerhill!

We postponed our plans to leave for London Friday afternoon to attend the last night party in honour of the international guests. A campfire and marshmallows and dancing and limbo and goodbyes followed. Early Saturday morning Amanda and I zipped our tent for the last time and jumped in a taxi we had reserved the day before (we learned!) right after one last look at the school grounds and one last cup of tea. We sped off to meet old friends in London and to take a marvellous charge at a rope swing at [Glamis Adventure Playground](#), a junk playground in London that supports free-play for children, but that's a story of children's freedom for another day.

Alexander Khost is an educator and artist currently in the process of setting up and adventure playground (play-ground.nyc) in Brooklyn, NY.

Picture: F. on a branch up Big Beech

Our continuing fight with the DfE.....



Zoe Readhead, Principal, Summerhill School

For the last two years or so we have been in correspondence with the Department of Education through our lawyers, the very supportive and capable Mark Stephens and Imogen MacLean who took us through our case in 2000 and in doing so learned probably more about Summerhill than anybody!

The DfE wrote to us saying that they no longer planned to follow our court agreement ratified by the Independent Schools Tribunal at the Royal Courts of Justice in March 2000.

Now I, naively it turns out, thought that an agreement was a mutual thing and that neither party would be able to back out of it without consent from the other party - but there was a clause in the Statement of Intent which says:

2. This statement of intent is on the understanding that the Secretary of State cannot and does not fetter his own discretion nor that of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools to exercise their statutory functions in relation to schools.

The DfE are saying that the agreement is now fettering their discretion because it singles out Summerhill for special treatment from Ofsted.

We feel, of course, that we cannot put our school at risk by running up huge legal expenses -and in an open court (the last time it was a tribunal) if we were to lose we would be liable for these government expenses as well so, sadly, we have come to the end of this particular avenue.

We are now preparing for our next inspection which will be carried out without our experts present to help guide the inspectors through what is, for them, completely new educational territory. The DfE have made it perfectly clear that we will be treated EXACTLY the same as all other schools.

Bearing in mind that the inspectors will all have attended mainstream education and probably have taught in mainstream education I think this puts us at a distinct disadvantage just as if our local doctor were to be asked to perform surgery on an elephant! We are not panicking, but I personally feel very bitter and angry that everything we fought for in 1999 has now been lost.

The one point that has always been a problem for us is that we cannot and will not track and assess our children when they are not in class, and of course our classes are not compulsory. This has caused huge problems for us in the past and we can only hope that it will not do so in the future.

We are working hard on this. Summerhill is a precious place that ought to be under the auspices of the National Trust or a United Nations World Heritage site, not pilloried by an Education Department too shortsighted to value what it can offer the future, nor respectful enough of its importance in the history of Education.

I might be jumping the gun here but I am fearful of the way the education system seems to be heading and if it impacts on Summerhill the way it could - then we could be in for trouble....

Please do contact me with your thoughts, x Zoë. Zoë@summerhillschool.co.uk

Interviews with Summerhill kids

By Steve Fawdry



Isabel

Isabel, aged 17, half Swiss, half German, has a brother Thomas who also went to S/hill and a half brother and sister.

How long have you been at Summerhill?

I started when I was 9 - seven years ago.

Why did you come to Summerhill?

We lived in the Sudan and there was a lot of civil unrest so my dad, Thomas and I came to look at Summerhill where we would be safer.

How did it feel when you first started at Summerhill?

I found it easy to adapt and fit in because there are so many different types of people.

Tristan

Tristan, aged 16, only child, from Spain.

How long have you been at Summerhill?

I started at age 11 – 5 years ago.

Why did you come to Summerhill?

My mum had been involved in alternative education for some time and was very keen. I first visited Summerhill when I was 3.

How did it feel when you first started at Summerhill?

Very hard. I didn't speak any English but there was Esther (staff) who spoke Spanish. It was difficult at first but then I came out on top.

I wasn't home sick at all but just really excited to be here.

What makes Summerhill special?

It prepares you a lot more to take responsibility and deal with your own problems than mainstream school. With adults being treated as equal it's a unique experience.

What is your favourite Summerhill game?

Rough prisoners.

How much poc (pocket money) do you get and what do you spend it on?

