

FACTS Founders Day

March 9, 2006

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FACTS Founders Day: March 9, 2006

[For grades 3-5]

What is Founder's Day?

Founders are people who “find” something— people who start something.

At FACTS, we are all finders. We are all founders.

We are ordinary people: grown-ups and young people.

We are making this school, all of us together, every day.

We are people from many backgrounds and cultures.

We are all working towards something, with justice and hope in our hearts.

Today is the first birthday of our school. It is the day that we got the right to found (to open) our school. We had to work hard (to struggle) for the right to open FACTS.

It took a long time. It wasn't easy.

Today is a day to remember how good it is to work together with other people for a dream of justice.

Have you ever dreamed a really big dream?

Sometimes we dare to have dreams that are so big and wonderful that they seem impossible.

But *sometimes* if enough people have that same dream and all work together, they can make their dream come true.

That's what this day, March 9, Founders Day, is about. It's about the day a very big dream — about a good education truly for all — came true.

Why would we want to open our own school?

Sometimes we see things that aren't fair or that make us sad or angry.

And we want to change things.

We wanted a school that put kids first, that respected culture, family, community and art. We thought it was unfair that there wasn't a school in Chinatown.

We were sad that some schools were not friendly to parents.

We thought it was unfair that some schools weren't happy places and didn't have books or music or art for all the kids.

We listened to many parents and children talk about the hard times they had at school, to what they needed, to what they dreamed.

We wanted to change things. At first we didn't know if we could do it. (Or how). But we knew we had to try.

We thought if we had our own school, we would make a school in Chinatown where everyone loves children and where parents are welcome.

Where children learn to respect each other and planet earth.
Where children learn the skills they need to help to make the world a better place.

It takes a lot of people to make a school.

A lot of things have to happen to make a school.
The hardest thing was that we had to get permission from the government to open our school.

We asked people for help.

Teachers wrote letters that said, "I would like to teach in a school like FACTS."

People in Chinatown went to meetings and said, "Our community needs a school like FACTS."
Parents from all different neighborhoods signed petitions that said, "We want our kids to go to a school like FACTS."

Businesses said, "We will help this school if you let it open."

All kinds of people stopped what they were doing.

They said, "Yes, this school is important. It is needed. It is a good dream. Let the people start this school."

Finally the day came for the government to make its decision.

We went to a big meeting.

Over a hundred people from all over the city came into the meeting wearing red t-shirts that said, "We Support FACTS."

It was a beautiful thing to see so many people coming together.

Four people from the government were the ones who got to decide whether or not we could have a school. When they were ready to vote, all of the people in red t-shirts stood up, holding our signs.

Then the votes came: Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes.

And all of the people cheered and cried and jumped up and down because we were so happy.

That was one year ago on March 9. That's why we are celebrating today.

You are now also the ones making our new school.

Did you know that you are the very first group of children ever to come to this school? Did you know that your teachers are the very first teachers ever to teach at FACTS?

We are all making this brand new school together now. We are all learning together.

We are all founders! **Happy Founders Day!**

(Text from Ellen Somekawa, with Debbie Wei, Alex Wong, Helen Gym, Hao-Li Tai Lo)

FACTS Founders Day: March 9, 2006

[For grades K-2]

What is Founder's Day?

Today is the first birthday of our school.

Have you ever dreamed a really big dream?

Sometimes we have dreams that are so big and wonderful that they seem impossible.

And *sometimes* if enough people have that same dream
and if they all work together,
then they can make their dream come true.

That's what this day, March 9, Founders Day, is about.
It's about the day a very big dream came true.

Why would we want to open our own school?

Sometimes we see things that aren't fair .
Sometimes we see things that make us sad or angry.
And we want to change things.
We thought it was unfair that there wasn't a school in Chinatown.
We were sad that some schools were not friendly to parents.
We thought it was unfair that some schools weren't happy places.
We thought it was sad that some books didn't have books or music or art for all the kids.

We wanted to change things.
At first we didn't know if we could do it.
We didn't know exactly how to do it.
But we knew we had to try.

We thought:
If we had our own school, we would make a school in Chinatown.
It would be a school where everyone loves children and where parents are welcome.
It would be a school where children learn to respect each other and planet earth.
It would be a school where children learn folk arts, family traditions.
It would be a school where children learn (together) how make the world a better place.

