

# Ancient questions,

**Schools in Bethpage, Huntington and other communities help students discover the joy of philosophy**

**BY MERLE ENGLISH**

Special to Newsday

Classes were over for the day at Huntington High School, but instead of going home, about a dozen students made their way to an otherwise empty classroom. A social studies teacher was waiting for them.

The students took seats and struck up a lively conversation, with the teacher acting as moderator.

"Is there any reason why one animal should be valued over another?" a boy asked, eliciting a flurry of viewpoints.

"I would value a cow over a worm," a girl replied.

Another said she preferred a dog to a spider, saying of the insect, "I want them in the world, just not in the vicinity of my life. Dogs have personality."

"The human race decides, because we're at the top of the food chain," one student said. Another retorted: "Why should someone at the top of the food chain have more rights?"

"Because the top can eat what's below them," came the answer, prompting a boy to say, "Just because I have the power doesn't mean I should do it"; and another to remark, "I eat too, but I might not contribute as much to society as a farm dog."

The verbal jousting at what was an after-school philosophy club in March, mirrored discussions taking place at some schools on Long Island and nationwide. Such gatherings are part of a growing movement to promote the teaching of philosophy in high schools, and even the elementary grades, so students can learn critical thinking at an early age.

## The philosophy of learning

Huntington is one of three high schools on Long Island offering philosophy classes that have attracted the interest of Roberta Israeloff, an East Northport resident. Israeloff is director of the Squire Family Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based, nonprofit organization that advocates for pre-college philosophy education.

The 3-year-old Foundation makes one- to three-year grants of \$5,000 to \$50,000 to develop curriculum for teachers without a background in philosophy. It also wants to create a national network of high school philosophy teachers and help them start a newsletter, sponsor contests and set up other programs.

"During the 19th century philosophy was a staple of public



PHOTOS BY ED BETZ

**Colby Sim and Drew Pouliot during a recent session of the philosophy club at Bethpage High**

education," Israeloff said. "Recently there has been a great deal of interest in reinstating [it]. High school is the perfect time to study philosophy because kids are naturally curious. They like asking big questions. There's not much opportunity for them to talk about these things in school."

Israeloff searched out philosophy classes and found that they are mostly taught as electives "tucked away in social studies or English departments."

## Tackling weighty issues

In such philosophy classes and at popular after-school philosophy clubs, 10th-, 11th-, 12th- and a few ninth-graders at Huntington High School, Bethpage High School and Stanford H. Calhoun High School in Merrick grapple with weighty concepts that perplexed Socrates, Aristotle and other ancient philosophers and still baffle modern thinkers.

They ponder such concepts as: What is the meaning of life? Do we have free will, or is everything predetermined? Is there a universal morality? Who determines what is right from wrong? Does God exist?

Mostly advanced-placement and honors students take the classes, learning about ethics, logic, metaphysics and other areas of philosophy. They ex-

change ideas on issues and learn to listen to perspectives different from theirs. Teachers guide the discussions, allowing their charges to argue their points and challenge those of others. There are no winners or losers.

Some Bethpage students explained their interest in the subject after a philosophy club session. "Learning about different points of view, we can make choices in this world that will not only help ourselves but other people," said Ryan Robin, a ninth grader.

Junior Nick LoBosco: "A lot of us make the mistake of thinking we're part of the choir that gets preached to. This program allows us to step out of that and gives us a new method of thinking that leads to a much more open and thought-out world."

Israeloff sat in on the club session. "Everyone who teaches these courses is delighted to do so," she said later, "and . . . perhaps contrary to expectation, the kids love the classes as well. They don't have to be 'sold' on it. Debating the 'big issues' is part of adolescence. Philosophy is not just a subject; it teaches you how to approach problems; it makes you think about how to think."

Israeloff said she wishes more principals and administrators on the Island would allow the teaching of philosophy, but said she

has encountered resistance.

"There has been some opposition, mostly from administrators who are concerned about adding any new course that doesn't address the issue of high-stakes testing," Israeloff said. "Ironically, there is evidence that studying philosophy can raise scores on standardized tests. Teachers also report that students who are behavior problems or poor achievers in other classes tend to do very well in philosophy."

