



Stories of SelfDesign

40 YEARS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

“ We do not have to understand what we are doing, or why, we do not need to be fully behind what is in our heart, sometimes our doubt brings forth reason, however we do need to live from our integrity and our passion. This is what our children will learn of most importance, to live a life of passion for what is real and worthwhile, day by day.

– Brent Cameron, *unpublished writings*

Stories of SelfDesign

40 YEARS OF LIFELONG LEARNING





Acknowledgements

Thousands of people — learners, families, educators and other stakeholders — have contributed to the educational initiatives that are the basis of what is now SelfDesign Learning Foundation. We thank each and every one of them for transforming the educational landscape and creating choice for families and freedom for learners.

To celebrate our organization's 40th anniversary, we invited the SelfDesign community, past and present, to share their memories and anecdotes of Wondertree, Virtual High, Wondertree HomeLearners' Network, SelfDesign Learning Community and the other iterations of SelfDesign's educational programs, and of SelfDesign Learning Foundation over the years.

This account is based on the narratives of those who responded, as well as stories shared in earlier years. We also drew on Brent Cameron's graduate theses and other writings, Michael Maser's Master's thesis, and Brent's and River Meyer's SelfDesign: *Unfolding our Infinite Wisdom Within*. Those writings contain other stories and explore the SelfDesign philosophy, which this account does not do.



Message from SelfDesign Leadership Team	6
Message from Verena Gibbs, Chair, Board of Directors, SelfDesign Learning Foundation.....	8
Message from the Premier of the Province of British Columbia	11
A timeline of SelfDesign milestones.....	12
1983 The beginnings.....	18
1984 Wondertree: The 25-year experiment in natural learning officially begins.....	24
1988 Learners present the first Wondertree Learning Award.....	42
1989 A homeschooling option becomes available: Wondertree HomeLearners’ Network.....	44
1993 Virtual High extends the Wondertree approach to older youth.....	48
1996 Learners write the Declaration of Learners’ Rights and Responsibilities.....	56
2002 Life’s spiral made visible.....	58
2002 “We’re finally going to get our chance!” SelfDesign Learning Community launches online.....	60
2004 SelfDesign begins formalizing and growing its special education offerings.....	66
2006 Annual Collaboratories bring educators together.....	72
2009 SelfDesign reaches beyond B.C.’s borders.....	76
2009 SelfDesign Learning Community offers high school options for B.C. learners.....	78
2010 A SelfDesign Path course is launched.....	82
2012 In-person camps bring SelfDesign learners together from across B.C.	84
2012 SelfDesign Graduate Institute provides training for educators.....	88
2012 Brent Cameron passes.....	90
2013 SelfDesign begins its transition to a new generation of leaders.....	92
2015 BC Ministry of Education moves to competency-based curricula and personalized learning.....	94
2015 A new library changes the way we learn.....	96
2017 SelfDesign Learning Community integration begins.....	98
2017 Indigenous Education task force charts the way to furthering reconciliation.....	104
2019 Learner Council gives learners greater voice.....	108
2021 SelfDesign goes fully remote.....	110
2021 HomeLearners Network launches.....	112
2023 SelfDesign Learning Community becomes an independent provincial online learning school.....	116
Credits & Acknowledgments.....	120

SelfDesign Leadership Team

When six-year-old Ilana Cameron asked her father, Brent, to be her teacher and to start a school in their house in Vancouver four decades ago, he agreed.

As a certified teacher, Brent had all the expertise and tools he needed to do as she asked. He also knew from his own experiences as a student and as a teacher that traditional Western-style education and the way much of the world viewed learning needed to change.

This is a story of how Brent took young Ilana's hand and cast a stone to create many, many ripples across the educational landscape across the globe and that led to the creation of SelfDesign Learning Foundation.

This is a story of how a new kind of community grew from those first ripples. From six learners and one educator who were based out of the basement of a house in Vancouver, that community has grown to thousands across British Columbia, Canada and beyond. That number is even more profound as the learners who benefitted from Brent's initial vision of personalized learning have gone out into the world and initiated change themselves. What started as a small year-by-year learning experiment underwritten by Brent's willingness to mortgage the family home until other funding came through is now an independent provincial online learning school with a stable, multi-year BC Ministry of Education and Child Care contract.

This is a 40-year-long story of how members of that community — the learners, families, educators, contractors and supporters — added to the ripples and further shaped the educational landscape by working within the frameworks and spaces that Brent and his program co-founders provided. On daily, weekly, monthly, annual and decadal bases, they inspired and co-created — and continue to inspire and co-create — what we now know as SelfDesign.

Without the community in all of its manifestations over the years, SelfDesign and its unique approach to learning would not exist as they do today. Hand in hand, those who joined the journey of SelfDesign have inspired positive change and transformed education in B.C. and beyond.

In late 2023 and through this past spring, we invited our community, past and present, to share their memories and anecdotes of the programs and initiatives that grew out of Brent's initial educational experiment, Wondertree, and became SelfDesign. The account told here of SelfDesign's emergence draws on the narratives shared by those who responded and on the pebbles they cast across the proverbial water. The ripples they and others created shaped SelfDesign into what it is today.