It takes a lot of people to make a school.

A lot of things have to happen to make a school.

The hardest thing was that we had to get permission from the government to open.

We asked people for help.

Teachers wrote letters that said, "I would like to teach in a school like FACTS."

People in Chinatown went to meetings and said, "Our community needs a school like FACTS."

Parents from all different neighborhoods signed petitions that said, "We want our kids to go to a school like FACTS."

Businesses said, "We will help this school if you allow it to open."

Friends all took time from what they were doing to say: "Yes, this school is important. It is needed. It is a good dream. We believe in this dream. Give the people the chance to start this school."

Finally the day came for the government to make its decision.

We went to a big meeting.

Over a hundred people from all over the city came there wearing red t-shirts that said, "We Support FACTS." It was a beautiful thing to see so many people coming together.

Four people from the government were the ones who got to decide whether or not we could have a school. When they were ready to vote, all of the people in red t-shirts stood up, holding our signs.

Then the votes came: Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes.

And all of the people cheered and cried and jumped up and down because we were so happy.

That was one year ago on March 9. That's why we are celebrating today.

You are now also the ones making our new school.

Did you know that you are the very first group of children ever to come to this school?

Did you know that your teachers are the very first teachers ever to teach at FACTS?

We are all making this brand new school together now.

Together we are learning: new ways to sing and dance, to do art and play games, to read, write, do math, be kind, listen to each other, take care of ourselves and others, love the earth, and grow up to change the world.

We are all founders!

Happy Founders Day!

(Text from Ellen Somekawa, with Debbie Wei, Alex Wong, Helen Gym, Hao-Li Tai Lo)

Additional thoughts from Founders. . . .

From Debbie Wei: Founders Day Reflections

Founders Day to me is a celebration of both an end and a beginning - the culmination (ending) of a lot of struggles and the start of making good on a dream and a vision that lots of people had for a long time.

For me, Founders Day was years in the making. In some ways, there were thousands of Founders Days – small Founders Days leading up to March 9th.

There were Founders Days about finding out how you love to learn things, just as an individual. Then, there were the Founders Days when you learn about stuff you never learned before, and the things you learn shake your world.

There were Founders Days where you know you have to make a commitment (a promise) to justice, to doing things the right way, the way things should be done.

There were the Founders Days of seeing what public schools have become for poor children in America, and then there were the founders days of realizing it didn't have to be this way and believing we might be able to change things or make a difference.

All these Founders Days.

There are Founders Days when you realize that the way sometimes history gets told is about heroes and big things that make you feel like you alone can't do anything to make a difference.

There were the Founders Days when you realize if history is always told that way, people might never know they can change the world.

Founders Day is finding out that small things, people working together, can make a difference.

Founders Day is about finding out about the importance of knowledge and justice.

We are all finders.

We are all founders.

We are all working towards something.

And then there are Founders Days that are seminal moments. That means moments where you feel like everything changes – nothing is quite the same. When you fight for justice, you may spend many years watching the powerless battle the powerful, and being beaten down, and losing fights, but always coming back to struggle harder.

Then, sometimes, there are the seminal Founders Days - moments when out of hard work and vision, you win something; not the whole thing, but a piece of the thing. On March 9, 2005, there was a change in the pattern - like a weaving where the thread moves in a new direction.

On March 9, we came from all different paths together, but we were there.

Educators.

Parents.

Committed fighters for justice.

Those who had dreamed of this for many years, and those who got on a bus that day because they thought it might help their kids.

All these people coming together to actually fight for something - a school.
Not just any school. Our school.

March 9 was a special day. I don't know in my lifetime if I'll see another day like that. When we close our eyes and think back to the moment the vote was taken to give us our school, it can still move those of us who were there.

When I remember March 9, I think always that there are founders days all over the world, every day. Founders Days where somewhere in the world, justice happens, after a lot of work, pain, and tears. There are places and times when something beautiful can happen.

We're part of a movement for justice going on all over the world. I think in remembering Founders Day, I want the children of our FACTS family to know that this is the legacy that is being passed on to them. I want our children to have thousands of Founders Days and then, in their lives, to experience what it's like to have at least one seminal Founders Day. Everyone should have the chance to experience a day when you know that your work and passion and love for justice makes the world shift a little, the weave in the fabric change just a bit. Everyone should have a March 9 in their lives some time.

