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Midland School Awarded California's Highest Environmental Honor - Lessons Learned from 8 Decades of Simple Living

If the survivors of the Great Depression were asked to teach today's youth about how to find one's way in the world, they would likely talk about character, resourcefulness, distinguishing needs from wants, and surrounding oneself with a strong community. They would talk about the value of working to meet basic needs and not wasting precious resources. They would talk about conserving, producing, and investing more than consuming. These grandparents would describe values and habits that may be a hard sell against the allure of ubiquitous and instant media entertainment available to a generation accustomed to flipping a switch to receive with ease the conveniences of life – money, light, heat and water. How do their values and ethics translate? Can they be made relevant to 21st century youth?

To look for the keys to this translation, one could travel up Figueroa Mountain Road, arguably the most photographed and digitally reproduced country road in the world in the summer of 2009, but instead of turning left into Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch five miles from the town of Los Olivos, turn right just before Neverland at the rustic wooden sign that says MIDLAND. The community one would meet after crossing the wooden bridge over the Alamo Pintado creek bed would help them to see that yes, places like this really *do* still exist. And yet, Midland wears the gold stamp of mainstream approval. In 2009, Midland was awarded a Governor's Award for Environmental and Economic Leadership (GEELA), California's highest environmental honor. The State of California considers Midland School a leader with important lessons to share.

A walk through the rustic redwood board-and-batten campus would make it seem like one was stepping back in time. The steel shower fire tanks in each communal bathroom tended daily by a student who gathers wood to heat his or her class's shower water reveal that Midland students are different, quite possibly from another era. Midland students work to meet their basic needs at a visceral level, and have been doing so since 1932. But *these* students have it easier; in Midland's early years, the showers were cold.

A look at the solar arrays outside the library, the 8-acre organic garden with nearby pastures for grass-fed cattle, or the newly refurbished state-of-the-art kitchen would bring the visitor to modern times. The cooks in this kitchen can prepare on site or freeze and store organic produce and beef to spread *this* garden's bounty across every season. The Energy Star label on the new dishwasher run by students and the Headmaster (yes, the Head of School) in "Dish House" would reveal Midland's evolution into the 21st century.

A gray metal box inviting visitors to sign in before enjoying the miles of trails accessible to the public bears witness to Midland's land ethic. This campus is set on 2,860 acres, 2,727 of which have been preserved from development in perpetuity in a conservation

easement held by the Santa Barbara Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land. Adjacent to the Los Padres National Forest and UCSB's Sedgwick Reserve, and with Figueroa Mountain Road being the only paved road in the vicinity, Midland's property contributes significantly to one of the largest undeveloped and unfragmented habitats in the mountains and foothills of southern California.

So here's the question that burns for many visitors who tour Midland School, that is, after they get over their delight that their son or daughter will daily wash dishes, clean a classroom, or help manage the trash and recycling stream - Just what IS Midland School? Is it stuck in time, or is it cutting edge?

Midland's founders, Paul and Louise Squibb, saw in the lean economic times of the Depression an opportunity to teach honest, essential values within a rigorous academic curriculum - doing more with less, distinguishing between needs and wants, and working to meet basic needs. In Midland's early years, these values reflected necessity, economy, and the intentional development of character and community. Now, it's clear that distinguishing between needs and wants is the *starting point* of a meaningful conservation ethic. The State of California agrees.

Midland's 8-decade legacy of distinguishing needs from wants is grounded in something real - living within limits on the Earth. Yet it has evolved to an ethic of not just doing more with less, but much, *much* more than that.

The genius of the Squibbs was in making our relationships with our resources transparent. Working to heat shower water with wood fires, exploring the outdoors and placing oneself on a topographic map, washing community dishes, tending a garden, or installing solar panels puts people in the cycle of life and materials. At Midland, the fruits and the waste of our labors are right in front of us, where we're more likely to take responsibility than we would by just flipping a switch to get what we need.

At Midland, everyone has a job in maintaining the campus and everyone is needed. Midland students find comfort in *being* needed – knowing their role in the community, and knowing when their job is done and done well. Storm Jameson wrote, “Happiness? It is an illusion to think that more comfort means more happiness. Happiness comes of the capacity to feel deeply, to enjoy simply, to risk life, to be needed.”

Self-confidence is built up when the clutter, the cushion, the comfort, and the buildings are stripped away. Many campuses risk insulating and isolating with imposing buildings that provide an edifice of strength, durability, and wealth. When these are stripped away, the students have more space to find their strength within. Instead of a sign that reads, “Come. Find solitude and solace, deep thought and importance within our walls,” the sign over Midland reads, “Come. Find yourselves in this place.”

Midland shares common threads of purpose with many fine institutions that value the development of individual character, lives of service, and respect for the Earth. But Midland has blended the three levels, linking **character** to **community** to **environment**

since 1932, before there were even words to describe these ethics and these connections. It is now clear that what is good for individual character is also good for the health of communities and for the Earth.

If the role of independent schools is to prepare students for the rigors of college and for meaningful lives in changing and challenging times, then Midland is, without a doubt, cutting edge. All of Midland's graduating seniors gain acceptance to colleges and universities that fit their profiles and strengths, many considered among the nation's finest and most selective. The impressive and diverse undergraduate and advanced degree pedigrees of Midland's faculty attest that these adults deeply value rigorous education and share their intellectual passions with their students. Likewise with athletics. Though a school of only 90 students, Midland kids and coaches are tough, and the athletic teams – cross-country, volleyball, soccer, basketball, and lacrosse – are competitive with schools within the Condor League.

Midland's founders, Paul and Louise Squibb, decided in 1932 to build an educational model around distinguishing between needs and wants within a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. We want to maintain Midland's relevance in the 21st century and define a transferable educational model that takes tangible, consequential steps towards carbon neutrality by producing food, clean energy, and most importantly informed young citizens.

Greening campuses these days tends to be about efficiency and automation (light sensors and climate-controlled buildings), which, paradoxically, can have the effect of removing students from the responsibility of, for example, turning off the lights. Green educators may teach students about voting with their wallets, and making enlightened decisions as consumers. But, buying green is still buying. As consumers only, we can be less bad, but is that good enough?

Educating for sustainability is more than just greening a campus. A Midland education is regenerative in that we balance consumption with production of food and energy. Our main product is informed students. But we also produce clean kilowatt-hours and sustenance. As of February 2009, six consecutive 10th grade chemistry classes helped install solar arrays totaling 17-kW DC meeting ~15% of communal electricity needs, and became community teachers. Faculty and students tend an 8-acre organic garden and pastures that provide organic produce and grass-fed beef to our dining hall. Our food system is a closed loop; scraps from every meal are taken by students to the pigs or the garden compost, and students understand this tight nutrient cycling. Midland practices environmentally and economically sustainable grazing on its ranch. Every student participates in native valley oak restoration every year, with results monitored and mapped. Midland's place-based courses instill knowledge and love of the land.

The signature of a Midland education is awareness of one's impact on the communities around them – human and ecological. Though it all began as an experiment to build character in lean economic times, it has evolved into something that is place-based, regenerative, and yes, cutting edge. The key to it all has been staying true to its soul.