

HERVermont: Youth Leadership Rooted in Waldorf Education

Interview by Beverly Amico

Three high school juniors—Leela McCann, Ella Thomas, and Una Liebermann—are redefining what it means to lead with purpose. Their organization, *HERVermont* (Health, Education, and Rights), is an activist and educational initiative focused on reproductive justice. What began as a semester-long independent learning project has grown into a statewide movement of youth-led education, art, and advocacy.

Their work includes a powerful 12-by-9-foot mural commemorating the struggles and resilience of female-identifying individuals throughout history. This striking visual piece was created to accompany a public education event that combined history, health literacy, and community dialogue. The mural, which

they plan to exhibit across Vermont, is more than an artwork—it is a call to remember, to honor, and to act.

HERVermont has also launched a campaign to bring reproductive health education into high school classrooms, with student-led presentations and pamphlets developed for peers. They've extended their efforts beyond their school, planning visits to Indigenous communities and building intergenerational connections.

The roots of this leadership endeavor trace back to their Waldorf education.

"I remember a block on peacekeepers and nonviolent protest," Leila shared. "We were asked to look at injustice—in our classroom, our community, and the world. It made me realize that education isn't just about learning facts, but about becoming the kind of person who can make a difference."

For Ella, Waldorf school nurtured confidence and creativity. "I helped lead a class mural as our graduation gift, and that experience stayed with me. Waldorf education honored my creativity and curiosity—those qualities are at the heart of HERVermont."

Una reflected on the shift she felt after transferring from public school. "At Waldorf, there was a culture of care. The community was robust and supportive. I think about that all the time now—how to bring people together, how to listen and build something that serves the wider community."

Leadership is woven into every element of their work: initiative, confidence, collaboration, and a deep sense of responsibility. These young changemakers embody the best of what Waldorf education aims to cultivate—human beings who lead with heart, vision, and moral courage.

As they look to the future, all three students plan to continue HERVermont beyond high school. Each intends to take a gap year—to travel, connect with communities, and deepen their learning. College may follow, with interests

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Thought Leadership: Cultivating Collective Capacity, Consciousness, and Conversation

By Brad Kershner

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ranging from environmental science and creative writing to gender studies and social justice.

“I think our generation is full of ideas and energy,” Una said. “We don’t always know the limits yet, and that’s part of our strength. We want to work with adults who bring wisdom and experience, and together imagine what’s possible.”

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Their work is a powerful reminder: leadership doesn’t wait for adulthood. Sometimes it begins with a mural, a conversation, or the simple belief that things can—and must—change.

Find out more on their website: <https://hervermont.weebly.com/>

Una and Ella attended Orchard Valley Waldorf School. Leela attended SunRidge, a Waldorf inspired charter school in Sebastopol, California before relocating to Vermont. All three are now juniors at U-32 High School in East Montpelier.

There are many kinds of leadership, and there is no such thing as ‘the one best way to lead.’ Good leadership is always good for a particular context; it is a special kind of ‘right relationship,’ and a way of working with others to grow together within a shared story of meaning and purpose. The world is changing, and changing times call for new ideas and new forms of leadership.

We are living in a world of dramatic upheaval, where many of the fundamental structures and systems of society are breaking down under the weight of misuse, distrust, and bureaucratic complexity. Education is one of the many essential domains of society that is being called into question and forced to rethink its underlying assumptions, forms, and purpose. Educational leaders are being called to co-create and embody new stories that have the ability to inform and inspire the current generation of educators, students, and families. This is a time for careful consideration, deep contemplation, and thoughtful perspective-taking; this is a time for thought leadership.

In the terrain of relationship, our stories are our maps. It is incredibly difficult to navigate complex social territory without a good map, and it is hard to find good maps for landscapes that are rapidly changing. Having right relationship and skillful means with diverse and dynamic groups of people requires being able to tell and inspire true and meaningful stories that have the power to help others find their way through the complexity and confusion of their own experiences, and to cultivate compassion and understanding for the confusion and imperfection of themselves and others. The question is: how does one know what story to tell, and how do we know what is true (and good, and beautiful) so that we may create the new stories of hope and unity that our communities long to hear?

The answer, which is always easier to say than to do, is that we must do the hard work of extricating ourselves from the polarizing and less-than-wise perspectives of our cultural environment, and have the courage to explore and develop heterodox and diverse perspectives on the topics and issues that matter the most for ourselves and our school communities. We need less news and more books; less nodding along with those we agree with, and more curiosity in relation to views that we are genuinely unfamiliar with.