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Fear and Loving in Los Angeles Public Schools: What Volunteerism Reveals About Women and Work Culture

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# Fear and Loving in Los Angeles Public Schools

WHAT VOLUNTEERISM  
REVEALS ABOUT WOMEN  
AND WORK CULTURE

BY ZARA BENNETT



**M**Y GROWING CRITICAL engagement with my role as a mother of soon-to-be-school-age children informed my decision to apply for affiliation as a Research Scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women. In the years leading up to my elder daughter's enrollment in kindergarten, I had participated in, read, and overheard countless exchanges among local mothers trying to navigate the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD.) The largest school district in California and the second largest in the nation, the LAUSD represents a massive system cover-

ing 710 square miles and more than 850 schools serving over 664,000 students from K to 12. Understandably, having your child enter a system of this scale and magnitude can produce a certain degree of parental anxiety.

However, the standard rhetoric surrounding public school choice betrayed the presence of something deeper than just feelings of parental malaise. Whether at the park or the workplace, the neighborhood-school bashing and the fear mongering I witnessed among my fellow parents suggested that many felt the system was broken or at least in a sad state of

disrepair. Parents' negative perceptions of local public schools seemed both to feed into and to create this conflicted relationship with the LAUSD. Being myself a successful product of public institutions from elementary to graduate school, I wondered what had given rise to this shared sense of deception vis-à-vis traditional Los Angeles public schools.

Having heard tales of highly successful neighborhood schools and others that were up-and-coming, I started to think about what it would take to repair the District as a whole—could parents put it back together? When I began reviewing literature and conducting informal surveys, it quickly became apparent that mothers were at the forefront of this movement not only to express discontentment, but also to mobilize it as a means to effect change in public education. Writer, performer, and LAUSD mother Sandra Tsing Loh's fictionalized memoir, *Mother on Fire*, offers a cogent example of public school anxiety redirected to empower others to engage with the system and, most importantly, to leave your neighborhood school better than you found it.

In my Research Scholar application, I proposed to study specific models of maternal engagement in LAUSD, particularly the creation and maintenance of edible schoolyards on its elementary school campuses. Thinking about



the broader significance of this trend, I wanted to explore how this grassroots involvement in schools could be seen as something larger, like a nascent movement. Could maternal engagement in urban school gardens signal a larger cultural project in which women were rethinking their relationships with public institutions, their communities, and their peers? I headed to the closest school garden in my neighborhood to find out.

#### ENTER WALGROVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

I first made my way to Walgrove Avenue Elementary School for a prospective parent tour last spring. During the visit I saw a mother preparing mixed greens grown in the edible garden for a class salad bar activity; kinders were enthusiastically crowded around an outdoor picnic table helping to make a vinaigrette-style dressing for the mixed greens they had just harvested. As Ruth H., the mother leading the activity, likes to say, “Zara was hooked on Walgrove from the first moment she saw me doing salad bar.” I left the tour thinking that Walgrove was potentially a good fit for my daughter: it had a climbing API score, a core group of invested parents, and a one-of-a-kind studio program for developing a creative engagement with core subjects. What’s more, it had a thriving green garden maintained by dedicated parent volunteers.

After the tour I did some sleuthing to get the contact information for one of the Walgrove mothers who was responsible for the edible garden. Connecting with the gardening group seemed like the perfect way to begin pursuing my research agenda and, at the same time, to collect more information about the school I was considering. After attending a few of their meetings and chatting with these Walgrove parents, I had pretty much decided that this

was the right choice. In anticipation of my daughter’s matriculation in the fall, I began attending the garden meetings more regularly. There I learned about an exciting greening initiative the school community was preparing to undertake: building a schoolyard habitat. (See <http://walgrovewildlands.com> .)

Six bungalows that had previously housed a charter school that was colocating in the Walgrove campus were going to be dismantled. As a result, there was an opportunity to take up the asphalt that had been covering the ground beneath them. The working plan was to green 25,000 sq. ft. of the campus by removing the asphalt and creating a schoolyard habitat on the exposed area. It was an ambitious project with only limited funds available to make it happen. Since I had expressed interest and had a background in writing, I was asked by a key member of the group to write some grants in support of the greening initiative. When I agreed to do some grant writing, the switch got flipped: I crossed over from passive observer to active participant in the project.

The first directive that I received from Emiko K. on becoming a member of the greening team reframed my research agenda as well. “There’s no room for negativity in this project,” Emiko reminded me whenever we encountered a particularly rough patch of road

as we tried to move forward. She was right—looking around at the mothers who juggled work schedules to attend garden meetings and community workdays said as much. And so I crossed out the first item on my research agenda, as locating the source of the negative affect that got redirected into community led-initiatives seemed a fruitless line of inquiry. What mattered was mothers voluntarily taking on work to transform schoolyards, not their refocused negativity.

