

OPINION/ESSAYS

Finding Community in an Unexpected Place

By Nadine Epstein

OUR son Noah was still in diapers when we enrolled him in a little preschool on the first floor of a row house in Washington, D.C. There were at most 20 families at the school, a parents' cooperative with the '60s-sounding name of Amazing Life Games, or ALG.

For months, Noah played mostly by himself at his new school, making up imaginary scenarios that involved miniature cars, plastic animals, and an occasional train. I felt like an outsider. I was a little put off by rules we hadn't yet mastered, and by Pickett, the director and a teacher of more than 20 years, who was from the South and had a manner more distant than that to which I was accustomed.

But, slowly, the school drew us in. For me, the first real connection was other parents, whom I met in classes required of parents who wanted to be "co-op teachers" in the mixed-age classroom. Here, we learned parenting skills, creative play and movement, progressive discipline, and conflict resolution à la toddlers.

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and the other teachers worked hard to lure him out of his shyness at school. He grew to adore José, who has been a teacher at ALG for more than two decades. José is a big, gentle man who captivated the children with his humor and dramatic storytelling.

By our third year, Noah had made many friends, and our days were crowded with play dates, parties, and dinners.

The school's forte is creative play, and Noah shined at this, leading the play, particularly when it had anything to do with a dog. For the first time, he sat down at the art table and revealed his love of col-

ors and design. He also loved to make up games and sing along with the folk singer who came in every week.

It wasn't until the end of his last year at ALG that I woke up one morning and realized that we belonged to more than a school: We were a real live group of too-busy, largely urban parents, alumni families, teachers, and friends – in our 30s, 40s, and 50s – who were juggling children, marriages, and careers far from the support of our own families.

We had come together at a time in our lives when we needed a community in which to make the parenting journey, and together we had created one. Birthday

parties were never the kind where we dropped the children off and ran out to do our shopping – rather, they were social events for parents hungering for connection.

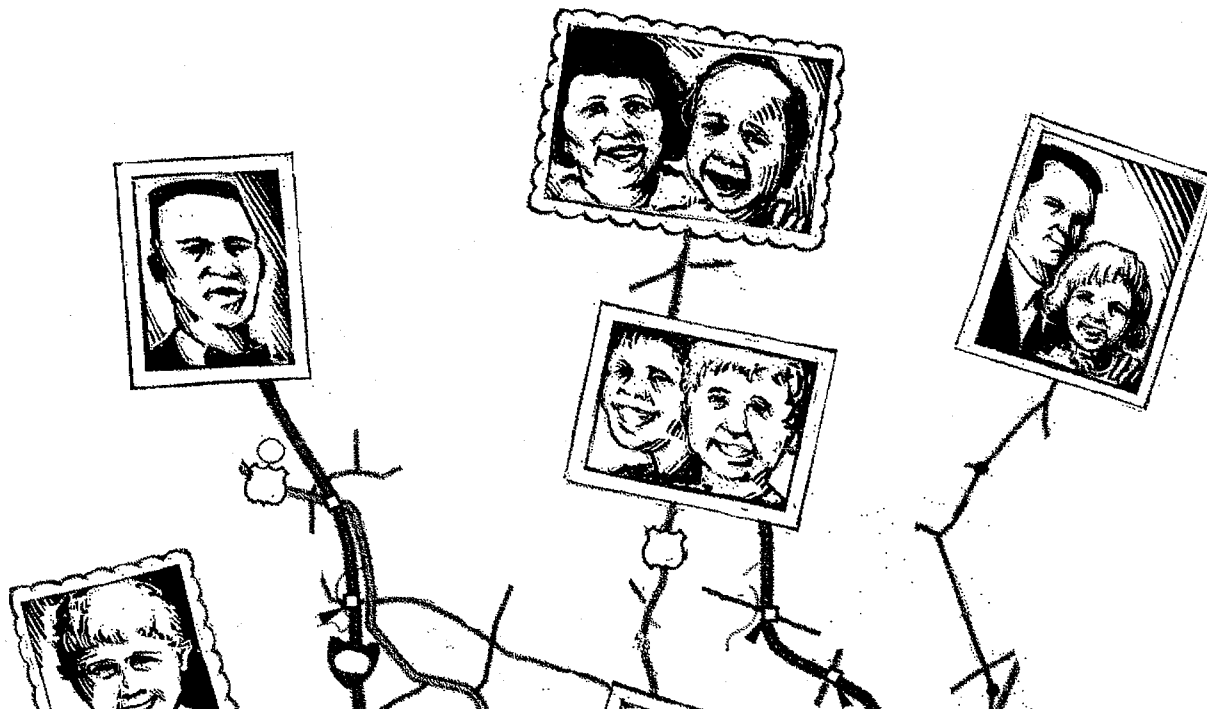
When it came time for them to "graduate" from ALG, the kids were ready. Noah, at age five, was a confident big-boy-on-campus. I, on the other hand, was not looking forward to the change. Almost all the kids would be going to different schools, and I was terrified. Our lives were built around ALG, and the idea of growing away from friends and moving on felt like another divorce.

And it wasn't just me. "I don't want to lose my community," wailed one mother at a summer birthday party, as she stood next to a table stocked with chips and pizza. A chorus of parents seconded her comment. "I never imagined my life would revolve around a preschool," another mother said, laughing.

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The new school year started, and though we have kept many of our old friends, we have been thrown into the real world of education: Noah is still adjusting to new classmates, teachers, traditions, and rules at another school with more than 300 students.