Thank you to everyone who shared their perspectives here. And, most of all, thank you to everyone who has shaped and co-created this amazing organization, community and learning approach over the last 40 years.

With gratitude,
SelfDesign Leadership Team



“ I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples.”

— Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu (Mother Teresa)

Verena Gibbs

Chair, Board of Directors,
SelfDesign Learning Foundation

Change is the only constant we can count on.

Sometimes it shows up in dramatic ways that shake us to our core. Most often it's the millions of tiny changes happening every second that silently transform us. Change inevitably comes with an invitation to grieve a piece no longer present, to make space for the simultaneous new growth.

I look back on photos of my youthful face during my Wondertree years, now over 20 years ago, and remember the drive and enthusiasm I felt to create something new with the learning community. Co-creating, building and nurturing this learning community with educators, parents and learners was an experience that profoundly shaped my life. There are too many wonderful people to name who collaborated on this great adventure, but you know who you are, and I love you!

To be honest, I sometimes miss the small community that met for meals and conversations that went on for days about our learning philosophy and life. At the same time, I am grateful that the spirit of this work has spread throughout this province and into the hearts of others.

Much has changed since that naïve 25-year-old Verena first walked into the Wondertree Learning Centre in Kitsilano. Even more has changed since Brent began this great experiment into an alternative way of learning a decade and a half before my first

encounter with Wondertree. In the last 40 years, SelfDesign has grown in ways only he could have thought possible.

I volunteer on the SelfDesign Learning Foundation Board of Director because I believe in the power of community to co-create incredible opportunities for learners and families. Thank you for supporting and being part of this SelfDesign community and for helping to co-create it every single day.

May the change we seek continue to move us towards a world where we each thrive and flourish.

Verena



“ Change is the only constant we can count on. Sometimes it shows up in dramatic ways that shake us to our core. Most often it’s the millions of tiny changes happening every second that silently transform us.”

– Verena Gibbs





Happy 40th Anniversary
SelfDesign Learning Foundation

As Premier of British Columbia, I am pleased to congratulate everyone at SelfDesign Learning Foundation as you celebrate your 40th anniversary.

Throughout the past four decades, SelfDesign's innovative approach to education has helped students from across British Columbia learn, thrive and unlock their full potential. Personalized education empowers students to chart their own course and explore their passions and interests, inspiring a lifelong love of learning. SelfDesign provides equitable access and support services for people of all ages and abilities, ensuring every student is set up for success. I have no doubt that they will continue to produce leaders for generations to come.

Thank you to the hard-working educators, staff and partners who have contributed to SelfDesign's record of success over the past 40 years. Your dedication to academic excellence has made a positive difference in the lives of countless students and I wish you all the best in the years ahead.

Happy anniversary!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Eby".

Honourable David Eby, KC
Premier of British Columbia

A photograph of a man with a beard and glasses reading a book to two children. The man is in the center, looking down at the book. A young girl is on the left, looking at the book with her hand near her mouth. A young boy is on the right, also looking at the book. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned overlay.

A timeline of SelfDesign milestones



Brent, Maureen and Ilana Cameron begin the Wondertree experiment

1983



Wondertree learners present Jane Goodall with the first Wondertree Learning Award

1988



Virtual High begins, bringing the Wondertree approach to high school-aged learners until 1997

1993

1984

Brent Cameron registers the Wondertree Learning Society as a not-for-profit organization and independent school



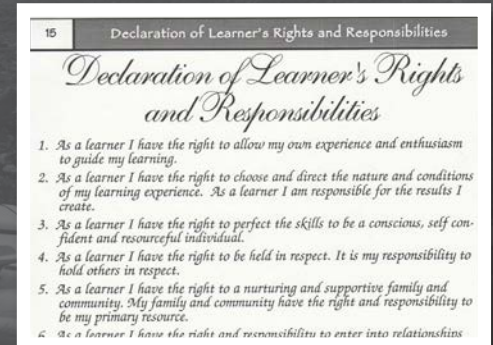
1989

The Wondertree HomeLearners' Network launches



1996

Virtual High learners write the Declaration of Learners' Rights and Responsibilities





The first LifeSpiral is built on Bowen Island

2002



SelfDesign Learning Community begins formalizing and growing its special education offerings

2004



SelfDesign Learning Community co-founders receive a national education award

2007

2002

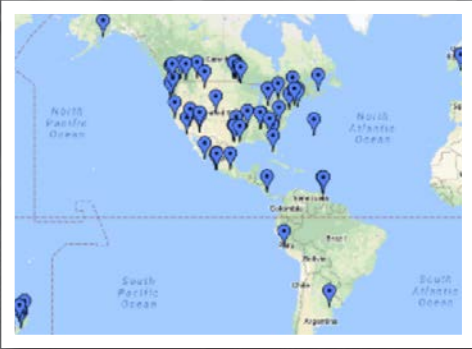
SelfDesign Learning Community launches online



