

ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

Learning Under the Rainbow:

A Profile of Rainbow Community School's Renee Owen

As executive director of Rainbow Community School, Renee Owen sees education through a colorful lens



By Citizen-Times staff writer,
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Renee Owen on the front
lawn of Rainbow
Community School on
Haywood Road in West
Asheville. / John Fletcher /
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There was a time many years ago when Renee Owen lived in Hawaii and believed the key to changing the world was for everyone to get back to nature, which in her case meant living “feral” — clad only in a sarong, carrying a knife everywhere she went and cooking all her food over a campfire near her little tarp strung to a tree.

In the same vein, Owen married the most radical man she could find, lived with him and their children in a trailer in the middle of Southwest nowhere for more than a decade and managed to survive on earnings of less than \$6,000 a year.

Today, as executive director of Rainbow Community School — formerly called Rainbow Mountain Children's School — Owen has found a more conventional method of changing the world.

Her mission now is to oversee children's learning with creative passion while finding time to brainstorm with educators from Harvard University and write respected manifestos on the state of education in America.

She has traded her sarong for knee-length skirts and sensible shoes and cooks over wood fires only when family and friends gather for barbecues and music-making in the backyard of their middle-class West Asheville home.

She bikes to work most days to save fossil fuel, yet she's more likely to bang out a few keys of Chopin or Debussy than spin a disc to relive her youthful days following Jerry Garcia across the land.

But Owen hasn't forsaken her yearning to look at life in more revolutionary ways, to see possibilities beyond the mainstream, especially when it comes to educating children.

It's one of the reasons Rainbow's board of directors hired her six years ago to lead the alternative school that was founded in 1977, and why enrollment has increased dramatically during her tenure — up from 125 students last year to 163 as this school year begins.

As Rainbow Community School unveils a new name and logo, it is also unveiling a dream for future expansion and additional programming to become a greater community resource in West Asheville.

That dream includes offering classes for families, a performance hall for nonprofits, green space for permaculture projects and office and studio spaces for artists who can in turn enhance the education of students.

“When Rainbow grows, it's going to be very transforming for the whole neighborhood, adding yet more vibrancy to a great community,” Owen said.

“The vision is very exciting, and our new name and logo capture the intent and evolution of Rainbow,” Owen said. “As one parent said, ‘I feel like the best of our history is being reborn

into a new school, and the new name and brand represent that.’”

Loss of innocence

Owen's journey from Deadhead to esteemed educator has been a lively one indeed, especially considering that she and her older sister were raised in what she describes as “a small, agricultural town in Minnesota exactly like Lake Wobegon.”

“We were Lutherans. We lived across the street from the elementary school where my mom taught fifth grade for 30 years,” Owen said. “My dad cut hair at a little old-fashioned barbershop in town, and it was mostly farmers and little boys who got haircuts there.”

Her childhood was spent mostly outdoors, playing sports and kick-the-can with neighborhood kids. She loved riding a tractor with her uncle at her grandfather's farm, and when she wasn't outside, she was playing classical piano, drawing or writing stories.

Admitting with embarrassment to being an overachiever, Owen was salutatorian of her senior class, lettered in three sports and was most valuable in tennis. She can't remember how many awards and scholarships she received at graduation — in speech, piano, art, athletics and academics — but there were more than a few. When she went off to the University of Michigan, Owen's idyllic world changed. For the first time, she met “people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, which was wonderful.” She also learned “what the CIA was doing in Central America and South Africa, and it was a devastating loss of innocence — how could our government lie to us and be so cruel?”

“I literally did not know there was so much suffering



in the world, and the thought of some of that suffering being caused by my government was devastating, because that meant my parents and I — everyone I knew — was culpable,” Owen said. “I took it really personally, and wanted to help make everything right.”

She got involved with “a bunch of liberal organizations” and started going to protests. And then she discovered Jerry Garcia.

“I don't know how many Dead shows I saw, but it was a lot,” Owen said. “It was a very liberating experience, and it helped me to not take everything so seriously.”

No humdrum life

Owen majored in art in college, rejecting her mother's profession because “it seemed too boring, and I wanted to do something more exciting.”

“Ironically, I found being an artist quite boring — too much time alone in the studio and social gatherings at pretentious art gallery openings that weren't any fun at all,” she said. “My work in education, on the other hand, has been an incredible adventure and far from boring.”

With her college degree secured, Owen moved from political activism to a quest for spiritual enlightenment, which led her to the sarong and tarp in Hawaii. It also led her to her future husband, Scott Owen, now a jewelry-maker, radio host, social activist, farmer and doorman at The Admiral on Saturday nights.

