Half of a defunct smoke detector attached to a string disappeared with a student around a corner as Konnie Serr, first-grade teacher and assistant professor of education, looked on with amusement.

“She’ll definitely have an explanation for that,” Serr said with a laugh as the student walked on.

Paper towel rolls, cardboard boxes, modeling clay, tape, and construction paper littered the hallway at her feet as the Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School (GBLUES) students gingerly constructed their latest creations.
This recent Friday morning—with the energy in the hall, the open classroom doors, and the mingling of teachers, volunteers, children, university students, cafeteria workers, and parents—might seem unorthodox to some, chaotic even. But no one is yelling, or pushing, or whining. Everyone is learning.

“We’re focused on community,” said James “Mr. Z” Zullinger, kindergarten teacher and associate professor of education. “It’s community and family, and we blend in education. …So many people focus on teaching stuff and not teaching kids.”

This is, and always has been, the guiding principle of the lab school at Shippensburg University. Most students, alumni, and parents realize there is something unique on campus when they spot the brightly colored playset a stone’s throw away from the university science center. As the last remaining laboratory school in Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education, GBLUES offers university students in the Teacher Education Department a distinct learning opportunity.

“Back to Basics”

Since its founding in 1871, Shippensburg University, in all of its different stages, has had an elementary school on campus. In a document titled “History of the Training School,” a former student wrote, “The writer is convinced that this training in the old model school enabled him to meet situations a few years later that might have been troublesome had it not been for confidence, poise, and judgment secured in (those) classrooms.”

It made sense to have an on-campus elementary school at an institution founded on instruction for teachers. From its start as a model school, to a training school in 1914, and ultimately the lab school in 1941, the evolving elementary school always has provided aspiring teachers with a unique, hands-on approach to classroom instruction.

Initially located on the first floor of Old Main, the model school consisted of eight classrooms and an assembly room. Eighty students were enrolled in 1874, learning morals, manners, language, and numbers. The curriculum expanded in 1887 to include drawing, penmanship, music, dancing, and creative movement.

In early writings, it was stated that the model school “should be first an attractive home to the child, next a place of natural, symmetrical growth, and a school of prac-
tice, to the end that right habits of thought and expressions shall be early formed.”

Dr. Phillip Diller, associate professor of educational leadership and special education and former director of GBLUES, provides a more modern explanation. “We enhance the training and preparation of future teachers. … Teacher education has to both prepare teachers for the schools we have and also prepare teachers for the schools we need. It models the possibility of what schools can be.”

**Teaching Teachers**

Serr loves the constant flurry of activity between GBLUES and Shippen Hall. She collaborates with several faculty members and often takes her first-graders “upstairs” to the Teacher Education Department to share what they’re learning. The elementary students revel in the fact that they can say they “went to college” for the day, and the university students get to work directly with children.

“The university students get an assignment and can literally walk down the hall to do it,” she said. “They see real kids. … It gives them a real sense of information and a living example. They can see the big picture.”

According to the book *Laboratory Schools: An Educational Resource*, lab schools were initially developed in the nineteenth century to train teachers and deliver quality instruction to students attending the schools. Over time, the mission evolved to include preparing staff, researching, developing curriculum, testing materials, providing clinical teaching experiences, servicing special student populations, and participating in graduate assistant programs.

“It’s a draw for students,” Mr. Z said. “They can visit and participate in classes. They don’t have to drive to another school. It helps them to make decisions about their career choices.”

Mr. Z first came to Shippensburg as a graduate student in 1974. After teaching first grade in Virginia for a year, he’s been working at Ship since 1978, both in the Teacher Education Department and the lab school. “I feel fortunate because I’ve been involved in education at all levels—from the beginning to the end and in development of curriculum.”

The constant communication between the lab school and Teacher Education Department shows students a direct connection between theory and practice, he said. In addition to education majors who observe, teach, research, and volunteer, university students are interns, administrative assistants, guides for open houses, and tutors.

Katy (Kirsch) Walters ’11 is now a substitute teacher at GBLUES and jumped on every opportunity to be involved in the school as an elementary education major. While at Ship, she was a Taylor Intern—a prestigious honor named for longtime lab school director Mary Jane Taylor, which requires additional work during a semester of student teaching.

“I found the lab school to be the best opportunity in the world. The philosophy matched my philosophy so closely,” she said. “Having a lab school on campus was a dream come true.”

**Cornerstone laid for the Cumberland Valley State Normal School**

*1871*

*1873*

Model school opens on first floor of Old Main

*WINTER 2015 29*
The school’s project-based, collaborative approach to learning allowed her to interact with the master teachers, other student teachers, elementary students, and parents, all of whom shaped her undergraduate education. “The teachers there are amazing,” she said. “Their enthusiasm for education is contagious. I want my kids to love learning like that.”

**A Love of Learning**

With her involvement in the IALS, Serr said it’s affirming to visit lab schools around the country and that “they’re doing the same things we do at our little Shippensburg school.”

It’s about focusing on the whole child, she said. In addition to the curriculum, GBLUES emphasizes the emotional and physical development of each student. “You want to fulfill the requirements for language arts and basic math, but we’re also trying to integrate other aspects of education that make learning fun. We’re trying to teach a child to own their education, which encourages a love of learning.”