2006

Annual Collaboratories bring educators together; they change to LocalLabs in 2018





SelfDesign reaches beyond B.C. with SelfDesign Global until 2018

2009



Enrolment in SelfDesign Learning Community surpasses 1,000 learners

2010



SelfDesign Learning Community achieves accreditation by Cognia

2011

2009

SelfDesign Learning Community offers high school options



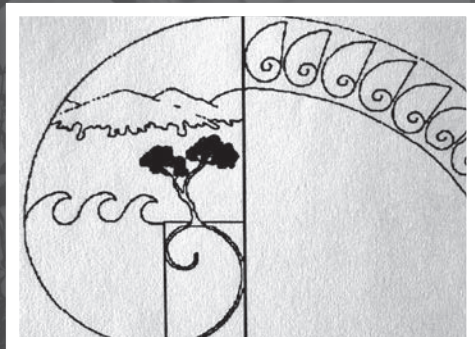
2010

A SelfDesign Path course is launched



2010

Wondertree rebrands as SelfDesign Learning Foundation





In-person camps bring SelfDesign learners together from across B.C.

2012



SelfDesign Graduate Institute provides training for educators until 2018

2012



BC Ministry of Education moves to competency-based curricula and personalized learning

2015

2012

Brent passes



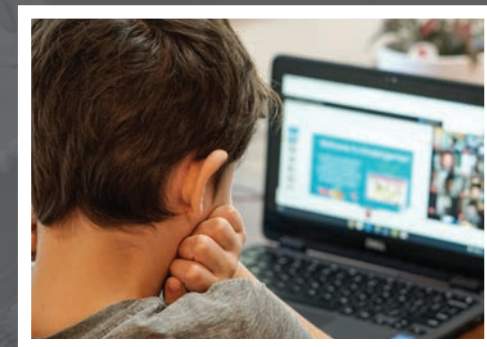
2013

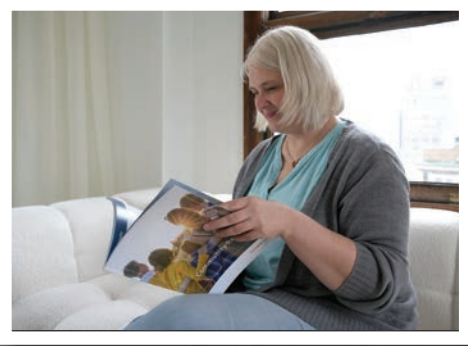
SelfDesign Learning Foundation begins its transition to a new generation of leaders



2015

SelfDesign launches the Learning Experiences Library





SelfDesign Learning Community integration begins

2017



Learners Council gives SelfDesign learners greater voice

2019



SelfDesign Learning Community becomes an independent provincial online learning school

2023

2017

Indigenous Education task force charts the way to furthering reconciliation at SelfDesign



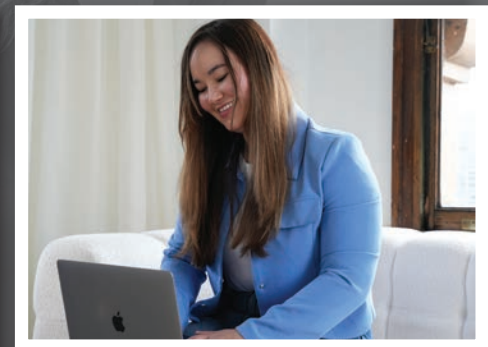
2021

HomeLearners Network launches



2021

SelfDesign Learning Foundation goes fully remote



A young child with curly hair, wearing a textured hat and a sweater, is looking upwards. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The text '1983' and 'The beginnings' is positioned on the left side of the image.

1983

The beginnings

One September morning in 1982, Ilana Cameron decided she wanted to quit kindergarten.

It was recess. The five-year-old daughter of Brent Cameron was swinging on a swing in the playground of her Creston, British Columbia elementary school. The bell rang, and Ilana did not want to go back to class. She wanted to continue swinging on the swing, watching the clouds and enjoying the sunshine. She realized that if she got off the swing and went into the school, she would lose control of her life.

That night she asked her father if she had to keep going to school. She told Brent, “In school I cannot learn what I want to learn when I want to learn it.” She said, “There are too many kids,” and “the things we do aren’t very instirring [sic].”

Brent’s own experiences with school were not happy, neither as a child attending school nor as a teacher. However, his experience as the parent of young, growing Ilana was joyful. He and Maureen, his spouse, had watched Ilana develop, learn to speak and communicate what she needed and wanted. They recognized her natural ability to make appropriate choices and to learn and acquire new skills as she needed them.

Brent told Ilana she didn’t have to return to kindergarten.

A year later, when her friends were starting grade 1, Brent suggested that Ilana try school again. Ilana

asked him if grade 1 was anything like kindergarten. When he said it was, indeed, very like kindergarten, she thought about it for a bit. Then she suggested that they start their own school at home.

