Episode 1,043: Spontaneous Order or Lord of the Flies? An Inside Look at a School That Puts Students in Charge

Guest: The Sudbury School

WOODS: All right, this is going to be fun. Matthew, you and I don't know each other, but you sent me a promotional video. Is this a recent video?

GIOIA: Yes, it is, Tom. It was produced here by a group of students two weeks ago, and we just got it out there recently.

WOODS: Okay, well, you sent it to me and I put it up in my private — I have a private Facebook group for supporters of the show, and I said, "What do you all think of this video?" And it generated a heated, heated discussion, to the point where —

GIOIA: Ooh, I'd love to take a look at that.

WOODS: — we decided that the only way to resolve this was by having you on the show.

GIOIA: Okay.

WOODS: Which, by the way, that's pretty much my answer to everything. Get the person on the show. Let's talk it out. So I'd like you to start with a little bit of history. Then I want to get into some of the points that are raised in the video. First of all, there's more than one Sudbury school. How did it all get started? What's the idea behind it?

GIOIA: Yeah, that's right, Tom. So we are located in the Hudson Valley in New York and our school is in its 14th year. And we are modeled after a school called Sudbury Valley School, which is in Framingham, Massachusetts, and that school has been there for 50 years.

WOODS: Oh, okay.

AMELIA: Yeah, they were started in 1968 and they were kind of modeled after the Summerhill School in England, but they're a little bit different.

WOODS: I need to ask just so people know, Amelia, how old are you?

AMELIA: I'm 15.

WOODS: Okay, all right, so high school age. All right, so it's a K-12 school?

GIOIA: Correct.

AMELIA: Yes.

WOODS: All right, so what makes this school — [laughing] You know what? I'm not even going to ask you that. I'm not even going to ask you that because that's the subject of the whole show, which is what makes this school different from the typical school. Let's go through a little bit of that video. Obviously, this school has something — it's not a million miles removed from an approach to education some people call unschooling. Is that fair to say?

GIOIA: Yeah, I'd say so.

WOODS: All right, I would say so too, judging from this video. Now, as the video went on, it got more and more challenging, actually, I thought. So it starts off with — By the way, Amelia, are you in this video?

AMELIA: Yeah, I'm the first one to speak.

WOODS: I had a feeling based on your voice.

AMELIA: [laughing] Oh.

WOODS: Yeah, so look, you're a celebrity now. So what's being portrayed here — and I want to get clarification of a lot of this stuff, because I don't understand at all what the role of adults is in the school at all from that video, so I do want to ask about that.

AMELIA: Okay.

WOODS: But you start off with, *This is a school that you say has no classrooms, no tests. It's a school in which there's no homework. I'm the one who knows best for myself*, and things like that. Now, initially, you know what the objection to that is going to be. If you don't have these traditional features of a school, everybody's just going to goof off all day and you'll go off and be illiterate and be unsuccessful, so why would you want that? That's an objection that you're going to have to deal with. How do either of you deal with that?

GIOIA: So, Tom, I think that from the school's perspective, I would say that that objection would be totally — I would agree with it if it were the school were operating within the traditional paradigm of instruction and authority that most schools are based on, the traditional system is based on, because in that context, learning and development become I think for most people very much a chore and onerous burden, for most students anyway. But our pedagogy is not based on instruction and authority; it's based on exploration and community. And what we notice is that, within that

context, that people feel safe and they're free here and they do develop in various ways.

You know, people do ask a lot, "How are kids going to learn? What about the basics?" And really, I think that we just consider different things to be the basics in terms of what people need to succeed. So whereas traditionally the basics are reading, writing, and arithmetic, so at our school I think that the basics are more like a strong sense of responsibility for your own life and confidence and people and social skills and resourcefulness. And we see those as the basics. And the way that's achieved here is by letting people develop naturally within the context of our supportive and caring community. Go ahead, Amelia.