£15. I spend it on food that I can cook and hair dye.

When you leave Summerhill, what will you miss the most?

Friends because we live so closely together.

If you could change one Summerhill rule what would it be?

To be able to swim in the outdoor pool at night.

If you could make one new rule, what would that rule be and why?

I'd like to relocate the trampoline under roofs of the buildings here so that we could jump off them onto the trampoline. We used to do it at home in Thailand, it was so much fun!

What do you most look forward to in the school holidays?

The weather and seeing my parents.

What is the best kind of day at Summerhill?

I like being outside on sunny days with lots of other people.

What makes Summerhill special?

A sense of community. We all know each other and even the person I hate the most – I still care for them.

What is your favourite Summerhill game?

Murder game. It's a role play game that takes place over a couple of days.

How much poc (pocket money) do you get and what do you spend it on?

£10. Where possible I put money aside for a new PC but recently I've bought new headphones, mouse and pens.

When you leave Summerhill, what will you miss the most?

I don't think I'll ever be in a such a similar situation as I am now where I'm so close to people. I'm deeply bonded to them.

If you could change one Summerhill rule what would it be?

Health & Safety laws. I disagree with almost all of them. They're out of place here but I live with it ok.

If you could make one new rule, what would that rule be and why?

Like Isabel, to be able to swim in the pool at night.

What do you most look forward to in the school holidays?

Seeing my parents as I've spent so little time with them. The weather too.

What is the best kind of day at Summerhill?

On sunny days everyone's outside playing games. The pool's open and there's a lot of energy and fun.

Is there anything you don't like about Summerhill?

Not really, no.

Favourite meal at Summerhill?

Roast dinner.

What is your most memorable meeting case so far?

The kids called a special meeting as the staff were elsewhere so couldn't attend. We proposed 'no bedtime' and 'no wake up time' for the following morning. Also, instead of saying 'here, here' when voting, we had to say 'true dat'! The staff were very upset that we'd called a meeting behind their backs.

Is there anything you feel you have added or given to Summerhill?

Just being part of the Summerhill community is a very big thing that you individually add to Summerhill.

What is the most important thing you have learnt at Summerhill?

Independence and responsibility

What would you say was your biggest achievement, or greatest pleasure at Summerhill?

I really enjoyed helping to build the half pipe. Lots of people helped and we played music outside – everyone was excited for this big new thing.

What will you be doing next when you leave? Home, college, job or what...?

I'm going to college in Italy to do the International Baccalaureate and I'm looking forward to being with my parents again.

Finally, is there anything you would like to add...your last word or thought about school?

Basically, it's great and I love it here!

Is there anything you don't like about Summerhill?

Nothing specific.

Favourite meal at Summerhill?

Curry with beans or rice or in a wrap.

What is your most memorable meeting case so far?

Some laws weren't working so someone proposed that we drop all laws, wait a few days to see what happened and then redesign them. But instead we just came to terms with the laws that weren't working.

Is there anything you feel you have added or given to Summerhill?

I organised a couple of murder games and suggested there should be 2 murderers which has continued to this day.

What is the most important thing you have learnt at Summerhill?

Since I've been here I've realised that it doesn't matter what people think of you.

What would you say was your biggest achievement, or greatest pleasure at Summerhill?

To be part of something greater than me and to meet people from all over the world and to get to know them in such depth. I've enjoyed learning and taken pleasure from the way the school works.

What will you be doing next when you leave? Home, college, job or what...?

I'm hopefully going to college in Norwich. I'll get a part-time job to help cover some of my costs and for spending.

Finally, is there anything you would like to add...your last word or thought about school?

See below...

The Trust

By Steve Fawdry, Trustee

The A. S. Neill Summerhill Trust is a registered charity whose purpose is to promote the educational philosophy, ideas, life and writings of A. S. Neill, and to provide bursaries or other forms of financial assistance to school pupils.

We currently have a policy of making bursaries to existing pupils only. For information on how to apply for a bursary, parents can contact the school office 01728 830540.

So far during 2015 we have awarded 4 bursaries totalling £5,500 to existing Summerhill pupils.

Last but not least, a very big thank you to all our regular donors, those who donate via the website and to the Summerhill parents, we couldn't do it without you!

Thank you!