***“Could you be my teacher?” she asked him.
“Can we keep on doing what we have been
doing since I was little? Could we start a
school here in our house? I will share all
my toys.”***

After several weeks of discussions, Brent and Maureen agreed that he would work with Ilana at home for one year, supporting her to learn what she wanted to learn when she wanted to learn it. Ilana suggested that they should try to enrol another five children – three boys and two more girls – so that they would have company and it could be more like a real school.

They called their school “Wondertree” after a saying printed on a bookmark in their home.

One day that September, he and Ilana walked around Vancouver, putting up posters announcing they were starting a small learning centre as an educational experiment where children would learn through curiosity and enthusiasm. One other family enrolled their child in Brent and Ilana’s learning program that fall. By the end of the first year, six children had joined.



“It was a difficult adjustment for me, having been a formal school teacher, to integrate the new discoveries I had made as a parent with my new role as teacher,” Brent wrote later in his 1990 Master’s thesis about his experience during that first year of Wondertree. He stopped calling himself a teacher, choosing instead the term “learning consultant” as a more accurate description of what he was doing to support the children’s freedom and natural instincts for learning.

In April, Brent asked Ilana how she was enjoying Wondertree and whether she wanted to continue it through the next year.

“She was very excited and said she was both enjoying herself and learning a lot and she felt that she wanted to continue next year,” he wrote. “I decided to continue the one-year experiment, first to support my daughter and second to fulfill my own desire to work further with the children.”

He also realized that if Wondertree was going to be a longer-term experiment, he and Maureen needed to get serious about how they approached it.



Ilana: On Brent and Wondertree's start

My father had been a public school teacher and had helped start an independent school in Calgary, before he moved to the Kootenays. I didn't know this as a little kid. I just knew that learning from him was really fun.

I was just a curious kid who loved hanging out on the beach with my dad, doing math in the sand. And so when I tried going to normal school, I didn't find it as fun.

He saw that I didn't feel comfortable in kindergarten. And when I asked him if he would keep teaching me, he decided he would try starting a school and seeing if he could do something different and support kids to learn in the new way.

My dad was so inspired by being a parent and watching the innate curiosity of children and how, if you support them to learn in the ways that they learn best, they can flourish and be resourceful. He could see that different people learn in different ways and that the public school system was supporting only specific ways of learning.

— Ilana Cameron, first Wondertree learner

“Wonder into wonder existence opens” – where “Wondertree” comes from

“We had a little bookmark at home,” Maureen Cameron says. “It had a drawing of a tree on it, and it said, ‘Wonder into wonder existence opens.’ It was a perfect match for how Brent saw education could be. With Ilana being the age she was and with Brent’s desire to honour her natural curiosity, it became the seed of everything that followed. That’s what Wondertree, and eventually SelfDesign, grew from.”

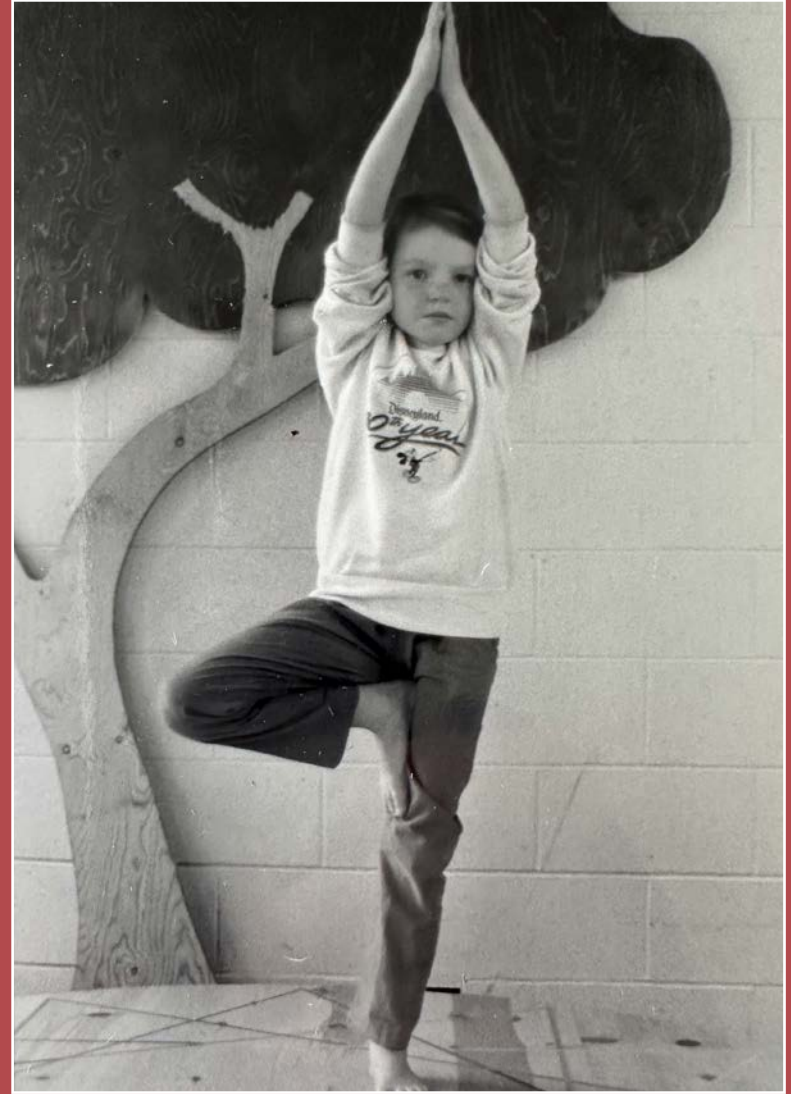
“Wonder into wonder existence opens” is a quote from American Witter Bynner’s 1944 translation and interpretation of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* (500 BCE). The saying is often interpreted as meaning that the nature of wonder is openness – to experience, to possibility, and so on.

