

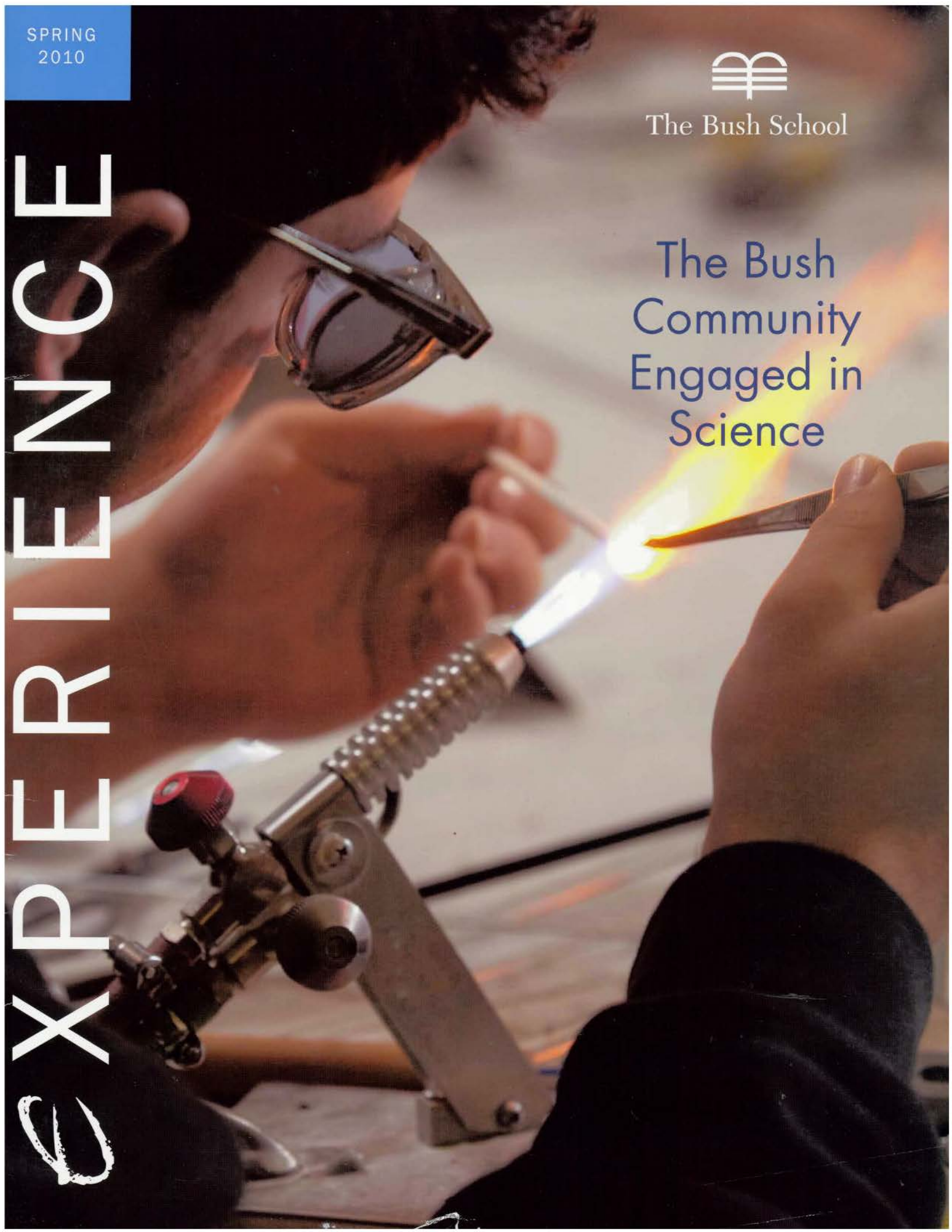
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The Bush School

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EXPERIENCE





# The Skinners: Science Is in the Genes

By Ben Ryan '97

While participating in a summer research lab at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center a few years back, Peggy Skinner struggled over the thorny complexities of *paramecia* while a rather cocky young graduate student bristled at her apparent lack of academic prowess. He pressured her to laser in on the singled-celled organism with the level of complexity he thought was necessary to take back to her work as a high-school biology teacher.

“I kept saying to

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*Peggy Skinner at home in the classroom and at the microscope*

him, "I just don't need this detail. It's more that I need the forest view versus the trees," Peggy recalls.

