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World's 3 miles away, but islanders don't mind

Place with a one-room schoolhouse forgoes the hustle and bustle

By Trisha Thadani
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PRUDENCE ISLAND, R.I. — For some on this tiny island nestled in Narragansett Bay, the mainland three miles away is just known as the real world. “Over there is the hustle and bustle, all of the traffic, and you need to get here and there on time,” said Cathy Homan, a board member of the one-room schoolhouse on Prudence Island. “But once you get on the ferry, and as you’re coming to the island, all of it stays over there.”

Prudence Island is home to Rhode Island’s only one-room schoolhouse. On Sunday, just over 100 people — about the same number who live on the island year-round — attended a celebration for the Prudence Island School’s 120th anniversary.

The island is part of the town of Portsmouth on the main-
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TIMOTHY TAI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Prudence Island School — Rhode Island’s only one-room schoolhouse — celebrated its 120th anniversary Sunday.

For many, 3 miles to the real world is just fine

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land. Until 2009, the town supported the one-room schoolhouse, which was built in 1896. But once costs rose and the town’s financial support dwindled, the school became reliant on grants, donations, and island volunteers to re-roof, paint, and clean the building.

Students from kindergarten to 12th grade are all taught by one teacher under the same roof. The students are often children of those who work on the island, such as the island’s only carpenter and its only public safety officer.

While some children take a 30-minute ferry ride to the mainland for school, 10-year-old Raya Young doesn’t mind spending her days at the one-room schoolhouse. For her, the island has everything she needs: a store to buy snacks, everyone she knows, and plenty of beaches to look for sea-shells after class.

She and her family often take trips off the island, so she is familiar with the outside world. But she likes the Prudence Island world better.

“It’s really nice,” she said. “I feel like everyone is so close, and you can literally get anywhere you want because you can walk everywhere. I also like how the woods are everywhere.”

Even though she has lived on the island her entire life, she knows she will need to leave eventually. Young, wearing a gold dress with a pink boa, said she wants to be a big Broadway star — and Prudence Island just doesn’t have a big enough audience.



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Joe Bains (left) and Nancy Rice Capron attended the 120th birthday celebration for the Prudence Island School Sunday. Bains attended the school from 1952 to 1958, and Capron lives on the island part of the year.

Prudence Island has a year-round population of about 150 and a summer population of about 1,500. Just 7 miles long and 2 miles wide at its broadest point, the island is locked in the past, some locals say.

Along with the schoolhouse, it has the basics: dirt roads, one store, a dump, and a place to host a weekly bingo night. It has no sidewalks, no stop signs, no bars, no restaurants.

But above all, some residents said, there is no need to lock the doors.

After the party, Richard Homan, 78, realized his car doors were open and his keys were in the cup holder. It didn’t mat-

ter, though, because he knows everyone on the island.

“You certainly don’t want to get a bad name on Prudence Island — it travels fast,” he said.

Stephen Hammond, 45, recently moved to Prudence Island to raise his children, who are students at the schoolhouse. While he acknowledged the relaxed island life isn’t for everyone, he said it is a great place for a kid to just be a kid.

“As a parent, it’s always a question of when do you release the leash, and you can do that here,” he said. “I’m all about having childhood be childhood for as long as you want it to be.”

Hammond said his kids would move off the island only when they are ready. His son, Edgar, out of breath from chasing one of his friends around the party, jumped up and down at the idea of never having to leave the island.

Seventeen-year-old Julianna Henault said she felt differently. She attended the school for a few years but moved to a high school on the mainland because she wanted a bit more of a “traditional” high school experience before heading off to college.

“It definitely is isolated, but has a lot to offer,” she said. “I’m a really extroverted, outgoing person, so being here was defi-

nately different. I thrive in some ways here, but in general, I think it is better for me to be around a lot of people.”

Next year, Henault hopes to go to a school like Boston University, where the student body is more than 100 times as large as the island’s number of year-round residents.

But, she said, when she needs to escape the real world, Prudence Island is just a ferry ride away.

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