From Alex Wong:

Twelve-some years ago, when Debbie, Ellen, Ming and I and other AAU staff tried to organize new and old immigrant parents to meet to address public school education issues—that was the first time I knew how bad the Philadelphia Public School system was. I was a newcomer to public education issues and learned a lot through being involved in organizing parents and students.

I remember that I was in tears one time, when I listened to the stories of our parents and students. One student's words, from one of the meetings, is still fresh in my mind. He brought with him a Chinese take-out menu, written in English. He said, "If I could learn a word a day from this menu in school, then eventually I would be able to read the whole menu. But I can't even learn a word a day in class."

At that time, we had some successes fighting with the School District but most of the time we failed to get what our parents and students needed. We all still had a dream back then of how wonderful it would be if we could have our own school.

The idea to start a charter school has been a struggle for all of us at AAU. All the pros and cons of having (and not having) a charter school were legitimate; each had its reason. Finally, we broke through our differences and started the process of forming a charter school almost three years ago. I now see that the struggle has not been divisive but consolidated further our thoughts about having a charter school that serves all immigrants.

The whole process of forming the charter school has been wonderful and painful. I always believed that we were going to have a charter school, no matter what, even in the darkest moments during that period of time. Of course, at times, we were greatly discouraged and sometimes felt hopeless. Throughout the whole process, I learned to see my friends and comrades in a whole different way. I am still amazed at how much this group could do! We had different opinions on issues and various matters, but we had one common goal, which was to make this charter school happen. Again, amazingly, nobody lost sight of the common goal throughout the two-year struggle.

March 9, 2005 was a date I will never forget. I was among a sea of people in red t-shirts, hearing testimonies from our friends, allies, supporters, and of course, from our opponents, too. Our friends, allies and supporters came from different communities and ethnic groups. The emotion that I felt at the time was the highest, most intense, so far in my life. I remember that Ellen sat in front of me, and when the last vote from the SRC was cast, she turned around and we hugged each other. I cried for the first time since I was a junior high student.

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From Betty Lui

FACTS Founders Day on March 9, 2005 is very important. March 9, 2005 is the birthday of FACT Charter School. I treat this school like a baby. On March 9, 2005, I was very scared and kept on praying to my own God. The baby may be born or we may lose it.

On that day, I took care of two busses in Chinatown. One of the busses in South Philly was broken down. I asked one bus to go to the School District for the hearing first. And I asked the other driver from Chinatown to go to South Philly to pick up Neeta and the families there who supported us. Things didn't look good with the bus broken down.

After we arrived, I saw a lot of people who wore red our red FACTS t-shirts who supported us. They were different ethnic groups. (People of different colors, who spoke different languages). They only had one goal: to support our school. (Thanks to everyone for organizing other ethnic community organizations and members.) All of the founders grabbed their family, friends and friends' friends for this important moment. This is FACTS mission: to serve many different communities. Our supporters kept on coming and we gave them "Support FACTS" t-shirts. (Things were looking good).

I recognized the people against us. They only had a few people there, not more than ten. They began to speak first.

Then Helen introduced all of the community organizations and they stood up when she called their names. Then our supporters— community leaders and parents— lined up for their turns to speak. The interpreters included Lai- Har, Mr. Wong (brought by Simon), and my daughter (they spoke the statements in English). The moment was coming. SRC began to vote. I started to pray and pray and pray. Everyone in the room who wore red t-shirts held up the signs to support our school. They raised them up high and let everyone see. We had ALL the votes for YES. I cried and hugged Ellen. I forgot who else I hugged! This is the moment I will never forget. We are joyful! We made it! This was not easy. WE ARE SLEEPLESS IN PHILLY. We are working day and night and dreaming about this charter school.

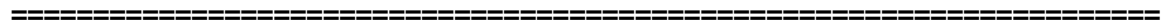
I remember other details. Sam was in Vietnam and he called back to find out what was going on. The inauguration for the Chinese Benevolent Association was just the night before March 9. Mr. Mak was the new Chariman. So he would represent CBS to testify. (There are nine Chinese associations under CBA. CBA is the leading organization in Chinese community. It would make the difference.) We were very lucky. Mr. Mak is Sam's friend. The previous Chairman didn't support our school. I called Mr. Mak around 11 pm and found out the result: he would represent CBA in the SRC hearing. LUCKY!!

