

# ✎ Boarding School at Age 12? ✎

by Sarah Delcourt

The road between Burnsville and Asheville seemed interminable, and I cried the entire way. I could hardly believe we had truly done it – left our eldest daughter Alice, 12, in a boarding school 750 miles away from home. She had never set foot in a school before. I hoped we were not making a huge mistake.

Now, four years later, I know it was the best decision for her. The confident, independent, caring, and responsible young woman she has become, confirms that for me. Not that it was always easy for her or us, but Arthur Morgan School helped make that difficult transition for affirming and em-powering as possible.

The most important element to begin with was that she wanted to be there. Her natural, growing need to be more independent of us had become obvious. However, as we quickly discovered, rare is the educational environment that responds to the needs of the whole child at this important transitional period; that supports, challenges, and encourages their development. Arthur Morgan School did.

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In our home, she was used to being listened to and heard. At AMS she had a voice too, but that was taken a step further as she learned to listen to other people's needs and concerns. In All School Meeting, she saw that consensus decision making could work and, most importantly, that it was a process.

As homeschooling parents, one of the things we had wanted to avoid was that “herding” necessary when large groups of children are put together. At AMS, with a staff-to-student ratio of 1:2, she was treated as an individual, both academically and emotionally.

The academic transition was smooth. She was used to working at her own pace and being able to pursue her own interests. At AMS, in small classrooms of 6 or 7, this continued. The approach was very hands-on, and Alice found what had been missing for her at home, and what she had begun to want desperately – group interactions and discussions, brain-storming and projects.

We had tried very hard as homeschooling parents to help create opportunities for learning-by-doing that had relevance in Alice's life. Living in a suburb of Chicago, such opportunities were not often forthcoming, or appeared (as they mostly were) contrived. In the AMS environment, activities such as planting and harvesting the garden; chopping wood for fuel; and preparing meals, all were necessities of life.

Although this learning was done outside of our family unit, I found the results of it transferred back. This is the test of true learning, that it becomes an integral and natural part of one's life. Over the three years Alice spent at AMS we saw and felt the changes at home. Making mistakes and owning up to being

wrong about something became acceptable and natural.

Last year, after Alice finished at AMS, we decided as a family to travel. For nine months five of us lived in a motor home, learning together as we covered some 18,000 miles. Again and again I saw the skills Alice had learned from living in community translate into our daily lives. She taught us about communication, solving problems practically and easily, confronting kindly but firmly when necessary.

Today at 16 people often tell me how amazed they are at Alice's maturity, her sensible attitude. Don't get me wrong, she is far from perfect (thank goodness) and struggles with issues like any other teenager. What I like is her enthusiasm for life, her curiosity, her caring and sense of who she is. Perhaps most importantly, she feels she's important enough to have a voice and to be heard. We nurtured those qualities as parents; Arthur Morgan School provided a larger community, a supportive, challenging and caring environment, that further confirmed them and allowed Alice to make the transition from childhood to young adulthood.

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## A Daughter Responds

And what does Alice have to say about all this? Asked to convey her thoughts about the transition from homeschooling to attending the Arthur Morgan School, she put down the following words.

I think that AMS is an excellent transition from homeschooling into a more academic classroom education. The community at AMS is very warm and welcoming to its students. The staff are there to help when needed, and they make the transition to more "book work" smooth.

No matter who the person, we all came out of AMS changed and more knowledgeable of how to interact with people and how to deal with conflict. The tightness and intensity of AMS was a little overwhelming at times, but everything must balance out.

Being at AMS helped me become more in touch with my self and how my actions affect others. The sense of belonging that AMS gives all its students is very important in the transition.

The mountains around me always gave me a sense of clarity and helped me "get away" from school when I needed to. My views and opinions were all respected at AMS, and I was made to deal with my "stuff." I couldn't hide! I found that, even though I did not feel it was a life changing experience at the time, down the line I can see how it has changed me and my outlook on the world around me.

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The Arthur Morgan School is a small, junior high boarding school located in the mountains of western North Carolina. Its program, a balance of academics, work projects, and outdoor activities, all within a strong community atmosphere, is specifically designed to meet the development needs of young adolescents.