



Headmaster Tom Evans on the grounds of the Cape Cod Academy in Osterville. (Village Advertiser Photo by Mark Cote)

A Talk With Tom Evans by Andrea Leonard

Occupying the building that was once the village's four-room elementary school, Cape Cod Academy is establishing its place in the community and bringing to Osterville, and to all of Cape Cod, an alternative to public education. Recent changes have given the school a new Headmaster, Thomas Evans; with his arrival, there is new interest in the Academy.

Why the Academy? What is its function? With public education available to every child, is there a need for an independent school?

Tom Evans says of public education, "Teachers and administrators of public schools do a fantastic job; with no control over enrollment, size of classes, physical plants, or abilities and disabilities of children who come into the classrooms, it's remarkable how well they do the job.

"Independent schools are no better or worse than public ones; they're an alternative; they're just different. The average American adolescent sometimes chooses to sit in the back row of a classroom and fool around instead of communicating and learning. The bright but unmotivated youngster might get away with that behavior in public school at the expense of his education. The bright child who knows where he's going and what he wants gets a fine education in either school, but the undecided boy or girl may benefit most from the atmosphere and individual attention received at Cape Cod Academy."

Asked how individual attention can stimulate a student, Evans said, "The answer sounds stereotyped, but it comes back to the fact that kids respond to interest shown them. It's enlightening for them to realize that the learning and teaching processes are completely interrelated and that they happen simultaneously. The teacher is often learning at the same time the teacher is teaching, and the student is gaining insight. Teaching and learning is a two-way street.

"It's not a question of going to class, listening to a teacher talk, taking notes, and doing assigned homework. There must be an exchange between student and teacher; there

must be dialogue."

A growing number of Cape Cod parents apparently agree. Upwards of eight students are expected to form the student body for the 1980-81 school year. "Parents are recognizing that if their children are to go on to college after high school, they need the basic background and knowledge to absorb higher educational opportunities," Evans believes. "If they perceive their child isn't establishing necessary education foundations, fathers and mothers look for alternatives to public school; those alternatives do exist and are within reach of middle-income or even lower-income families through financial aid programs. Also, many families today have more disposable income to invest in their children's education because more mothers are employed outside their homes.

"In spite of the national trend to smaller families, which means fewer school-age children, independent schools in this country are growing between two and three percent a year and parents are making the educational investment at the lower educational levels to ensure their children will be prepared for the college experience."

Getting to know Tom Evans is a pleasure. He's warm, sincere and outgoing. Asked about himself, he responds openly. "Why did I accept the appointment as Headmaster at Cape Cod Academy? It was a difficult decision. I'd recently become field representative for the National Association of Independent Schools and felt I owed the organization the two or three years we'd set to accomplish certain goals. For six weeks after hearing of this opening, I did nothing, even though I was urged to make application. Finally, I explained my dilemma to my boss; he, too, encouraged me to apply, appreciating the opportunity it presented me.

"I've always wanted 'my own school,'" he said, adding quickly, "of course, it's not 'my' school. It belongs to the faculty, the students, the parents and the trustees. But I've hoped to have the general responsibility for implementing

policy in a school like this.

"And I've always liked small schools. In one this size I can know faculty and students on a first-name basis and can come to know each as an individual, work with them humanly, not mechanically.

"When I first visited it, this was the Friendship School in Brewster; its size and potential for growth appealed to me then. It is now receiving 175 inquiries a year and could grow to an enrollment of 250 students, plus or minus 100 either way. Parents are becoming convinced it's a good educational facility, has a solid curriculum and will still be operating 25 and 30 years from now.

"Since my wife teaches at Osterville Elementary, we're both involved in education in the same community, but in different ways. It's enriching for us both and broadens our viewpoints.

"Perhaps the most important reason for accepting the post was the search process. The trustees asked very thorough, searching questions. It was clear they knew what they wanted and what to ask to make certain they got it."

The Evanses live in Harwich in an old three-quarter Cape on an acre-and-a-half of land abutting a conservation area. Restoring their house has been an on-going activity. Tom has been appointed to the Harwich Conservation Commission. "That will be interesting. We enjoy having the conservation area next door. The variety of wild-life we see, especially in spring and fall, is remarkable. It wouldn't be easy to find another place, even on the Cape, that suits us so well.

"I like to run there. Yes, I'm a jogger. I was in the Falmouth Road Race, not to win but to compete both with the other runners and with myself. It's great exercise, relaxing, and something I can do in a short period of time."

We got back to the subject of Cape Cod Academy with difficulty; there were so many common interests to explore, but time was limited.

Regarding changes to be made at the school, Evans explained he has set up guidelines to ensure plenty of attention is paid to students and personnel and to the development of a proper pace. That's his agenda for the first year. He's dedicated to preserving the excellent base established since Friendship School became the Cape Cod Academy and to making improvements without disturbing the essence of what went before.

In the past, the school has been departmentalized in all grades, with students having a different teacher for each subject. Under his guidance, classes will be become self-contained in grades 1 through 6; the upper grades will continue to be departmentalized.

The building itself is undergoing change; three large classrooms are being subdivided to provide six smaller rooms. All classes for grades 7 through 12 will be held in one wing of the building on the same floor. Similarly, the lower grades will occupy their own wing. Thus, separate environments and identities will distinguish upper from lower grades; movement throughout the school will be minimized, scheduling facilitated, and more flexible transportation arrangements for off-grounds activities provided. At present, the school operates three vehicles to transport students from all areas of the Cape; one goes to the Orleans rotary, another to the Bass River Bridge, and a third to Woods Hole.

Evans' greatest frustration, he says, is that the financial aid budget is no greater than it is. Between ten and twelve percent of the Academy's budget is allocated to student financial aid, and about 15 percent of the children now enrolled receive assistance. Low-income and middle-income families are eligible, and the socio-economic mix is little different from that of students in public schools on the Cape. Distressed by how large family incomes can be these days, still allowing the family to qualify for financial assistance, Evans recognizes the effect of the inflation spiral. "People are often surprised to find they qualify for scholarships," he said.

Looking to the immediate future, the new Headmaster wants to improve the physical plant, inside and out, to enhance its image and bring its outside appearance up to neighborhood standards.

Long term, Evans foresees enrollment of 120 students in the present building with its twelve functional classrooms. As growth continues, the time will come to acquire land and build anew. "Perhaps the best thing about Cape Cod Academy's location," he said, "is its proximity to the Osterville Library. Just a few hundred feet away, it's an incredible feature and enormously helpful to students and faculty. I'm deeply grateful to the library trustees and the librarians for bending over backwards to help our children. I have dreams of a central-Cape location, as near as possible to the Route 134 and Mid-Cape Highway intersection, but I'm loath to leave here because of the library and the superb cooperation we receive from its staff."

Is there a need for an independent school on Cape Cod? It is an alternative. It is different, not necessarily better or worse. For many children, public school is the better choice; for some, the small independent school may be preferable. If it didn't fill a need, it wouldn't exist.