## Where thinking is critical

The subject has ardent adherents at Bethpage. Six years ago the school included philosophy as an elective for juniors and seniors. It won the title Most Philosophical School in America in the 2004 and 2006 Kids Philosophy Slam, an international competition for children in grades K-12.

Wendy Way, a social studies teacher at Bethpage, created the school's philosophy curriculum after attending a national social studies conference at which it was noted that "the level of critical thinking was going down," she said. "Students weren't able to reason through problems."

"We started talking about what to do," Way said. "Philosophical thinking kept coming up; use of the Socratic method: Rather than just saying things to kids, questioning them so they start questioning themselves."

When the philosophy class debuted there, meeting in a classroom dubbed The Socrates Cafe, 25 students were Way's "guinea pigs." The numbers have since grown. The elective "caught on rapidly," Way said.

"At the beginning [of each new class] when someone doesn't agree with someone, they'll say, 'That's stupid.' I'll say, 'Let's analyze it,'" Way said.

At first, some students are mad at having to think about a topic, Way said. "Sometimes they are afraid to state their opinion about an issue because that leaves them vulnerable, or they don't want to think about

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— Wendy Way, a social studies teacher at Bethpage, who created the school's philosophy curriculum



# modern dialogues



PHOTO BY ED BETZ

**At Bethpage High School, philosophy teacher and club adviser Wendy Way, in back row at left, oversees club members after school. Way created the curriculum after attending a conference where it was noted “the level of critical thinking was going down.”**

an issue. As the year progresses, it gets easier.”

The two-hour classroom sessions became so popular some students wrote their own proposal for the after-school, walk-in philosophy club so they could talk longer.

Just as enthusiastic about philosophy are some 50 juniors and seniors whom Douglas Smestad teaches at Calhoun High School. Smestad, a history teacher, wrote the course.

“Everyone needs some kind of view on life, why we do things, why do we not do things; ethical

issues a person has to deal with every day. Is copying homework cheating? You’d be surprised to know how many kids say no.”

With the guidance of social studies teacher Peter Crugnale, who wrote the Huntington philosophy course, the class and club tackle ethical controversies, metaphysical questions, existential inquiries, paradoxes, and specific philosophers and philosophies.

#### **A new openness**

Crugnale, one of two philosophy teachers at Huntington, noticed that students in his class —

which started during the 2002-03 school year — “become more open to others’ ideas. They become more tolerant.”

Also making the case for pre-college philosophy training, David Schrader, executive director of the American Philosophical Association based in Newark, Del., said: “Teaching young people [philosophy], we are preparing them to make the kinds of decisions they’ll have to make in their private lives and as voters in a democratic society.”

Joe Leavy, director of Huntington High School’s social

studies department, is heartened by high schoolers’ pursuit of philosophical inquiry.

“They are a highly reflective generation,” Leavy said. “They care perhaps a lot more than their elders perceive they do. They want to explore the essential truths, and we want to provide the setting with the support of highly motivated teachers to guide them. We give them tools to ask the right questions.”

That was Gary Squire’s dream when he established the Squire Family Foundation. Squire, a former student at Harry B. Thompson Junior High School in Syosset and Syosset High School, studied philosophy at Yale University and at Oxford University. Squire, a prosperous restorer of historical properties in Washington, D.C., credits critical thinking for his success, according to Israeloff.

Schrader applauds the foundation’s work. “There is a particular urgency at the present time . . . especially in the area of ethics,” he said, adding that, as the world becomes more complex, such issues as the economy and global warming require ethical thought. “What principles should govern finance, what government regulations are necessary.”

Anna Beheshci, a Bethpage junior, says she and her peers should be prepared. “The philosophy class allows us to think outside the box,” she said. “If we’re ever going to advance as a generation, we have to think outside the box.”



**Bethpage junior Nick LoBosco says the philosophy program “gives us a new method of thinking that leads to a much more open and thought-out world.”**