“Scott was the most radical man I'd ever met, so I married him,” Owen said with a grin. “I remember

telling him that I didn't ever want my life to be humdrum, and I knew it would be interesting with him. Fortunately, he really loved me, and he has a huge heart, or it could have been a total mess." It was a little messy, partly because Scott was not wired to work a 9-to-5 job, "so you can imagine we were pretty poor, especially since I was pregnant or nursing for most of 10 years," Owen said. "Plus, in the remote area where we lived, there were no jobs."

Living in poverty in Hawaii was at first a "political choice," but Owen wanted to own land, which was too expensive on the islands. So they left Hawaii and put \$3,000 down on property on the Colorado-Utah border, where they lived for 15 years while Scott grew most of their food and made jewelry to sell at craft shops.

"It was so far away from everything that we had to drive 50 miles through miles of switchbacks to get to a grocery store in Moab, Utah," Owen said. "Like I said, being poor was a choice at first, but after a while I felt very stuck, and it seemed impossible to ever dig our way out of poverty. I never felt secure because I never knew how any expenses would get paid, but I'm glad I went through that."

Creating a school

Meanwhile, their older daughter, Mesa, was nearing school age and was facing a 1 1/2-hour bus ride each way to attend the nearest school. So Owen founded her own: Paradox Valley Charter School, now an award-winning institution turning out high academic achievers.

Every one of the 19 children in grades K-6 who lived within a 30-mile radius attended the school its first year, and more than half had a parent or other immediate family member who was incarcerated, Owen said.

"When you work at a school in a tiny, remote place, you learn about what goes on in every home; the stories of neglect, incest and abuse I could tell you would curl your hair," she said.

"This was another huge loss of innocence for me, and I suddenly was on a mission to save these kids and get them an education so they could break this legacy of poverty and abuse."

Owen started "writing grants like crazy" and raised more than \$1 million for the tiny school in the desert, beginning with a "jackpot" grant of Annenberg Rural Challenge funds for place-based/project-based alternative learning in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School



of Education — with whom Owen continues a relationship today.

"I didn't even have a degree in education, and all of a sudden I was principal of my own school and involved with HGSE," Owen said. "It was very exciting and a great method to use with these kids who needed to learn in alternative ways, in ways that really motivated and engaged them."

Leap of faith

Owen went on to add an arts and academics after-school program and founded a public library for the valley so all residents could have access to literature and computers.

She was asked to help other schools in the state with charter school accreditation and was hired with grant funding to write a book about project-based learning, which she co-wrote with Harvard's Carla Fontaine. Meanwhile, Owen became a certified teacher and earned her master's degree in educational leadership.

Over the next few years, students who had some of the lowest test scores in the state when Paradox Valley opened were in the top 10 percent academically. The school received a Colorado School of Excellence Award, one of its teachers won Charter School Teacher of the Year, and a group of students traveled to the Kennedy Center in Washington to perform their

bluegrass music.

"I still stay in touch and get news of these kids," Owen said. "They sweep the awards at the county high school, and it's remarkable to see them going to college and getting scholarships."

With Mesa nearing graduation from eighth grade — Paradox Valley had grown to preschool through eighth grade by then — the family made the difficult decision to uproot.

"I gave up everything I had worked for — our farm and my school — without even knowing what I would do next," Owen said. "It was the most emotional decision I ever made, and a huge leap of faith."

Date with destiny

Owen began applying for other school leadership positions, "but none of them were going to allow me the freedom I had at Paradox to do what really works for kids," she said. "Public education was becoming so test-focused that it was hard to imagine teaching in a traditional school."

Scott encouraged her to apply to private schools, which offer more freedom than publics, "but I felt a huge conflict."

"After serving at-risk kids for eight years at Paradox and working for social justice in one form or another all my adult life, I couldn't get passionate about working at a (mainstream) private school — and then I found Rainbow," she said.

"The executive director position was listed on a Columbia University site for educators, and I knew I had found a school like none other — I knew my destiny was to work there," she said. "I had never even heard of Asheville. I just thought the school sounded amazing."

When Owen arrived at Rainbow, "it was a really magical place that was ready to become more professional, and when the board hired me, they wanted someone who would nurture everything that was special about Rainbow while ramping up academic rigor," she said. "I think a lot of people don't realize how much it's changed since 2007."

Leader and friend

Claudia Konijn, chair of the Rainbow board of directors, said the change has been significant.

"Before Renee came on, I felt the school was a loose collection of often brilliant teachers and motivated administrators who were inspired by the roots of the school and its possibilities, and tried as best they could to contribute to it," Konijn said.

"Renee has taken everything that was already present and welded it together into a solid framework for building on," she said. "She hired the right people, shined a light on the weaknesses, refined the purpose and contributed expertise and many necessary tools to allow the school to grow and flower."

Seventh- and eighth-grade teacher Susan Waddell said Rainbow "has shifted in Renee's wake, all in positive ways, from greater enrollment to a more concrete purpose that is understood and consistent from staff to the students and families."