AMELIA: Yeah, and just to answer your question kind of more from a personal point of view, you mentioned literacy. And so I've been here since I was five, and actually, that was like a really huge thing for me, was learning to read, and I think there's this kind of idea when thinking about children is that they don't want to learn and they aren't curious about the world and they kind of just want to goof off all day. And for a lot of kids here — and I can't speak for everyone, but at least for me, learning how to read was such a huge thing for me and I chose to do it and I kind of taught myself how to do it. So not only did I — and I chose to do it because I saw that other things I wanted to do I needed to be able to read for. So not only did I learn how to read, but I kind of learned the value of it and I learned to really enjoy it and love it. And I think you see that with a lot of kids here.

WOODS: There are some things — I mean, I get that if you can avoid it, you don't want the learning process to be just mind-numbing and rote memorization and things like that. But on the other hand, there are plenty of things in life that are highly worthwhile that are extremely arduous to do. So isn't there a concern that you're sending the message that we want you to do whatever you feel moved to do. I don't know, as an employer, is that the kind of employee I want? Maybe you won't feel moved to do half the things that I want you to do, but you've got to do them.

GIOIA: No, that's true, Tom, but I think that our school doesn't produce that kind of self-indulgent subject that some people tend to assume that it does produce. Because the school is not offering this program that promises to deliver success to students, students here have to work for whatever they want. And in order to achieve their goals or get access to the resources they need to pursue the things that they feel inclined to pursue, a part of that process is always doing things that they might otherwise not want to do or doing unpleasant tasks associated with it, whether it's raising funds or going through processes at the school to get things that they want. So I think that that part of it is built in, but because there is this goal at the end of the process, students are able to do it with enthusiasm and to be motivated to set their mind to doing difficult tasks.

AMELIA: Very similar to the way that you have a job to make money to support yourself.

WOODS: All right, let me ask **AMELIA:** can you describe for us what your typical day is like? That might help people understand better what goes on.

AMELIA: Yeah, okay, so first I just want to say that my typical day — again, I've been here for ten years, so my typical day at Sudbury has changed vastly over the years. But right now, I'd say my typical day is I get to school at around 9:30. I might see who's here, see what my friends are doing. And then I'll go and — recently I've been working on the video, so I would go kind of maybe try to write another draft or plan out some of the shots with another friend who was doing it with me. I've also been recently really involved in helping the promotion of the school, so a lot of my day is spent just talking about the philosophy and how we can get more out there, who can we reach out to, what are kind of the goals for the school and where we want to be in the world. So I'll have a lot of just discussions about that and kind of plan out things that we can do.

Then maybe I'll spend an hour or something reading just whatever I'm interested in, whatever I'm reading at the moment. I've been recently — I just applied to Bard. They have a bridge program, so I applied there and so I might spend some of my time filling out an application like that or trying to choose my course lists. My guess is if I get in next semester, my time will be spent maybe doing homework or stuff like that. And then on Thursdays, I will go to school meeting or if there's a committee meeting or something that I'm interested in, I'll go to that. But a lot of times, it's really different.

WOODS: So Matthew, what is your typical day like and what's your role in the school?

GIOIA: Yeah, so I can speak to the role of adults at the school. So the school does obviously hire staff. You know, we weren't a part of the video. But so the school hires staff and then delegates most or all of the duties, the administrative duties of running the school to the staff members, and that makes up typically about half of our job, school our administrative jobs. So I'm the enrollment director at the school. I do the admissions and I have some other buckets of duties that I do here at school as well. So that's about half.

And then the other half of our job is to be out on the floor, so to speak, and that's right in our job description is the idea of being a model of an effective adult and being with students and then also being there as a resource for them in whatever ways they want.

WOODS: I think maybe — well, first of all, as I told you, we had a very lively exchange of views just based on what was seen in the video, and of course, no matter how good the video is, it's no substitute for being there and speaking to people and all that. But we felt like we got enough of a glimpse into the school to be able to say something about it. And a lot of it came down to people were turned off by the apparent attitude that authority is either evil or stupid or an afterthought and that the accumulated wisdom of generations that came before us really is less important than what I just feel like doing. And that just strikes people as — well, let me just say it — juvenile. Is there any way you can address that?