"The grad student quipped, "You're not even in the forest, you're in the savannah."

The next day, Peggy showed up decked out in a zebra-print T-shirt and safari pants and announced with her trademark effervescence, "So I'm in the savannah. Take me from where I am."

The exchange delighted Peggy because it served as a model for her own teaching philosophy. Her job is to focus students' attention with a carefully tailored amount of scientific detail. And she believes above all else that students shouldn't be afraid of failure in the classroom. Rather, they should celebrate the chance to learn from mistakes because that is the very essence of laboratory science, not to mention an invaluable life lesson applicable to any discipline.

"The whole idea of uncertainty is really critical to me," she says. "In class, if someone is struggling with something, I'll say, 'Are you feeling uncertain about this?' And they'll say, 'Yes,' and I'll say, 'Well, that means you're thinking.'"

Topping Athletic Director Gary Emslie and Upper School art teacher Bill Baber as the longest-standing member of Bush's faculty, Peggy came to Bush in 1971 after a year in the

company. Megan '96 and Sam '99 Skinner would soon occupy desks in her biology courses and, to her great pride, go on to their own careers in the sciences. With a degree in molecular biology from the University of Montana and a master's in public health epidemiology from U.W., Megan works in a Seattle lab researching components for a possible microbicide to prevent chlamydia. Sam, whose "big rebellion," he says, was to veer away from biology and study astronomy and physics at his mother's alma mater, is pursuing a PhD in physics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign while also participating in biophysics research at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

"At home in the summers we would always have some science project going on, like sprouting avocado seeds in water or breaking water surface tension with soap," Megan says of her mother's influence. "Mom encouraged us to start asking our own questions and have us come up with an answer. Even if it wasn't the right one, we would have to think critically about it. I liked not thinking that there was always just a right answer, that there could be other explanations and you should be able to figure that out for yourself."

The ever-curious siblings borrowed their mother's passion for science and took it to the streets.

"My sister and I, instead of a lemonade stand, we had



*L. to r.: PEGGY SKINNER has inspired more than 30 years of Bush School students | SAM '99 and MEGAN '96 Skinner share their mother's passion for science | PEGGY SKINNER confers with Amanda Lee '09 in the classroom*

Shoreline school district, otherwise fresh out of the University of Washington (U.W.), where she'd earned a bachelor's in biology and chemistry. She's long established herself not only as a beloved mentor to generations of students, known for her infectious enthusiasm for science and sly wit when corralling straying minds, but also as a teacher of national renown. In her 30-year affiliation with the College Board, she's helped shape the Advanced Placement test and national curricula for high-school advanced biology courses and also trains other high-school teachers in the subtleties of the fruit fly, yeast, and, yes, paramecium labs.

With no prior experience in private schools, Peggy found she was initially attracted to Bush because the student body was about the size of her entire home town—Bucoda, Washington, population 400, where her elementary education took place in a two-room school house and where she first developed a passion for biology rooting around in the rich wilds of the Skookumchuck River.

"Bush just felt like home to me," she says. "I realized it was a community; it was a small town. You get your hair cut and people notice."

For Peggy, this small town would eventually include her own "F1s," as she jokingly calls the first-generation offspring she shares with her husband John, an art director for a printing

a penny-washing stand in our neighborhood," Sam says. "We had this little chemistry set, right on the corner, and we were offering to make your pennies all nice and clean with household products."

"We just wanted them to love learning," Peggy says. "I think the main thing is, does a kid show passion about something? We loved it when the kids would be excited about soccer or crew—anything."

Pressed about the teaching awards she's received over the years, Peggy says that what is more important to focus on are the other treasures she keeps in her "awards" file at home: notes from former students, which she might pull out on a gray February day to cheer her up.

"'Thanks for being my teacher this year.'—It could be as simple as that. That's the award," she says.

And the biggest award of all? The magic of genetics.

"This is my chosen career because this is what I do best, to get into kids' minds. And to have that opportunity to do that with your own children is amazing. To understand the nuances of how they learn. It was a gift. It was magical." ■

*Ben Ryan '97, a Bush lifer, had Peggy for Biology, Advanced Biology, and Environmental Studies. He is a writer living in Manhattan and often covers scientific topics.*