All of this was for the education of our children! We are the founders. We all have one goal: to make this charter school get born. We need to care for it for the rest of our lives. (Even though, we may not work in the school forever). I feel that FACTS is part of my life. I have responsibility for this FACTS. We need to pass FACTS on to next generation, to the next decade, to the next century. We need to keep this school going on forever.

We would not have been able to open this school without the support of other community members and allies and friends and family members. So teamwork is important! One person cannot do everything. We had meeting after meeting. We planned in advance for all the important hearings. I remembered Neeta and me attended the SRC hearing on Lunar Chinese New Year. We needed to find out what was going on! One e-mail after another. Maybe 100 e-mails or more! One phone call after another.

We worked as a team. Each individual has his/ her own strength. Debbie opened her ears in the School District about our school stuff. She wrote large portions of the proposal. I remember I put Debbie's writing in paragraphs and it took me a long time! Alex is good for budget matters. Helen contacted SRC members. She kept on bugging them. Each founder had her/his own duty. I was doing outreach in Chinese community. I always said my face has thick skin. Ming drove me to community leader's houses or stores to ask for support letters or signature. Mr. Wong (the landlord on 10th & Callowhill) called his friends and customers to support us. One of the customers referred us to Mr. Simon Liu. Ming and I went there and talked to him about our plan to open the charter school. He helped us a lot and become our FACTS Board member. I carried around FACTS information in my bag. I met Chinese leaders on the street and asked for their support. I met Jimmy inside HSBC bank and talked to him about supporting our school. He gave us a lot of advice. He was the peacemaker between organizations that opposed us. Jimmy introduced Mr. Chen, Steven Zhu, Curtis Thomas and Robert Shine to us. They all helped to make this school happen.

WE ALL WORKED HARD TO BUILD THIS SCHOOL, TO MAKE A SAFE PLACE FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN EACH OTHERS' CULTURE, TO RESPECT EACH OTHER'S CULTURE. FACTS IS NOT FOR US. IT IS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION. CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE. OUR WORLD IS IN THEIR HANDS. WE WILL DIE ONE DAY AND THEY ARE YOUNG. WE NEED TO DO OUR BEST TO EDUCATE THEM. ONE CHILD AT A TIME IF WE NEED TO.



From Hao-Li Tai-Loh:

What stands out for me in this epic journey of ours is how grandly everyone dreamed. We sat down and said, "What should this school be like? "What should it look like? "What should our vision be?" And we put out our biggest hopes without letting them be diminished by pragmatism, realism, or cynicism. As a result, we have a school fiercely committed to its students and families where we care about the emotional/spiritual growth of the student as much as their academic achievements. Where students learn about diverse folk arts and are not discouraged but encouraged to value their cultures of origin. Where we're conscious of how important good nutrition is, taking care of the environment, caring about and fighting for social justice. Oh, how I would have loved to have attended FACTS when I was just getting to this country...

What I would like the students to know is that the school was designed for them by a group of people who are totally committed to young people and care deeply about them and have the highest hopes that they will flourish in every way possible.

Two things in my memory

The tension and strain in the packed room as all our supporters waited to hear if we would get our charter and then the explosion of joy, relief, tears and love when we realized we had it!

The retreat we had in my house where we said we can't do this in five months. And then the realization that we had to do it in five months even though we couldn't see how it was possible.

“To dream the impossible dream” -- this group made it possible!

From Helen Gym:

What do you (personally) want kids to know or remember? I want children to know that the school was not built quickly or easily, that it only came together when people who cared about one another, were involved together in working collaboratively for social change, and who had worked for a long time trying to make change happen decided that at this time, it made sense to build something independent. I want children to know that many people with many skills contributed to this project, that it wasn't built or granted by people with titles and important positions. I want children to remember that we built this for them, with all the best of intentions, that the founders and the families of the founders did it with love and compassion, with justice and hope in their hearts.

What do you remember about March 9th, or the long path to March 9th? I remember that it was an incredible struggle, but despite the hardship, every single member of the founders, grew in esteem before my eyes. I had increased respect and love and deference for every member's skill and our ability to not only work towards a productive end but to come out loving one another and respecting one another more than ever.