GIOIA: Well, yeah, I can see how you might get that impression from the dramatization of this school from the video, and it is something that's missing from that particular video. But we have — as I was saying, an important part of staff's job at the school is to provide that connection to older people and earlier generations and to provide the modeling and that knowledge. It's here at the school, and students certainly

appreciate it, and young people certainly crave those types of connection and that guidance and mentorship from older people. And that's part of what we do; it's just not compulsory.

There's no adult or cabal of adults at the school who are either in a back room cooking up projects that we think would benefit from the kids — and from the school's perspective, that's patronizing to the students here — nor is there a cabal of adults that is making rules for the school community. It's more of a — think of a village kind of relationship between adults and students at the school. So the school is by no means anti-adult or anti-teaching either. A lot of students, again, seek out instruction in whatever they want. All of those kinds of things are happening here; it's just that the students' liberty is really honored at the school.

WOODS: All right, let me talk about my own experience. My kids in general are homeschooled, except my high schooler, who goes to a traditional high school, in large part because it has a veterinary assistant program, which is a very unusual feature and she'd like to take part in that. But her experience, her testimony of most of the students she sees is that none of them care about anything. And now, we can say that's because their independent spirit has been crushed by years of being in these institutional prisons, and I'm open to that theory. I'm not entirely convinced by it. But if they had all day to sit around, they'd be looking at their phones all day. She tells me about people who almost revel in the bad grades they're getting.

And you would think, *But surely, Tom, don't worry about it because eventually they're going to realize that if they want to succeed, they're going to have to* — Well, apparently, they just don't have a long enough time horizon. So is this a kind of situation where — are you saying that this model really, genuinely would work for everyone, or maybe it's not for everyone?

GIOIA: Yeah, I don't know that we would want to claim that it works for everyone, Tom. I don't know that there is a model that would. And our students here are independent. They're not under the constant surveillance of adults, so I think there are people who have certain challenges that our school would not able to meet. But I think for a, so to speak, average person, I think the school could be effective for any person who has the ability to take care of themselves, I guess, in the most basic ways.

WOODS: How would I as an employer evaluate a student coming out of your school?

GIOIA: I think just in direct conversation with them, that's really where our students come off I think really the best. A lot of what they do here is they spend a lot of time in conversation and collaboration with people and with adults. Because the adults at the school don't hold these positions of authority, I think students are able to interact with them much more freely and experiment, so to speak, socially and to know adults well and to know them on a kind of equal footing. And that's one of the things that they get very good at, is conversing and speaking to adults. And they can be very clear about what their goals are what they want to do and how they plan to achieve them and that sort of thing.

WOODS: There's a part of the video in which students are talking about, "What if there were a school in which I could *blankety-blank* all day?" So I could be outside all day, I

could be practicing my instrument all day. So obviously everybody's day seems to be different, but what we were seeing in the video was people running around playing on a playground and with the words "all day" kind of echoing in the background. I think a skeptic, the skeptical antenna are going to come right out of the head when they see that.

GIOIA: Yeah. So again, to get back to what we think are the real basics, not the typical sort of academic basics that people think of when they think of school, to us, again, it's a strong sense of responsibility for your own life, it's confidence, it's social skills, and it's resourcefulness. So at our school, kind of the typical arc of development we observe in our student population is that when they're very young, they do spend all their time playing all day. That's exactly what they do. That's sort of the elementary school years. In the middle school years, they tend to turn more towards intensive socialization and forging their social identity. And Tom, from the school's perspective, that's exactly what they should be doing. And they're developing themselves, they're developing those other basics, our set of basics.

When they get to be towards the high school age, towards Amelia's age, they, having had that experience and that time and space to develop as young children and middle-school-age children, then they tend to start looking to the world and developing interests in the world and thinking about what comes next after this school. And they have a good foundation of soft skills at that point, and they often then undertake more rigorous courses of academic study. And at that point, they're prepared for it because they're not burned out from having had to do it throughout their childhood. And they have real goals that they want to achieve, and so they do it with enthusiasm and they can get it very quickly as motivated learners at that point.