"I've worked with Renee for six years, and my admiration for her grows with each year; she is willing to take chances and also willing to admit defeat or acknowledge when she has made a mistake, which is a wonderful trait for a leader," Waddell said.

"She respects us and seeks guidance from us, which lifts our spirits and confidence as a team."

Owen is also a friend to her staff members, Waddell said.

"At my wedding, Renee boogied like I have never seen anyone cut a rug before — she can throw back, laugh and love life with the best of them," she said. When Waddell's older child, now 4, was born six weeks prematurely following a difficult pregnancy, Owen was there for her.

"Renee came to visit me in the hospital the day before he had to be 'taken' via C section," Waddell said. "We cried, we laughed ... and that moment is a memory I will never forget."

'A whole new level'

Rainbow parent Elana Kann, whose daughter graduated from eighth grade in the spring, praised Owen's "brilliant hiring decisions" and focus on continuity in what's taught from one grade to another, and said her insistence on quality training "has clearly paid off in increasing effective, inspired teaching."

"This woman is so open to anything that works, anything that moves the school in a forward, dynamic direction. In her quiet, firm way, she fosters cooperation, open communication, trust, empowerment and deep understanding of what students and teachers need to do their best," Kann said.

"Renee has a strong sense of what the world needs from our children as they mature, and she keeps on top

of evidence-based, cutting-edge teaching methods," Kann said. "My daughter has thrived there, has felt safe, loved, and stimulated there, and has been mourning her loss of such a special school as she moves on from eighth grade."

Marketing professional Elly Wells, who has worked with Owen on the "rebranding" of Rainbow, including its new logo, said Owen "is taking Rainbow to a whole new level, evolving the school into a terrific choice among all the options in this area."

"Rainbow has developed into a serious alternative school that is getting the attention of a lot of families," Wells said. "And by alternative I don't mean obscure or odd, but so committed to the whole person represented in each student."

"I saw, wholesale, during my visits to Rainbow how the administration and staff there live the ideal that when a kid feels connected and understood, wonderful things can happen in that child's development."

Aiden Cundiff, who graduated from Rainbow last spring and will now attend SILSA at Asheville High, broke it down this way.

"Most schools, you dread going to the principal's office, but you never dreaded it when Renee called," he said. "It's like Renee was just part of our family — our home family and our Rainbow family."

Learners and leaders

Owen literally glows when she talks about her school, whose stated mission is "To develop accomplished, creative and confident learners who are prepared to be leaders in building a compassionate, environmentally sustainable world."

Almost all of Rainbow's teachers have master's degrees or post-graduate training, from schools such as Emory, Cornell, Brown, Duke, Elon and New York University. Rainbow alumni have gone on to become Rhodes Scholars, attorneys, Broadway actors, entrepreneurs, teachers, nonprofit leaders, chiropractors and musicians, and to succeed in many other careers.

"These are people who learned from Rainbow to really pursue their passions," Owen said.

"At Rainbow, we create an atmosphere of joy and acceptance," she said. "Our teachers have such a deep respect for each child that they really accept them for who they are and help them learn and grow from that place, and once children feel completely accepted and at ease, it is very easy to learn."

Only one part of her life gives Owen greater joy: her own family.

Mesa, 20, is a junior at Kenyon College in Ohio and will spend the entire school year in Grenada, Spain. When she's not in school or working, she volunteers with Big Brothers/Big Sisters in Asheville and tutors teens on probation in Ohio.

Johanna, 16, who has had her own radio show on Asheville FM since she was 14, won the Harvard Award at Carolina Day School this year for "intellectual curiosity" and is about to enter a gap-year higher education program at Black Mountain Self-Organized Learning Environment (SOLE).

Geronimo, 14, who graduated in the spring from Rainbow, won a merit scholarship to attend high school at Carolina Day and "literally wants to be president one day," Owen said, adding that she "credits Rainbow for giving him the courage to set his sights so high."

"And I think raising them in the wilderness was an important piece of their childhood," she said.

"Most children don't get that kind of freedom anymore; our kids didn't have TV, computers or video games, so they had to use their imagination."

Unlike some parents, "I love having teenagers — they are so fun and funny and loving," Owen said. "Scott and I are in the fantastic phase in life where we have the satisfaction of knowing that we must have done something right, otherwise our kids are magnificent people despite us."

Owen also savors her life on the west side, which is "like living in a small town, yet having the amenities and culture of a much larger urban center."

"I love downtown, too, but I try to center my life around West Asheville," she said. "I think it's important to support local businesses, or at least that's a good excuse for treating myself to some of the best restaurants and services known to man. "There are so many good ones," she said. "And some of the best and most creative are owned by Rainbow parents."