I remember that on Mar. 9, I was holding hands with friends and colleagues, that all of us stood up in the audience together to face the SRC, we did not have the power to make the decision, but we were at peace knowing that we had done a just struggle and made our voices heard. I remember letting go of any bitterness or resentfulness of struggle in the past, that the key to community is the act of coming together as broadly as possible,

From Debora Kodish

My own founders' day story

There is the founders' story that many people shared. But there are also many different stories, about what founders' day means to different people, to each one of us. This is one story.

March 9th was my father's birthday. Daniel Robert Kodish. He was born on March 9, 1924. And on his birthday, his mother died. She died in childbirth. I don't know how he felt — I didn't think to ask him — that every year of his life, his own birthday was his mother's *yarzheit* (the anniversary of her death). I remember that he lit a candle for her. But I don't remember realizing that it was his birthday. I remember this only as a little kid, myself. I guess I just wasn't paying attention.

So my dad was a motherless child, and an orphan. He spent the first 5 or 6 years of his life in an orphanage. And I think that when he started school he was a Yiddish-speaker. He didn't speak English. School never worked for him. He told stories (I thought they were funny when I was a kid) about how, when he was in gym class, he would fade back, back, back in the outfield and just leave school. He played hookey a lot. (Now all of that makes me so sad, that nobody cared.) He never really felt comfortable as a reader, or as a writer. He was always self-conscious about his “lack of education.” I don't really know what he did when he wasn't in school. I know he worked early, on his stepfather's produce truck. I know he worked really hard. I don't think he was loved. It makes me sad to think about what his life was like

(like so many other children, born into hard times and places). He never graduated from high school. His report card had lots of “F” marks. I think he remembered one teacher who took an interest in him.

But I think of him because school wasn’t a shelter for him. And because it is his birthday.

And it is an honor to try to build a school that can be a shelter, that can be for everyone.
For all kids who come from hard times and places (and good times and good places).
For all kids who speak many languages. (A place where we can hold on to languages and cultures).

I think he would have been so proud of this school.
I wish he had lived to see it.
I wonder what he would have told me, if we could have walked down these halls together.

And I am so happy to think that from now on, the way I will celebrate my dad’s birthday, and my grandmother’s passing, will be with all of you, in good company, making a beautiful vision of justice and equity, of learning for all, working together. In real community. At FACTS.

Another way to remember

There are so many stories of FACTS, of Founders’ Day. I love hearing everyone’s stories. I love being able to hear them: to make the time to hear someone talk about what Founders’ Day means to them.

I have vivid memories of March 9th: like a film unrolling. Getting to the School District early with bags and coats and t-shirts, and saving seats so that our coalition could be right up front. Watching people come in, one at a time: AAU folks, Jimmy and Simon and Betty and the busses from Chinatown and South Philadelphia. Nervous conversations on cell phones with everyone (where were the busses?!) Wonderful allies, friends, folk and traditional artists: people I love, people who all came through. Neeta’s wonderful parents, and Helen’s. Ming. Ellen. Betty. Debbie in the back. District folks and allies coming downstairs whether they were allowed to or not. Rosemary. Lois. Rita. Everybody. Just so many people intensely involved, there and caring SO VERY MUCH. Used to losing. So much on the line. And people just kept coming in. We put on our Eric-made shirts. I was videotaping, and at the front of the room, watching, making a record. Powerful speakers, one after another. Watching the SRC folks. What did they think? So much in the balance. People translating to one another.

And then the vote. None of us knew which way it would go. And they voted for us. And it was AWESOME!!! The look on everyone’s faces: we were so filled with feeling. Almost numb. I’ll never forget it.

There is always something so powerful about working together with people — and the months (years) leading up to March 9th were richer because of the joys of working together with people, learning from other peoples’ strengths, being able to trust one another so deeply, being able to fully contribute. But when there is an unbelievable victory, truly because of so many — the people united truly speaking — it gives you something more. It restores your faith that justice, truth, beauty might be possible. And in those moments, it allows you to really feel and know justice, truth, beauty, unity, strength. (OK, I am over the edge into corniness, but there you go). I feel so lucky to be part of this. . . . Happy Founders’ Day to all.

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A few questions for founders:

What is most important for you, in thinking about the history of how we got started?

What do you remember about March 9th, or the long path to March 9th?

What do you want kids to know or remember, on a Founders Day?

A few questions for teachers, kids:

What will you remember about this year?

How are you helping to start this school, in a special way? What is your special contribution?