So I know that it can be difficult to see kids playing all day and that really challenges something, but here at the school, what we see is that something important is happening there that you can't necessarily see on the surface, but that the development is happening and that the person is preparing to take the next steps.

WOODS: All right, let me ask Amelia this question. Suppose you're 15 years old and you come to the conclusion that I'd like to go into one of the sciences. I'd like to be a physicist someday. So you realize that, for that, well, first of all, you might want to consult with somebody what kind of background do I need to be able to go into that field. Then once you know what that is, can you be sure — not that there's somebody at the Sudbury School who's going to make you into a PhD physicist. That's not the point of the school — but you're definitely going to have among the adults there people who have expertise in enough fields that when a student says, *This is what I want to start doing*, they can say, *All right, I can tutor you or I can guide you in learning these disciplines*?

AMELIA: Yeah, so no. We have seven — how many staff do we have?

GIOIA: Nine.

AMELIA: So there's nine staff, so obviously not all of them — there's no nine people in the world that probably know every subject. But if you do want to learn a subject that maybe one of the staffs don't have the ability to teach, what I would do is I would talk

to them about where we can look for someone to come in and do that and, you know, how —

WOODS: Okay, but let's think about more customary things. Because if it's true that students are genuinely creating their own curricula and there are no classrooms, then you can't just say, I know I'm going to need trigonometry and I know I'm going to need algebra II, so I'll just look on my schedule and see when those classes are meeting. If there are no such classes, how do you learn those subjects?

AMELIA: Yeah, so algebra is actually a good point. Last year, me and a couple of other students wanted to take the Algebra Regents. I wanted to because I wanted to see how I was at math. I wanted to see what it would be like to take a test, and they wanted it for similar reasons. But the staff who were there at the time, like all the time, didn't have those skills, so one of the staff who wasn't there all the time, we talked to him and he said he could teach an algebra class. And so we just worked out a time. It was like we all just kind of like, okay, here's when we're free, we can meet in this room. We were like, can you — He was like, *Yeah, I can teach this class*. And we just kind of — like I don't know how to explain it, but we just kind of did it. We set it up. So it's not as much — you just kind of have to work with the people teaching it and with the people in it and be flexible. Does that make sense?

WOODS: Yeah. Can you tell me how many students there are in the whole school?

AMELIA: 75.

WOODS: Oh, it's really small then.

AMELIA: Yeah.

WOODS: Okay, okay, okay, because I was going to say there seems to be a kind of inefficiency to it, that if I want to learn this and then three weeks later somebody else wants to learn this — well, look, if we could all just get our acts together, we could have all decided to learn it together and we could do it in a — I mean, there's nothing wrong with structure. There's nothing wrong with saying, "At 4 pm, the Chess Club is going to meet and today we're going to talk about the en passant rule." There's nothing wrong with that. And likewise, with math education, why wouldn't you just say, "Well, look, guys, a lot of you are going to need to know this, and if you'd like to do it, we're doing it at 3 o'clock every Thursday"?

AMELIA: Yeah, well, sometimes what happens is nobody wants to do it, and then there's kind of this — then there's just someone sitting in a room alone. And that's kind of what happened. Usually when you have a class, when you're the one initiating the class, more people see it and join in. But that initial initiation is I think necessary. And yeah, there is some frustration sometimes with scheduling and people who want to do it and then don't want to do it or want to join in late, but I think we just kind of learn from that and figure out a more efficient way to do it.

WOODS: Okay.

GIOIA: And there is a similar thing that happens, Tom, to what you're talking about, where a class is organized and then the organizers of the class as part of their process will post a list at the bulletin board in the school and you can sign up, and it is similar to what you were saying. You know, *We're going to have this class that's going to meet at this time and you can sign up to join us if you like.*

WOODS: Matthew, honestly, this part doesn't matter to me and I'm sure it doesn't matter to you, but just out of curiosity, I want to know, given that New York State is not known for being the most hands-off, laissez-faire state in the union, I'm curious to know if the school is accredited.

