

Opening a Free School

Georgia Rogers and Shash Woods

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Discuss what math you would need if you wanted to start a school.
2. Consider the meaning of: non-profit corporation, tax deductible, barter, value.

Knowledge is for Everyone

In 1998 in Seattle, Washington, three adult students and four teachers started their own school. The seven founders were all passionate about education. We (Georgia and Shash) were two of the founders.

You've heard the saying: "Knowledge is power." The founders hoped that if students and teachers created and owned a school together, the power of knowledge would belong to everyone.

After much discussion, we chose the name People's Learning Center for our school. The word "People's" meant that the school welcomed all



Georgia Rogers reading from her book, Georgia Loves Learning.

people, and that the school belonged to all people. The word "Learning" explained the school's purpose. "Center" is a place in the middle of everything. The People's Learning Center was to be the center of our experiment in learning together.

It took many different skills to run the People's Learning Center (PLC). Students studied reading, writing, public speaking, and math. We also used these

same skills to operate the PLC. Math was particularly important. All organizations need money to survive. You need math to make a budget, to fundraise, and to take care of your bank account. You also need math to barter and to determine the value of things that you are not paying for. As a student, Georgia Rogers was working on her times tables and studying for her GED. As President of the PLC Board, she used math to direct and grow the school.

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Making the School Non-Profit

The founders decided to make the PLC a non-profit organization. This meant that the school would not have to pay taxes. This also meant that people who wanted to give money to the school could get a tax credit. Being a non-profit helped the PLC survive and grow. The founders read a lot of documents to understand how to be recognized by the Federal government as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. It took months of reading, talking, and writing together to finish the application.

Bartering for Classroom Space

To save on rent, we looked for people willing to donate space. Sometimes we held classes in Geor-

gia's living room. Over the years, we had classes in all kinds of places—a church, a community center, a fitness club, and a hair salon. Why would a church or a hair salon give us free space? Well, they got something in return. Church members could easily attend our classes. And the hair salon got more customers because students were attending class right in their store. The PLC did not have to pay rent, but we did have to pay for liability insurance, which cost about \$2000 per year.

Volunteer Teachers

The teachers at the PLC did not get paid. They volunteered their time. Why would a teacher volunteer? They got something of value in return. One volunteer tutor said that he had been a teacher for a long time, but it wasn't until he volunteered at the People's Learning Center that he learned the most important lessons about teaching: "Respect, collaborative learning, and student-designed curriculum."

Georgia Loves Learning

The PLC stayed open for 15 years. During that time, Georgia played a key role in keeping it going. She said, "I always want to learn. When you get to a certain age, it's harder for you to learn, but you're never too old to learn. You're always learning something. Nowadays, there's such a change in life. You need education. Don't let nobody tell you, you don't need education. You need education to go to the grocery store. Or just to do any-

thing, nowa-days, you need education."

You might think it would be hard for someone like Georgia to be a founder of a school and to keep it running all those years.

And there were times she felt scared. "I was afraid, at first," she said about starting the PLC. "But, if you see somebody else doing something, you think you can do it. Try it. That's what I did. I didn't feel that I could do it, but I found out I could...by trying it!"



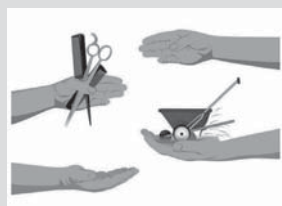
Georgia Rogers and Shash Woods.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. The People's Learning Center did not have much cash, so they bartered when they could. What are some examples of bartering from the story? What did both sides get from the bartering arrangement?
2. What skills did Georgia and the other founders of the People's Learning Center need to be able to help start the school?
3. Georgia says you need education to do just about anything. Do you agree? Why or why not?

What would you barter?

List some things you could barter. What are they worth? What would be an equal trade? How do you figure out the value of what you are offering and what you might receive in return?



Georgia Rogers grew up in Franklinton, Louisiana, in the early 20th century. As a Black child in the countryside, she did farm work to help support her family. That meant she missed every other week of school. Later in life, she took adult education classes, published three books, and became an outspoken advocate for adult learners. In 1998, she co-founded the People's Learning Center. Shash Woods grew up in Worthington, Ohio, in the mid-20th century. As a white child in a middle-class suburb, she went to school every day and did not work until she was a teenager. That meant that she finished high school, graduated from college, and became an adult education teacher. Shash has published two books and is an outspoken advocate for adult learners. In 1998, she, Georgia, and five other students and teachers founded the People's Learning Center.