

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Review*

## Welcome to Commie High

by Pamela Annas



WELCOME TO COMMIE HIGH. DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY DONALD HARRISON. (2023). BULLFROG FILMS. 94 MINUTES. AVAILABLE FOR ACADEMIC STREAMING ON DOCUSEEK2.

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**W**elcome to Commie High is an engaging documentary film about one enduring educational experiment begun in the Free School Movement of the late '60s and early '70s. Inspired by School Without Walls and Philadelphia's New Park School, a group of radical educators created an alternative high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan—Community High School. The film is fab, and your students in education and American history will be astonished and energized by its story.

The documentary was filmed over the course of a school year as it relates through interviews with current and former students as well as current and former faculty the history of Community High School from its beginnings in 1972. Amazingly, Community HS is still going strong, one of the very few such alternative schools which survived the past 50 years.

At the beginning, admission was first come/first served. Prospective students camped out on the grounds for days and weeks to get in. Community HS took in students, said a faculty member, who were failing at other schools and/or were geniuses. "It was a place where you could fit in where you never were able to fit in before," said a student. So many 13- and 14-year-olds wanted to apply that, in order to provide equal access, the school finally had to switch to a lottery system. By the 1990s, Community High School was outperforming all the other high schools in the Ann Arbor area. As one student remarked: "It became the cool school because it became the smart school."

The heart of the school is the forum, "a homeroom on steroids," said a teacher who is one of the founding members of the faculty and is still teaching there. Every student is assigned to a forum, which meets every day. From the beginning, it was more like a (good) family in providing support, modeling critical thinking, discovering what each student was passionate about, and then providing academic and community resources so students could explore their interests. Some students spent more time outside the school walls than in—internships, camping trips; working in the school's nursery; and creating artistic, political, community and intellectual projects. One project was a protest march to the local courthouse where a student's father, a Muslim man who had immigrated 18 years before and raised his family in the community, was up for a hearing that might have led to him being deported. Spoiler alert: His case was dismissed.

Students are interviewed in the documentary as well as faculty and former faculty. Many of the current faculty have been there for many years or were once students at

Commie High [either 'Commie High' or Community HS ?? ], graduated, got a few academic degrees and came back to teach at the school. One featured former student, a single mom, sits at the kitchen table with her 14-year-old daughter who has applied and, because of the lottery, has a one in four chance of getting in. No legacy kids here. The lottery is public, and faculty pull names of applicants out of a bowl.

The amazing feature of 'Commie High' [quote marks?] is that it is indeed like a family. It is clear from interviews with faculty who had graduated from the school that going back to teach there is like going home. And my sense is that that is why the school succeeded when so many of the promising free school movement schools did not. The schools which didn't survive were schools which stayed "hippie schools," remarked one of the teachers, schools which did not stay connected to their communities and which did not evolve as the times changed.

I invited a friend over to watch the film who had gone to an alternative high school in Newton, MA. from 1972 to 1974. A radical lawyer rather than an educator, he was impressed with the story of this alternative high school and said, "yeah, mine was definitely a hippie high school with very little connection to the community. We were the outsiders. It lasted less than 10 years."

'Commie High,' Community High School, seems to have had from the beginning deep ties to the larger community around it as well as its student-centered structure and a faculty and administration totally committed to student-centered learning. The number of its students coming back to teach provided continuity and, in this riveting film, the history of a remarkable school.

**Pamela Annas** is Professor Emerita of English at University of Massachusetts, Boston, where she taught courses on American working-class literature, modern and contemporary poets, science fiction, and writing. Recipient of a Mina Shaughnessy Fellowship and an NEH Seminar, she has published articles on feminist approaches to teaching writing, on working-class literature, and in feminist criticism. Books include *Sylvia Plath: A Disturbance in Mirrorsand*, with Robert C. Rosen, four editions of a textbook/anthology, *Literature and Society*. Her poetry has appeared in anthologies and journals. She directed a lively residential American Studies program, Semester on Nantucket, for three fall semesters, and was recruited by students at Goddard Cambridge Graduate School for Social Change to teach seminars in feminist writing. She has served on the Radical Teacher editorial board since 1979.



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