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TOP STORY

Windsor couple plans to open LGBTQ+ high school in Cummington, where they will be 'acknowledging, celebrating who these kids are'

By Jane Kaufman, The Berkshire Eagle
Apr 8, 2023



Ben Bederson and Allison Druin stand in front of the 23-room farmhouse that will be the hub of the J.S. Bryant School, which they plan to open in the fall of 2025 for LGBTQ+ teens.

BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

CUMMINGTON — A Windsor couple who searched in vain for a school that would celebrate their child’s transgender journey have shifted their focus to opening their own high school for LGBTQ+ teens.

Allison Druin and Ben Bederson chose to launch their \$5 million campaign through social media last Friday, March 31, to coincide with the International Transgender Day of Visibility.

They’ve already chosen a site for the therapeutic high school: the Bryant Farm, a 300-acre former dairy farm that was owned by poet William Cullen Bryant and his descendants.



The site for the future therapeutic high school is the Bryant Farm, a 300-acre former dairy farm that was owned by poet William Cullen Bryant and his descendants.

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The J.S. Bryant School is named after the poet's younger daughter, Julia Sands Bryant, who didn't marry and eventually moved to Paris. When she died in 1907, she left half of her estate to Anna Rebecca Fairchild, then dubbed by The New York Times Julia's "chum."

Druin and Bederson plan to open the private school in the fall of 2025, with 36 ninth- through 12th-grade students commuting daily from Berkshire, Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden counties. They hope to staff the school with 15 to 20 fulltime-equivalent employees who will be teachers, wellness professionals and farmers.

Drawing from the history of the site and its sweeping ridgeline view, the school will concentrate on three endeavors as the spine of both the curriculum and experience of the students: farming, the arts and wellness.

Druin and Bederson's long-term goal is to open a boarding school for up to 100 residential high school students and 50 commuting or day students.

At first, they searched for a place for their child, crisscrossing the country to inspect therapeutic schools. Frustrated, they adjusted their sights to developing the program of the J.S. Bryant School.



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“Most therapeutic schools, if they appreciate the LGBTQ community, will say they support LGBTQ teens,” Druin said. “But we don’t say we just support it, we say we focus on them. And we focus on them exclusively because we are going to have staff that have the lived experience as well as are deep allies. Maybe they’re parents like us and-or have been highly trained to support this community.”

Students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ will not be admitted.

“This is not their place,” Bederson said. “They’ve got a lot of opportunities.”

Druin added, “However, if they come to us and realize, ‘Hey, I’m not gay; I thought I was,’ we’re not throwing anyone out.”



The couple paid \$1.15 million for the Cummington farm. All but four acres of the 300-acre farm are under agricultural preservation restriction, meaning farming is the only allowable use for most of the site.

BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Sarah “Pepper” Fournier-Scanlon, who runs Two Mamas Farm in Cummington, and who is on the seven-member board at J.S. Bryant School, will be the farming lead.

That means she’ll be in charge of raising goats and calves for the dairy operation, which will also include cheese-making, as well as overseeing the planting of the first 200 apple trees for an orchard.

There will be maple sugaring on the

farm as well, with a farm stand at the entrance.

“For the next couple years,” Druin said, “we will do community events in the arts, in farming, that bring the community in to help, but also to learn.”

Druin and Bederson in November of 2021 paid \$1.15 million for the Cummington farm. All but four acres of the 300-acre farm are under agricultural preservation restriction, meaning farming is the only allowable use for most of the site.



JS BRYANT SCHOOL

UPPER BRYANT ROAD, CUMMINGTON, MA 01026

ART ROOM
JULY 25TH, 2022



**KUHN·RIDDLE
ARCHITECTS**

Renderings of J.S. Bryant School show it as a boarding school. The founders plan to open the main farmhouse as a day school for LGBTQ+ students in 2025.

image provided by KUHN RIDDLE ARCHITECTS AND BERKSHIRE DESIGN GROUP RENDERINGS

The four acres in the center of the property will thus be redeveloped as the campus, with the existing mustard-yellow 23-room farmhouse set up for operation as the hub of the school.

For now, the dining room has an oak table Bederson fashioned from a tree on the couple's Windsor property. Spread out on it are renderings of the school, and there are renderings tacked to the walls.

The couple hired Kuhn Riddle Architects of Amherst to design the buildings and Berkshire Design Group of Northampton to design the landscape. The campus will be "green," the couple said, with net-zero waste and composting toilets.

Bederson lived in Westchester County, N.Y., as a child and said he spent summers in Windsor with his family at “an old farmhouse on a dead end.” The couple decided to move there permanently from Brooklyn during the COVID-19 pandemic. Druin has since worked remotely from Windsor in the administration of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.



Ben Bederson points out an element of the J.S. Bryant School.

JANE KAUFMAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

She has a Ph.D. in education. He has a Ph.D. in computer science. Both have worked as faculty and as administrators at the University of Maryland in College Park. Each is entrepreneurial: Druin has launched two schools; Bederson two companies. They are used to working together, but this will be their first collaboration school. Bederson will be chief operating officer; Druin will be head of school.

When the school opens in 2025, the couple’s son, who is now 18, will likely be midway through college. The family was finally able to find a school that worked for him, but it wasn’t ideal.

“This is the challenge,” Druin said. “It is not just to say the LGBTQ community of teens is hurting inside, it’s not just about that. It’s about acknowledging, celebrating who these kids are.”

Jane Kaufman is Community Voices Editor at The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at jkaufman@berkshireeagle.com or 413-496-6125.

MORE INFORMATION



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Community Voices Editor