Despite what people think about studying being optional at Summerhill, I decided to study and went to lessons for 3 years to get 7 GCSE's, not 11 years as many kids do! It's an illusion that people won't study if not made to. Happiness is not something you can buy, people should be encouraged to follow their hearts and pursue their interests.



If you'd like to make a difference to a child's life you too can make a donation to the Trust. Whether it is a one off or regular donation, we will spend it wisely.

£25 means a child can join their friends on a school trip.

£50 will pay for two extra-curricular lessons.

Make a difference!

DONATE HERE NOW

£100 will pay for travel costs incurred by the External Affairs Committee during their promotion of Summerhill & the ideas/philosophies of A. S. Neill.

£1,000 will provide assistance over two terms for parents who are struggling to pay their child's school fees.

A regular donation made by standing order will become an important part of our 'bread and butter'. To set this up please contact the school office on 01728 830540.

Andrew Morton and the Big Beech



Steve Fawdry (left) and Andrew Morton, standing in front of the Big Beech

Earlier this year, Andrew Morton, ex-Summerhillian (1949-1954) visited Summerhill to hand over a donation to the A. S. Neill Summerhill Trust, represented by the Treasurer, Steve Fawdry.

Andrew told the story of when he was a kid at Summerhill and how he was given a big rope which he hung in an oak tree on the edge of the Summerhill grounds. Later it was moved and became the first rope swing to be hung on the Big Beech, a huge tree that generations of Summerhill kids have climbed and swung from.

Both Andrew's father and uncle taught at Summerhill and his daughter Zoe went to the school too. Andrew still keeps in touch with several Summerhill friends and would love to hear from anyone who knows him. His phone number is 01263 514275 if you'd like to get in touch.

Visit the **NEW** Summerhill School website [here](#)

TED “Ideas worth Spreading”

Links to Video talks on education

[Sir Ken Robinson says schools kill creativity](#)

[Sugata Mitra: The child-driven education](#)

[Our digital lives, Eli Pariser: Beware online "filter bubbles"](#)

[Nick Thorpe, Author of ‘Urban Worrier’ mentions how a visit to Summerhill inspired him](#)

[Arvind Gupta, Science toy maker “Toys from Trash”](#)

Suggest some more to.... summerhillnewsletter@gmail.com



A.S. Neill talks about freedom and his Summerhill School in England. Summerhill is often said to be the first school based on freedom and democratic ideals. The documentary was called "[Here and Now](#)".

More interesting videos

[Make Your Voice Heard: Discover Democratic Education](#)

[Think Global School!](#)

Suggest some more to.... summerhillnewsletter@gmail.com



Links to pages related to education

[A. S. Neill's Summerhill School](#)

[EUDEC](#)

[Alternative education resource organization \(AERO\)](#)

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All the Summerhill Newsletters can be viewed at Dropbox [here](#)

vimeo

SUMMERHILL

A four part double BAFTA award winning children's drama made by Tiger Aspect about life at Summerhill, culminating in the battle and court case with OFSTED in 2000 [here](#).

Organisations & Resources

Links to organisations and resources

[Personalised Education Now](#)

Personalised Education Now promotes education based on learner-managed learning within a framework of democratic values and practices. An educator becomes, pre-dominantly, 'the guide on the side' rather than 'the sage on the stage'.

[Education Otherwise](#)

Whether you're thinking about home educating or are already doing it, Education Otherwise provides information, guidance and resources to help you achieve this.

[EUDEC](#)

EUDEC is a non-profit organisation that promotes democratic education as a sensible educational model for all democratic states. Its [members](#) are individuals, [schools](#) and institutions throughout Europe with decades of experience in democratic education.

[Arvind Gupta Toys](#)

Arvind Gupta is a science toy maker - he shares his passion for toys and books through his [website](#). Everyday 50,000 children across the world view his films in 18 languages. Also 15,000 passionate books on Education, Peace, Science, Environment and Maths are downloaded every day.

[Other Education](#)

The Journal of Educational Alternatives

If you have something interesting you'd like to share with Summerhill readers that is related to Summerhill school, please do get in touch with me.

Steve Fawdry, Editor.

The next Summerhill News will be mailed out in February 2016

Copy deadline is 31st December.

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