“We were renting a basement suite in Vancouver, and we started Wondertree with two kids in our basement suite. From that very early beginning, Brent went out into the world to invite others who might like to join this small group of children for schooling.”

— Maureen Cameron



Wondertree learners in the yard of the first Wondertree Learning Centre in Vancouver



Young Ilana Cameron at Wondertree

A black and white photograph of a group of children and an adult, likely a teacher, sitting on the floor. They are all smiling and have their arms raised in a celebratory gesture, with some holding hands. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text '1984' is written in a large, white, serif font on the left side of the image. Below it, the text 'Wondertree: The experiment in natural learning officially begins' is written in a smaller, white, serif font.

1984

Wondertree: The experiment in
natural learning officially begins

To continue Wondertree and allow him to explore the creation of a new learning model, Brent needed to formalize the experiment. He wrote up a prospectus for the BC Ministry of Education and incorporated the Wondertree Education Society as a not-for-profit society in May 1984.

Brent also determined that, to pay its costs, the school would need tuition from at least 10 learners.

The school year began with six learners. Brent described Wondertree that year as “a day-to day survival operation.” He collected employment insurance while he created his own job, Maureen worked as a nurse to cover the family’s expenses, and the school just covered its costs with tuition fees. He and Maureen knew the family and school likely would have to move at the end of the school year.

Despite the uncertainty, Brent began setting the basis for what would evolve into the Wondertree and SelfDesign learning model, working collaboratively with the learners and their families. He and the learners gathered on the four mornings each week that the school operated to decide what they wanted to learn and do that day, that week and that season. He initiated the learner mentorship program, inviting experts from the local community to spend time with the children and give them a taste of the work they did. The learners and mentors then decided whether they would work together weekly for the next three months. The learners budgeted and paid for the mentors’ time from the Wondertree tuition fees. Pottery, woodworking, yoga, languages, dance, music, computers and, in later years, clowning and

puppetry proved popular. Brent coached the children in modelling skills, observation skills and imitation techniques so that they could best model the excellence demonstrated by their mentors.

He also set up an apprenticeship program for B.C. certified educators to visit Wondertree, observe the learners and help out. This was the beginning of a network of learning consultants, whose role would be constant in almost all of the education programs that would emerge from Wondertree over the following years.

At the start of Wondertree’s second year as a registered school, Brent took out a loan to pay the learning centre’s resource staff. This too was the beginning of a frequent practice. Over the years, Brent often would mortgage the family’s property in the Kootenays in August to pay the learning consultants and other contractors until learners’ tuition fees started coming in or other funding came through. It was only in Wondertree’s third year as a registered school that it became eligible to receive BC Ministry funding – if at least 10 students enrolled by the ministry’s deadline. Wondertree received its first \$5,000 from the ministry that January and another \$5,000 in June. The school also qualified for its first casino funding, raising \$3,000 that year.

Over the next few years, Brent recruited a board of directors for the Wondertree Learning Society, moved the school to a church basement in downtown Vancouver and recruited and trained more learning consultants, while supporting the learners' learning choices and working with parents.

And as the school continued, Brent continued his own learning, reading about educational theory, neurobiology, anthropology and more. He found and learned from mentors such as Buckminster Fuller, Humberto Maturana, Virginia Satir, John Grinder and others. He incorporated his own learnings into the model that was evolving, listening to the learners and to what other members in the community were sharing with him.

Brent created the basic framework for Wondertree's emerging learning approach and provided the initial physical, social and psychological space for what then unfolded and evolved. Within that framework and space, the Wondertree community – learners, families and educators – co-created the program daily and finetuned the approach to learning and model for self-directed learning that Wondertree, and later, SelfDesign, became known for.

Other Wondertree learning centres opened, including on Vancouver Island, in the Lower Fraser Valley, and in the Kootenays.



“ The educational model developed out of Brent engaging with the kids through his initial desire to honour children’s natural curiosity and love of learning, because that was the basis of what he felt. He really trusted children to know.”

