

« There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning. »

Jiddu Krishnamurti



SUZANNE VAN DER STRATEN

A woman of vision and enterprise

A year ago this month the Verseau family said farewell to Suzanne van der Straten at the blessed age of 100 years old. Many of us know of her as the founder of Le Verseau along with her husband Hugues and can call to mind her image as the kind elderly lady in the framed photo in our entry hall. Some of us were even lucky enough to have known her personally and to have worked with her in the autumnal years of her life... Today, however, we want to shed a little light on the beginning of her story, on Suzanne as a young woman and how she came to be so passionate and determined to take on the creation of a new and entirely unique school for its time...

Born into the industrialist Feron family at the Stoclet Palace in 1921, Suzanne was exposed to an international and multilingual environment at an early age when she attended boarding school in Switzerland. She continued her education to become a nurse and she soon applied her sense of civic duty and her humanitarian calling as WW2 engulfed Europe and Belgium. Ardent about the wellbeing of children, she chose to take care of war orphans at the Chateau de Beloeil.

and forward-thinking, found that the educational offering available to her children at the time was not entirely what she had envisioned. Inspired, amongst others, by the alternative approach of Summerhill School in Suffolk, England, Suzanne's initial vision for a holistic approach to education slowly began to take shape.

By the mid-50s, already a mother of 5 children, Suzanne's and Hugues's life was struck by the intense personal tragedy of the loss of their youngest child. This devastating event propelled Suzanne to deepen her quest for meaning and purpose; she clung to the rigorous practice of yoga, meditation and vegetarianism and acquainted herself with various philosophical teachings including those of Indian philosopher Krishnamurti.

After the war, she founded her own family with Hugues van der Straten Ponthoz and they ultimately went on to have 9 children of their own. Suzanne, being very open-minded

While going on to have three more children, a first attempt to create an alternative schooling environment was made by her participation in the establishment of a Central Examination Board school in Brussels, *Entraide Scolaire*. As she educated herself in contemporary trends in education, she became personally acquainted with Krishnamurti and she and Hugues were even involved for a short period in the establishment of Krishnamurti's Brockwood Park School in Hampshire, England.

Thus, her desire grew to find an inclusive, multicultural, and multi-lingual/ English-language education where children could learn to live in harmony with one another and with the world around them. This became her hope and determination, not only for her own children but something she aspired to share on a wider basis. When she asked Krishnamurti for direct personal advice on how to "improve education", his unequivocal advice to Suzanne was to "start your own school, this is how you will be able to touch the lives of children and families most profoundly". He even went on to guide her with pedagogical and practical advice.

Whereas Suzanne was very passionate, her avant-garde ideas and idealism needed structuring. This is where Hugues' role was essential. With his business acumen and entrepreneurial experience, Suzanne's dream finally came to fruition in 1969. It is true that her husband took quite a bit of convincing as this was no small feat to tackle on many levels: from the pedagogical to the logistic to the financial. In the end it was Suzanne's relentless perseverance that won Hugues over. They bought a plot of agricultural land in Bierges of 5 hectares and hired an architect whom they even sent to England and Canada for insights into current school conception trends. Surrounding themselves with a team of like-minded individuals, Le Verseau opened its doors in September 1969 to 150 students, with 3 kindergarten classes, 6 primary and 3 secondary classes. After one year, enrolments grew to 350 and from there on the growth of the student body and infrastructure has culminated in a community of nearly 1000 students and 150 staff today. Their three youngest children went on to graduate from Le Verseau; Everard, known to us all as our current President of the Governing Body, was one of the laureates of the first graduating class in 1974.

While Le Verseau had been established initially as a small private school, Suzanne had always been adamant to create an environment that would be pluralistic and open to all. She imagined a place where children from all walks of life, of all colours and creeds could come together and learn and grow in cooperation and friendship. This was soon made possible when she was able to secure government subsidies, thereby rendering the school more democratically accessible. In parallel, Hugues and Suzanne created a foundation to which they endowed the entire property - land and buildings. It would be through this foundation, "Les Amis du Verseau" that additional private funding would be able to guarantee the concrete actualization and continuity of Suzanne's vision in the long run... small class groups with specialized teachers and individualized attention to children's need and capabilities, English classes with native speaker teachers, green surroundings for children to be in touch with nature (there was even a zoo with a lion in the early years), continuous teacher training in more progressive educational approaches, a high staff to student ratio, etc., ... It is perhaps a well-kept secret, but noteworthy nonetheless, that for the first few decades of Le Verseau's existence, the lion's share of these additional funds continued to come from Suzanne and Hughes personally. To this day, the van der Straten family continues to make a considerable personal contribution to our school, not in the least through the time and energy they dedicate to Le Verseau as active governors and permanent volunteers always available to help steer our team.

Once Le Verseau was launched, Suzanne remained very involved and hands-on with the everyday running of the school. For instance, she was our first school principal, she oversaw the implementation of active teaching methods, she taught yoga to all the teachers so that they could apply it in class with their students... We feel that Suzanne would have been proud that, after her children and grandchildren, a number of her very own great grandchildren are happily running around Le Verseau today, enjoying exactly the education she dreamed for them.

Recalling one of her own favourite mottos, "May every child who will have passed through Le Verseau add a small brick to the construction of a better world", we truly thank Suzanne for her vision, her passionate perseverance and her spirit of true kindness that continues to bring us all together to this day.