GIOIA: Well, we are chartered by the state. We don't have an accreditation from a third-party company. It's an expensive process that we haven't thought would be appropriate for us anyway. But we're chartered by the state. That's true.

WOODS: Okay. Okay, yeah, I was just wondering about how that would all work. Now, what about college? Obviously when you go off to college, you're going to have a very, very different experience than what you're having at Sudbury School. How do you prepare students for that? Have students come back and talked to you about their experiences?

GIOIA: Yeah, they have, and I think that generally the feedback that we've gotten is that they've done really well. I think that they've had — partly because they've had the time and space here to really consider where they want to go and what they want to do, they are able to carefully select particular programs. Like, our students don't necessarily feel like they must go to college. I think they feel more like the world is their oyster and they have other options. There have been students who've jumped right into a professional field right out of school. I think there's probably a higher percentage of students here who decide to travel before going to college or try to start a business. So they don't have that pressure that you might typically get in a lot of high schools where it's just a matter of course that the next thing is college. It doesn't really exist here. But the ones — and you know, certainly obviously a lot of them, probably most of them do decide to go directly to college, and they've just had a lot of time to consider it and to find the people that they want to study with.

And another thing that they're really good at, Tom — I mean, listen. When they leave here, there are certainly gaps in their content knowledge. There's no doubt about it. It's a rare student at our school who leaves with the same knowledge of the traditional content areas as a traditional student. They're able to fill those gaps really quickly because, again, they're motivated, they're resourceful, they know how to talk to adults, they know how to ask for help, and they're energetic because they're prepared for that challenge. They're choosing it. And they haven't been burned out academically. They're not jaded like the students you mentioned your daughter talking about. So they do very well.

WOODS: All right, so as we close, then, first I want to know how can people find out more about the school? What's the website?

AMELIA: So the website it SudburySchool.com, and we also have a Facebook page that's just Hudson Valley Sudbury School. Yeah, and just feel free to email us or message us on Facebook. The email is Info@SudburySchool.com.

WOODS: Okay, I'm going to put the website and the Facebook page at the show notes page for this episode, which is TomWoods.com/1043, so people who want to know more can do that. As we wrap up, let me give you a little bit of a challenge here. Amelia, suppose you don't have the whole time of that video. You've got about 30 to 60 seconds to make the case for the school. Do you think you could do it?

AMELIA: Yes.

WOODS: All right, give her a shot.

AMELIA: Oh wait, you meant right now?

WOODS: I do, yes. I realize I'm putting you on the spot.

AMELIA: [laughing] Okay. Yeah, so Sudbury is really about learning who you are and what you want to do and how to answer those questions, and it's about learning how to be confident, and it's really about learning how to make you want happen. So if you want to get a job, it's about how to find a job, how to advocate for yourself, how to impress an employer. If you want to learn math, it's about finding a teacher, setting up a time, and doing the work to learn that skill. Sudbury teaches students how to figure out what they want, who they are, and where they want to be and how to get there.

WOODS: Matthew, any final thoughts for us? By the way, I think that was very well done, especially since you had no idea I was going to ask you that and I put you on the spot and you delivered. Matthew, what are your final thoughts for us?

GIOIA: Yeah, I would say the school is about learning how to own your life and that ultimately what everybody really needs to do, Tom, to be successful, however you want to define "successful," you need to be responsible for yourself and to claim ownership of your life. And the school provides a training ground for students to work on that and to learn how to accomplish that.

WOODS: Well, and with that, we're going to say goodbye to Matthew and Amelia. I appreciate your time today. We're going to have a lot of information up at TomWoods.com/1043. And I have a feeling that when we go ahead and talk about this episode in my private group, the episode will also provoke great discussion. So that was when I knew this was not just an email to say, "Hey, thanks for writing. Go jump in a lake." This was a time when I thought, all right, I've got to get some folks on, we're going to hash this out and see where it goes. Thanks to both of you very much.

GIOIA: Thanks so much for having us on the show.

AMELIA: Yeah, thank you so much.