– Maureen Cameron

“ Somebody asked my husband, Robert, if he had met Brent Cameron. Somebody else asked Brent if he had met Robert Boese. And they got together, and when Robert came home to me, he said, “I think we’ve found our next place that John is going to go to school.”

The kids did all their learning at that point just in life itself. It was field trip after field trip, going and doing it. That was what the school was at that point. They all had to have their own computer. That was John’s main interest. Brent talked BC Hydro into doing a learning program about energy use. And so the kids put a program together and did everything on the computer. That was the kind of thing they did: they turned things into science lessons or they just turned things into learning experiences. Everything was an object lesson.

When I think back on how it prepared John, he was just prepared for life, however it was. It didn’t matter – he was prepared, and he was excited to try something new.”

– Maren Dancer, one of the first Wondertree parents



Maren Dancer

“ We, the learners, chose our curriculum: Japanese, the martial art Wu Shu, woodwork, pottery, speed typing, computer programming, drama, dance, meditation and juggling. More often than not, our classroom was out in the world: Lighthouse Park, Stanley Park, the anthropology museum, the science centre. We got season passes to Expo '86 and managed to go to every country's exhibition. We would observe construction sites and chase ambulances, and sometimes Brent would just drive through the city and let us call out 'left!' 'right!' or 'straight!' to see what kind of adventure we would stumble upon.

And all along the way, we would stop and reflect on what we learned... and on how we learned what we learned... and on what other questions the learning raised...”

— Josh Bloch, *Wondertree learner*

“ I spent grades 1 to 7 at Wondertree.

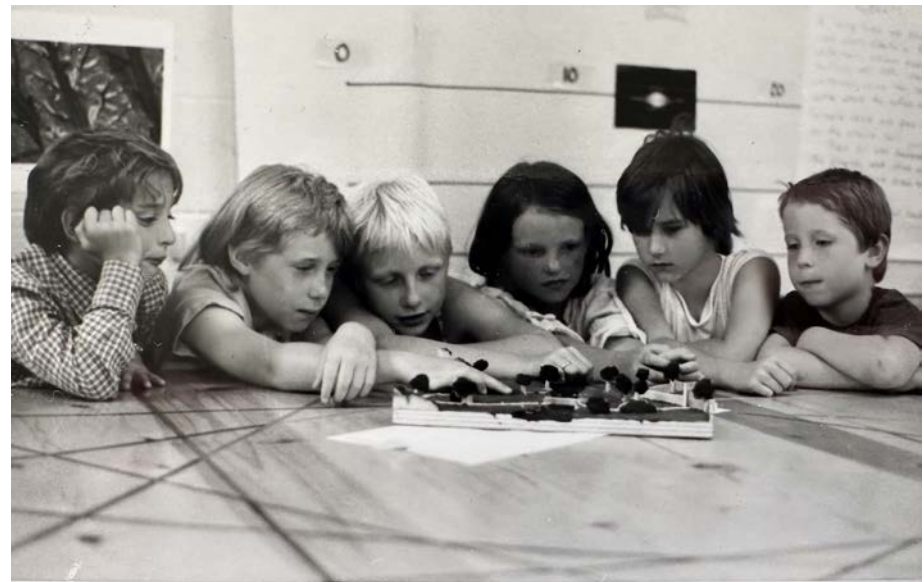
When we started out, it was just Ilana and me as learners, so it was really just going on adventures every day and learning in our environment, following the things that interested us, as well as just picking up whatever we observed. If we went to a park, we might look at the sand and then just follow that discovery down whatever path that interested us. It was just sort of observing the world, learning through play.

I believe it was sort of the foundational piece where I was always curious. We could ask any question — no question was bad. It really laid the groundwork for a lifelong learning process, being a self-starter and really pursuing what you like and what you like in life.”

— Jonathan Ireland, *Wondertree learner*



Wondertree learners at Expo '86



Wondertree learners



“ When I started this work 25 years ago, I started it because I was absolutely in love with my daughter.

I had no idea what to do, intellectually. I knew what not to do. But I’m pretty good at figuring things out. I love solving problems. I didn’t know how people learned. I didn’t. I knew what a bad education system was like, but I had no idea what a good one might be like.

So I did the smartest thing I could do, which was to trust the children — to trust in natural learning, to engage in deep conversation and relationship with the kids, and to let them be. I learned how people think, how people make decisions, and the role of feelings. And I learned how to tune in to what’s going on inside of people, which was profoundly important.”

— Brent Cameron, as recorded in 2010





Brent, learners and a mentor (far right), early Wondertree years.

River: The emergence of a new approach

In the years I spent with Brent, and during the time of writing the SelfDesign book with him, there were lots of conversations about how Wondertree was born. He talked about his own difficult experiences with public school, both as a child and as a teacher. He often shared the wonder he felt as he watched his daughter, Ilana, naturally accomplish the major skills of childhood and how this led him to question the foundational concepts of traditional schooling, where everything was taught. Ilana was an enthusiastic and curious learner, and Brent wanted to ensure that Ilana's passion for learning remained.