GBLUES is one of few lab schools operating as part of a public school district. About 40 percent of students are related to university employees; the remainder are a diverse representation of the Shippensburg Area School District.

Anne Hockersmith started at the training school in Gilbert in 1936 and is one of four generations in her family to attend the lab school. “I don’t remember ever saying I didn’t want to go to school,” she said. “I often thought we had more fun.”

Her grandson Cooper is in Mr. Z’s kindergarten class and loves school just as his grandmother had. “The way he subtly teaches them—it’s not ‘this and that,’ it’s a subtle way of getting all this information into their heads,” Hockersmith said. “I think that’s what it was like back then, too. A way of teaching (that was more doing).”

Diller said the university affiliation presents the lab school with unique opportunities. “A lab school has multiple functions—traditional teaching, curriculum development, some experimentation, and serving children and families.”

Parents of elementary school students know that university faculty and students will be observing classrooms, testing new curriculum, and developing best practices, for example, on how to approach children with autism, he said. University professors also offer their expertise to enhance classroom lessons.

Recent collaborations between the university and lab school have led to the development of a Spanish Club and Chess Club, an on-campus air quality monitoring project with fifth-graders, and a hands-on after-school program to get students interested in math. Each September, the university president joins fourth-graders in reading the preamble of the US Constitution. Faculty and staff also volunteer during the two-day GBLUES Camp in the spring, which moves the classroom outdoors to learn about different themes in nature.

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**labschool milestones**

<table>
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<th>1914</th>
<th>1941</th>
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<td>Model school relocates to Gilbert Hall and becomes training school</td>
<td>Training school moves to Albert Lindsay Rowland Laboratory School building</td>
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*A class from the training school outside Gilbert Hall.*
REMINDING

History is best told through the stories of those who lived it.

Dr. Stephen Burg, professor of history and chair of the History and Philosophy Department, and Dr. Laurie Cella, associate professor of English, both have children attending GBLUES. They developed a joint project last fall with their university students that focused on the history of the lab school. Cella’s Studies in Writing class interviewed generations of GBLUES graduates and compiled essays into an oral history book, while Burg’s Theory and Practice of History class completed archival research. The combined effort produced a bound book to be released this spring.

“From the beginning, there have always been children on campus,” Burg said. “We wanted to establish that sense of history and its impact.”

Following are recollections of GBLUES alumni as reported by Cella’s students:

If you could say one thing about the school in a few sentences, what would it be? I think it was more a friendship thing. You were so close to all your classmates because the classes were so small that everybody in the class was friends. So it was like a family environment almost. You knew everybody, you knew the kids’ parents, you knew the teachers.
—Tim Luhrs, as reported by Caleb Shank

What can you think about now that you can relate back to learning at Rowland? Learning through experience. I prefer a hands-on approach to things. Books are fine, but once you do it, it’s perfectly engrained in you. It’s one of those things you never forget.
—Tim Luhrs, as reported by Caleb Shank

Do you still feel a connection with Shippensburg, either the school itself or the town, and do you think Rowland School and the atmosphere there contributed to those feelings? Oh yes. It will always be my home base. …It was the world’s best place to grow up. Grounded by the town and the region, but the sky was open by the college. All was possible. I’m a lucky guy.
—Dan Roddick, as reported by Shelby Golden

Did you attend the model school? Yes, when my family lived right outside of Shippensburg out on Britton Road in the farmhouse at the top of the hill. And my father had a small dairy, which he delivered milk. So he would be coming to Shippensburg every morning, and he would deliver his children. …When there were big snows and the other children couldn’t walk to school, we were always dropped off. Isn’t that funny? So we had the teacher’s full attention for a day.
—Anne Hockersmith, as reported by Peggy Wagner

Do you feel like you learned by doing? Yes. …I can’t really think of an example, but art is so important for kids, to learn to express yourself in different ways, as is music. That’s what I think is what’s good about the lab schools, they experience things.
—Anne Hockersmith, as reported by Peggy Wagner

‘C’ is for Community

As students filter in for school each morning, they are enthusiastically greeted by Interim Director Dr. Robert Ziegenfuss. Parents often comment on how rare it is to see a director saying, “Good morning,” when children arrive. With just 123 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, Ziegenfuss knows the students well. He also gets to know their families.

“We encourage engagement. Between 7:35 and 8:00 each morning, there are twenty to thirty parents in and out of the classroom talking to the teachers, working with the kids.”

Ziegenfuss said the elementary school sees between 5,000 and 9,000 visitors a year. Among them are parents who read with students, retired elementary faculty who have established after-school programs, school district staff who take time to eat lunch with students, university students who aid teachers with special projects, and professors who contribute to classroom lessons.

That positive interaction with members of the campus, school district, and community makes GBLUES a happy place to be, Serr said. Students learn to be polite, insightful, creative, disciplined, and independent. They learn to serve themselves and treat people right.

“Here, we don’t say ‘thank goodness it’s Friday.’ It’s more like, how did another week pass by so quickly?” Serr said. “There’s not a day in my career that I don’t walk down that sidewalk excited for another day.”

Lab school moves to Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School building

Faculty and students from the lab school stand outside Rowland for a final photo before moving to Grace B. Luhrs University Elementary School.