

haven

A guide to exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



NEW & NOTEWORTHY



Front row, left to right: Robert, Clara Margaret, George, Arielle. Back row, left to right: Alexis, Madison, Grayson



SHEREE VAICKUS
CO-FOUNDER OF BALD HEAD
ISLAND ACADEMY



ISLE OF IDEAS

BY ODETTE EMBERT ARNOLD
PHOTOS BY ANNE LILES & PAUL CHARLES



It's lunch time on an ordinary Tuesday. Two seventh-graders and one eighth-grader are sitting with two kindergartners and two first-graders in the Forest Pavilion beside the Maritime Market. The middle-schoolers begin discussing their college-level robotics project: helping a private enterprise code a scheduling app for first responders. The young students listen, absolutely fascinated, not yet understanding but soaking up the conversation, nevertheless. They are learning new vocabulary, asking questions and undeniably benefiting from the exposure to new ideas.

WELCOME TO THE INAUGURAL YEAR AT BALD HEAD ISLAND ACADEMY

Bald Head Island Academy is the brainchild of Sheree and Lou Vaickus. The couple founded the school with invaluable input from three mentors: Kit Adcock, a former long-time island resident who shared their vision, as well as Mary Moss and Vikki-Rose Tunick, the two women who founded Charlotte Lab School, an innovative charter school in Mecklenburg County, N.C.

The Bald Head Island Academy story begins in 2021 when the Vaickuses, who own a pharmaceutical development firm, bought a home on Bald Head Island and began spending time there, working remotely. They had also made the decision to hire a tutor and homeschool their daughter Madison, who has significant bilateral hearing loss, because they felt the public schools in Wake County were not meeting her educational needs and she was falling grade levels behind.

A SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

After meeting other parents who were also homeschooling their children but did not feel qualified to do so, the Vaickuses decided to move to Bald Head Island full-time, unite with these like-minded people, and embark on their own educational journey: figuring out how to build a school of excellence on an island accessible only by boat.

Following a year and a half of meticulous planning and jumping through the many hoops such an undertaking requires, the Vaickuses opened Bald Head Island Academy in May of 2023 with summer enrichment programs and commenced its first full academic year in September.



READING, WRITING, ARITHMETIC... AND RESPONSIBILITY

While Bald Head Island Academy is fully credentialed and complies with all federal and North Carolina educational standards, the curriculum far exceeds the minimum requirements.

The school day starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 2:30 p.m. The academic work is rigorous and individualized, infused with lessons about responsibility, stewardship and character development.

In addition to their core subjects, the students are assigned chores that alternate each week —such as watering the plants, taking out the trash and cleaning up. It’s part of an overall philosophy articulated in the school’s mantra: Respect for self, respect for others, respect for the environment.

“There seems to be a national trend toward asking less of students, but we don’t subscribe to that theory here,” said Sheree. “We believe in challenging children to work hard and achieve their best and we are so happy with how that is playing out. Our students are truly thriving.”

“We try to teach to each student’s specific needs, regardless of grade level,” said Head of Curriculum Sarah Tennant. “We are trying to build an educational atmosphere in which we reach the students where they are and bring them to where they need to be and beyond, to where they are capable of reaching.”

According to parent Kara Tureski, it’s working. “At Bald Head Island Academy, my child is receiving a tailored education that builds and amplifies his strengths in coding, math and science, while also providing the support he needs,” she said. “The small class size and the caring and compassionate teachers enable experiential learning

and a customized educational experience. This school is truly a community resource we should continue to nourish and support.”

Sarah came aboard more than a year before the school officially opened and Andrew Hano was hired for the 2023-2024 school year. Both have decades of teaching experience and hold their master’s degree in education. They agree that teaching a variety of grade levels in a small space has its challenges, but the rewards more than make up for it.

“What the island has to offer provides great opportunities for making learning real,” said Andrew. “The pollinator gardens, the overlook, the nature trails all provide science-related labs. Old Baldy and Fort Holmes give added historical relevance. The local municipality and businesses offer lessons in the social and political aspects of life.”

Andrew, an island resident, said he loves riding his bicycle to work every day, with the novelty of a golf cart as the alternative mode of transportation. “I also love the scenery, the wildlife, the people,” he said. “I have to remind myself it is real every day!”

“The island is our classroom, and we can get up and go out into it,” agreed Sarah. “It makes the school day more fun for all involved and I think the community appreciates seeing the students and can recognize their academic, emotional and social growth.”



IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO BUILD A SCHOOL

“This island community built this school,” stated Sheree emphatically. “We wouldn’t be what we are without the support and contributions of so many people on this island who believe in what we are doing.”

One of the most significant ways islanders have shown support is through experiential learning or transfer of knowledge.

“I call it the Isle of Ideas,” said Sheree. “We have remarkably knowledgeable people on this island who have done amazing things in their lives. Many were the best of the best in their chosen careers, and they have so generously shared their skill sets with our students. I threw the idea out there and residents flooded our doors.”

As examples, Sheree lists a mathematician, an artist, a writer and an expert on adolescent character development, all who have given their time and talents to the school.

“This is not just basic information,” Sheree stressed. “It’s often high-level thinking and our students are just soaking it up like sponges.”

Countless island businesses and organizations have also stepped up, from the city manager inviting the middle school students to sit in on a city hall meeting to learn how local village rules and governance are made, to an in-depth tour of the public safety building.

“This community is invested in having these children learn the fabric of what makes Bald Head Island what it is,” said Sheree, continuing to list supporters. “Students participate in many of the environmental science and stewardship programs available through the Bald Head Island Conservancy. The Maritime Market provides lunchtime space, and the owners of BHI Hardware have been extremely supportive with robotics knowledge, book donations, and are looking into providing carpentry and archery for the middle school students in the future.”

The Academy also has plans to add fencing classes to their physical educational offerings, which include running, swimming,

biking and the club sports that are offered through Bald Head Island Club memberships.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION BEYOND THE BUBBLE

The vision for Bald Head Island Academy has always included achieving a socio-economic balance in the student population. In addition to the full-tuition students, the school operates a lottery system in which children of qualifying island employees can apply to attend with 100 percent of their expenses paid. Students are randomly selected as spaces become available. At the time of this writing, there were 15 students on the waitlist.

“We would love to enroll them all,” said Sheree, “but the funding is not there yet. We are working on fundraising for all aspects of the school, including expanding our student body, hiring Spanish and Mandarin teachers, and building our own facilities.” The school is currently housed in a rental space in The Esplanade on Maritime Way, with plans to expand significantly over the next five to 10 years.

As she summarizes the school year just a couple of months in, Sheree is exuberant and expectant. “We have a stated mission and a mantra, and we are seeing what we are saying,” she said. “The success rate so far is overwhelming and we’re just getting started.”

Want to learn more, support the school financially or volunteer your time or talents? Call Sheree Vaickus at 910.294.6644 or visit bhiacademy.org. 🍎

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