He and Ilana's mother, Maureen, were committed to raising their daughter as a respected individual, regardless of her age. Her thoughts, ideas, beliefs and desires were always considered in the family structure, and Brent felt that any learning environment with children or young people would benefit from that type of consideration.

When Brent agreed to honour Ilana's request that he be her teacher, he decided to explore whether his original thinking about how learning happens could manifest into a unique methodology. He wanted to see how their curiosities and passions unfolded in natural ways. He observed both their cognitive and social or emotional development as they engaged in individual and group activities. Brent had a goofy side, too, and he brought fun and playfulness into each day, even as he developed deep understandings about what was going on for each learner.

Wondertree was always about invitation and curiosity about emerging interests. Learners were heard, respected and included as they developed skills at their own pace. Designing their own learning with passion and a sense of relevance, they became authorities in their own lives. And in assuming responsibility for their learning choices, they acquired the skills they needed to be successful in whatever life they chose. Most importantly, they learned how to learn.

Throughout the Wondertree years, Brent worked continuously with mentors of his own. He trained with experts in many fields and did extensive reading within a widely diverse range of topics. He started to see that he could incorporate the expertise of these thought leaders into his experiment.

The more that Brent worked with the learners and the more he listened to their interests, the more his philosophy developed. Over the years, he created tools and strategies that supported his revolutionary approach, shifting the methods of traditional schooling to a beyond-schooling practice of excellence and a passion for lifelong learning. As I worked with Brent through the years of SelfDesign, I could see that his original beliefs about learning still held true, even as he refined and expanded his thinking.

– River Meyer, member of the SelfDesign leadership team from 2004 to 2024



River Meyer and Brent Cameron, 2011

Verena: Wondertree as an educator

On my very first day at Wondertree, I asked Brent, “What do I do? How do I set this up?” He said, “You can’t set anything up,” and “You can’t decorate your classroom,” and “You can’t really have a plan because you’re going to design with the kids.”

This blank canvas was how I started every year for the next seven years, creating the space and the learning with a community of children and families. As a trained teacher, this letting go required being both vulnerable and brave.

The rewards were well worth the journey. What I enjoyed most was my role as facilitator, where we were each invited in as our authentic selves. It wasn’t always a smooth ride, but it was well worth the bumps!

When I started, each consultant had a group of about 12 learners. It was very intimate, and there were lots of parent involvement and lots of learner choice. We had many amazing mentors come to the centre, and we went out in the community as much as possible.

At the time, it was very leading edge. There weren’t many schools creating agreements or giving families a say into how funds were invested. Each year began with the family consciously choosing to work with a learning consultant and vice versa. I believed this was

critical in setting the stage for a new way of creating a learning community. It wasn’t performative, in that I declined working with numerous families over the years. These were all innovative design qualities.

For learning consultants, much of the work was about learning about ourselves. We would take courses together because the more we knew about ourselves and the more we had best practices, the better we were able to show up in ways to best serve the learners.

— Verena Gibbs,
*former Wondertree learning consultant
and vice principal,
current SelfDesign Learning Foundation
board chairperson*



Verena Gibbs (left 2009; right 2023)

“ I started out with a small group of kids. I worked with 10–12 kids for eight years.

And that was really a prototype. It was kind of like the Wright brothers. They built a machine that proved the principles of flying — that it’s possible for humans to fly.

So now that we’re 25 years into this, we just dissolved that school. The school gave up its school number after 25 successful years.”

— Brent Cameron,
as recorded, 2009



Maureen: Wondertree as a parent and administrator

My role was very behind the scenes much of the time. But because Wondertree was a community and I was a parent, I was part of the parent input where we would get together and be part of the decision-making. And on the side, because there was a lot of administrative stuff going on, I supported the emergence of everything that Wondertree became by doing whatever was necessary, whether it was helping to get the word out into the community or supporting the parents. We were playing with some new rules, and Brent was creative and fun, but he was also very much a taskmaster in terms of how he understood this could work. So our relationships with the parents became something we all worked on together.

It was amazing to witness Ilana in the early years. As a mum and being part of Wondertree, the two crossed over so much, and I think that was also part of what was happening for the parents. Because we didn't have a typical school year or hours in a day, it was like a family thing. In traditional schooling, the kids are at school, the parents are at home, and that division means it's not so close. But this way, I got to be part of everything Ilana was excited about and I got to see how she was growing in terms of how she related to the other kids.

— Maureen Cameron



Marielle: Educators at the forefront

I'd like to share my gratitude for the learning consultants. They had a big impact on creating a welcoming learning environment. They offered all of the kids a place to be seen and heard in a way that, I think, as a parent, I appreciated and learned from.

They were also at the forefront of changing how education is delivered. To me, honouring a child's innate way of learning and what they want to learn is just so needed. I have a huge appreciation and acknowledgement for the learning consultants' courage to innovate and not be in the mainstream. Without them, there wouldn't be a SelfDesign or Wondertree. The parents are vital, too, in partnership with the learning consultants, who are doing the heavy lifting. They're there in the trenches with both the families and the kids, and there's a lot of unseen work in the background that needs to be considered.