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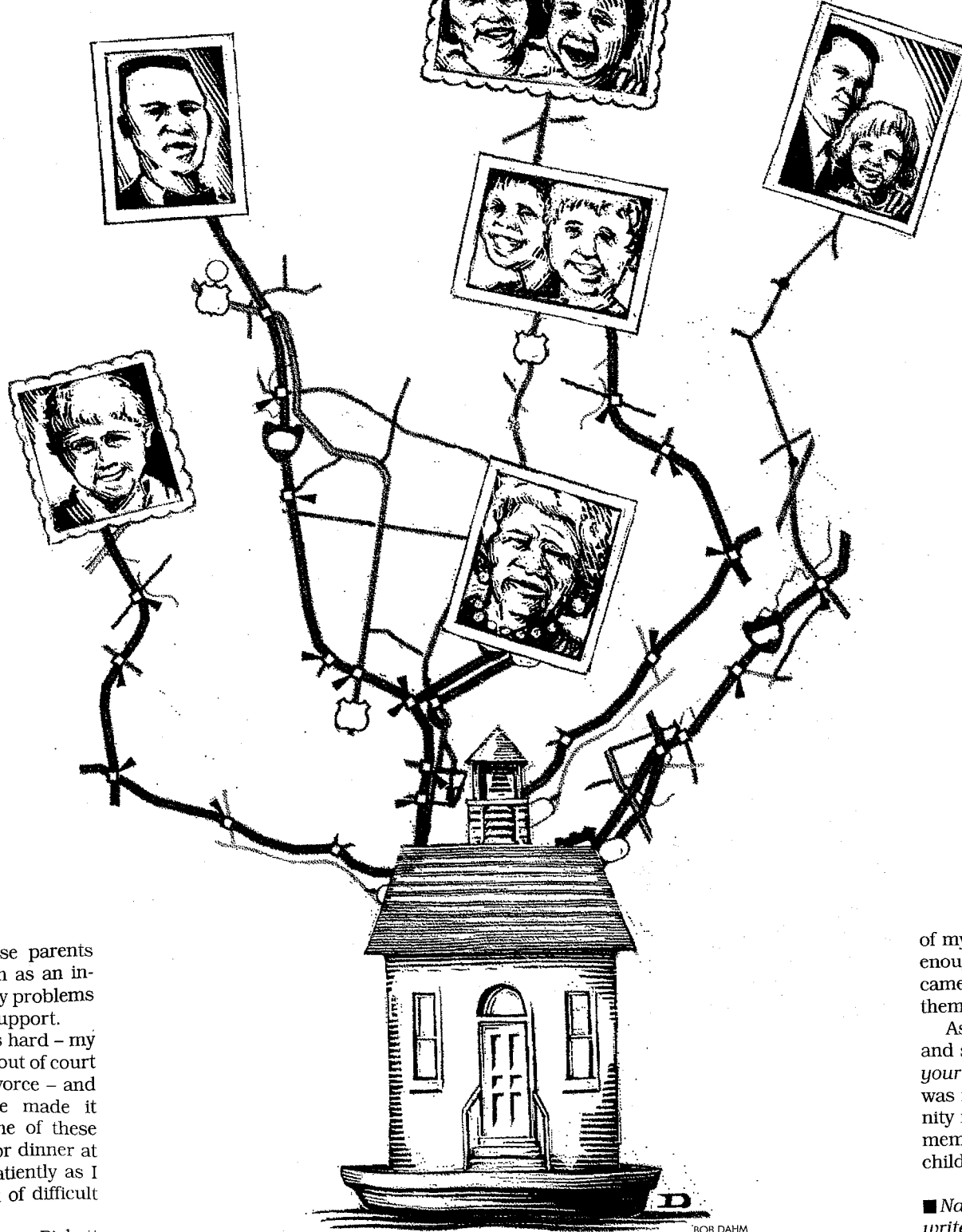
It all started rather innocently – a question to a mom or dad dropping off a child at school – but we began to use each other as sounding boards.

A lot of parent- and teacher-gabbing was squeezed into drop-offs and pickups, and it wasn't uncommon for an engrossed parent to look at his or her watch and realize that an hour had passed. Parents – and teachers, too – shared baby sitters, clothes, car seats, rides, toys, information, dinners, plumbers, camping trips, beach houses, and vacations.

And, when necessary, these parents and teachers leapt into action as an informal network for jobs, family problems of all sorts, and general life support.

My own life at the time was hard – my son's father and I were in and out of court in the midst of a horrible divorce – and I'm not sure I would have made it through were it not for some of these kind souls. They invited us for dinner at crucial times and listened patiently as I tried to navigate my way out of difficult circumstances.

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Now that I know what a real community is, I'm waiting for this school, too, to grow to feel like one, though I'm not sure another can fill the shoes of the one we've left behind.

This morning, the new school was closed, so we went to visit ALG. Noah ran the entire way from car to door, threw off his coat, and got down on the floor next to José and hugged him. The smile José responded with was so loving, I can understand why Noah feels the way he does.

Pickett glowed when she saw Noah and waved at me from where she sat at the art table, surrounded by little children and parents. Some

of my favorite people – fortunate enough to have second children – came in, and I was thrilled to see them. Noah and I felt at home.

As I was leaving, José spied me and said, "You're not going without your hug, are you?" We hugged, and I was reminded that a genuine community needs to touch each and every member. For a school, that means children, teachers, and parents.

■ Nadine Epstein is a freelance writer in Washington.