#### LOVING, NOT FEARING, PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN LOS ANGELES

Focusing on the “work” forced me to redesign my project and to think about the circulation of affect in a different way. Namely, instead of examining how negative affect disconnected parents from public schools, I would study how positive affect connected mothers to schoolyard transformation and, by extension, to a larger community of women. As an active participant, I experienced firsthand the way in which this kind of intense volunteering made one part of a system of personal relationships defined by a shared commitment to public education. I began to build affective ties linking me emotionally to my close female collaborators. Together Emiko, Clare C., and I formed the Walgrove Wildland’s steering committee, a

tightly-knit trio that functioned as an unstoppable greening team.

While I appreciated this kind of intimacy with my Walgrove colleagues, I was completely unaccustomed to it. My prior experience working in academe had left me disillusioned, doubting that working mothers could be allies, advocates, or mentors for each other. What, I wondered, was responsible for this shift in behavior (or attitude) that enabled mutually supportive relationships among working mothers to flourish here? My intuition led me to explore the role the working environment played in giving rise to this positive phenomenon. What was it about this specific context that strengthened these relationships between highly engaged mothers? It seemed to me that their success was a function of the particular way affect—what we feel or the sensation our feelings describe—circulated in the volunteer work economy.

In a volunteer work force, affect must be managed thoughtfully and intentionally—it cannot be discounted as it is in the traditional work place. In a volunteer work force, where people are not being monetarily compensated for their efforts, the tenor of the affective economy determines the efficacy of the project and its production. Take, for example, the Whole Foods Venice Joyful Activists Club, a commu-

nity-based group of volunteers whose motto is “Transforming outrage into outrageous fun.” They set out to infuse fun into volunteerism while pursuing “serious change,” and they succeed at doing both. As Emiko stated earlier, negativity—the transmission of negative sentiment—could not be tolerated because it would undercut the motivation of the volunteer work force: to feel appreciated, valorized, and integral to the project. By creating the conditions to reinforce mutual respect and understanding, this positive affective economy had effectively shaped the dynamics of relationships among the green team members at Walgrove.

In the guise of field notes, I have written and published a series of introspective essays on my blog, *Going Public*, that feature work and motherhood as reoccurring themes. (See <http://goingpublic.tumblr.com/archive/> ) A central focus of my writing has been trying to make sense of the incompatibility of emotion with the dictates of traditional work culture. I often attempt to reconcile being a highly sensitive person with the tacit imperative in the office to disregard sentiment, or at least downplay the affective side of the individual worker. My constant refrain in these essays has been that affect matters in the workplace—particularly to me as a working mother.

I have positioned myself as an advocate for

**VOLUNTEERING AT WALGROVE HAS CONFIRMED MY HYPOTHESIS THAT AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE POSITIVE AFFECT PREVAILS CAN FOSTER NEW, STRONGER ALLIANCES BETWEEN WORKING MOTHERS.**

people who care deeply, who feel acutely, and who reject the dehumanizing market logic dominating traditional places of work. My writing project is to force a space for emotion into public discourse about work, be it in academe or elsewhere. Feelings betray our humanity and, as such, need to be recognized and reckoned with instead of being declared inconvenient or inappropriate in professional contexts. If I can begin to pry open this closed discussion, I might make room for talking about the connection between who we are and how we feel. Women, particularly working mothers, need to be able to take ownership of the affective dimension of their personal and professional identity without being stigmatized in the workplace.

Thinking back on my voluntary departure

from a tenure-track position, I can begin to appreciate the way in which my inability to manage the negative affect that dominated the working environment soured me on academe. I could not get beyond the shame that other women—most surprisingly, fellow working mothers—made me feel for not managing my home responsibilities more effectively or, at least, in a manner that did not infringe upon work duties or ability to put in adequate face time. My experience at this liberal arts college left me wondering why working mothers used shame and games of one-upmanship to undermine and, potentially, sabotage each other. It was unfortunate that competition prevailed as the dominant mode of interaction among working mothers when there was so much to be gained from the collaborative pursuit of a shared agenda.

Volunteering at Walgrove, however, has confirmed my hypothesis that an environment where positive affect prevails can foster new, stronger alliances between working mothers. The school's collaborative environment brings together the affective elements necessary for success: mutual respect, recognition, and appreciation. For me, professional fulfillment can be achieved through the development of a complex web of relationships with others built on a common understanding of a

shared goal. Given that working mothers can more effectively build the kind of relationships that enable them to thrive within a volunteer economy, there is an urgent need to address the obstacles in work culture that are preventing these collaborative relationships among women in traditional workplaces.

The larger question remains as to whether this kind of intensive maternal engagement in public schools might signal the emergence of a larger grassroots movement in which women are reinventing their relationships to public institutions, their communities, and each other. My sense is yes, it does: as women transition back from volunteering to paid positions, they will bring with them volunteerism's values, and on the job they will exert subtle pressure to defend its principles. I like to think of Walgrove as a boot camp for a working women's utopia, a place for mothers to experiment with how to forge solidarity and a more hospitable work culture for women.

**Zara Bennett is a former professor who received her Ph.D. in French and Francophone Studies from UCLA in 2007. Bennett is a CSW Research Scholar, an activist, a writer, and a mother of two. Her current research focuses on the politics of parental engagement in schoolyard greening within the Los Angeles Unified School District.**