— Marielle Soong, Wondertree parent,
and former Wondertree assistant



“ The experience of working with Wondertree transformed the way I approach learning and learning systems. The gifts it gave me regarding my own personal awareness and personal mastery were incredible. It was, at times, infuriating and frustrating and chaotic and messy, and it was also beautiful and heartfelt and community-driven. I wouldn't say it's for everybody, but it was really, really important to me.”

– Verena Gibbs, former Wondertree learning consultant and vice principal

“ My beginning days at the Wondertree Learning Centre in Vancouver were some of my favorite memories. I got to experience and enjoy exploring and discovering what sparked my interest with other learners.”

– Lia Meyer, Wondertree learner

“ It was only in my 20s that I realized I'd been able to play for longer than most kids in the learning setting. I think that really impacted who I am now. It was just so freeing and open and authentic to be able to play until I was 10 years old instead of having to be in a very structured environment. It's become something I treasure.”

– Tallisen Soong Smith, Wondertree learner



Lia Meyer



Tallisen Soong Smith

“ I learned so much during those first years with Wondertree. It was radical for me to see it in action. We were adults communicating with children in a completely respectful way, with so much vulnerability and humility, and also leadership and boundaries.

I had so much to learn, and making mistakes together and problem solving together, like, ‘We don’t really know how to handle this, so let’s talk about it as a community.’”

– Darcy Kaltio,
*former Wondertree learning consultant,
now a SelfDesign education assistant*

“ I was a mentor for Body Science at Wondertree for many years. My classes were focused on health, science and safety information about bodies and relationships. We covered reproductive anatomy, pregnancy and birth.

The learners were highly engaged, asked many age-appropriate questions, and created some great models of reproductive systems. We covered many topics over the years, and I continue to hear back from families about how meaningful these conversations were, even more than 10 years later.”

– Lauren Goldman, *Wondertree mentor*



Darcy Kaltio

Wondertree Learning Society is renamed

The Wondertree Learning Society was renamed the Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning in 1996. The new name reflected Brent's broader vision for what was possible in personalized learning. The organization's new legal and charitable status better supported that broader vision.

In 2010, the foundation's name was changed to SelfDesign Learning Foundation to better reflect the organization's approach and needs.

The Wondertree experiment ends

In 2009, as the greater SelfDesign community celebrated the 25th anniversary of the original Wondertree Learning Society, the Wondertree Learning Centre closed its doors.

The Wondertree approach was created by extending the natural learning of one child to a small community of children, offering a choice and an opportunity for a learner to choose their life-long learning process, in relationship with a community of equals.





1988

Learners present the first
Wondertree Learning Award

The Wondertree Learning Awards honoured people who worked to make the world a better place for children and who set an inspirational example.

The first recipient was British primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall. Later recipients included Canadian filmmaker Mark Achbar, American linguist and social advocate Noam Chomsky, Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, American filmmaker Michael Moore, American chemist and biochemist Linus Pauling, Canadian children's musician Raffi, and others.

Ilana: A cheeky way to meet innovators

The Wondertree Learning Awards were Brent's initiative — both the awards and who was chosen for an award. All of us learners would get to go as a group to see the recipients, and one of us would present the award to them.

Honestly, it was just a cheeky way of getting to go backstage to meet these amazing people. They were people who were excellent at what they did, had an impact on education, were innovative, and basically had the whole package. They couldn't just be experts in their field; it had to be the whole package.

And they also had to be coming to Vancouver.

We gave Michael Moore, the documentary filmmaker, the award one year, and he liked us so much that he came over to Virtual High — to the building — to meet us and hang out.

— Ilana Cameron



Mariner Janes, Donnie Madsen and Ilana Cameron



Jane Goodall with Wondertree learners



1989

A homeschooling option becomes available:
Wondertree HomeLearners' Network

At one time, in British Columbia, any parent who chose to keep their children at home out of regular school risked being charged with truancy — the act of staying away from school without good reason.

That changed in 1989, when the BC government revised the *School Act* to recognize parents' right to choose their children's education.

To accommodate the change, the BC Ministry of Education created a new category for the legal registration of homeschoolers — children being taught at home — and made it compulsory for parents who wanted to homeschool their children to register them through an established B.C. school.

Wondertree, which was accredited as a kindergarten to grade 9 school by the BC Ministry of Education, was already known in the loose-knit homeschooling community as an option for families interested in a natural, unschooling type of education for their children. With the change in the *School Act*, Wondertree offered to register homeschooling families.

In the first year after the amended School Act, approximately 70 homeschooling children across B.C. were registered under the Wondertree Learning Society.

After the Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning changed its name to SelfDesign Learning Foundation in 2010, the homeschooling program was called the HomeLearners' Network. The name changed again in 2021 to SelfDesign HomeLearners.



Maureen: Wondertree HomeLearners' Network starts up

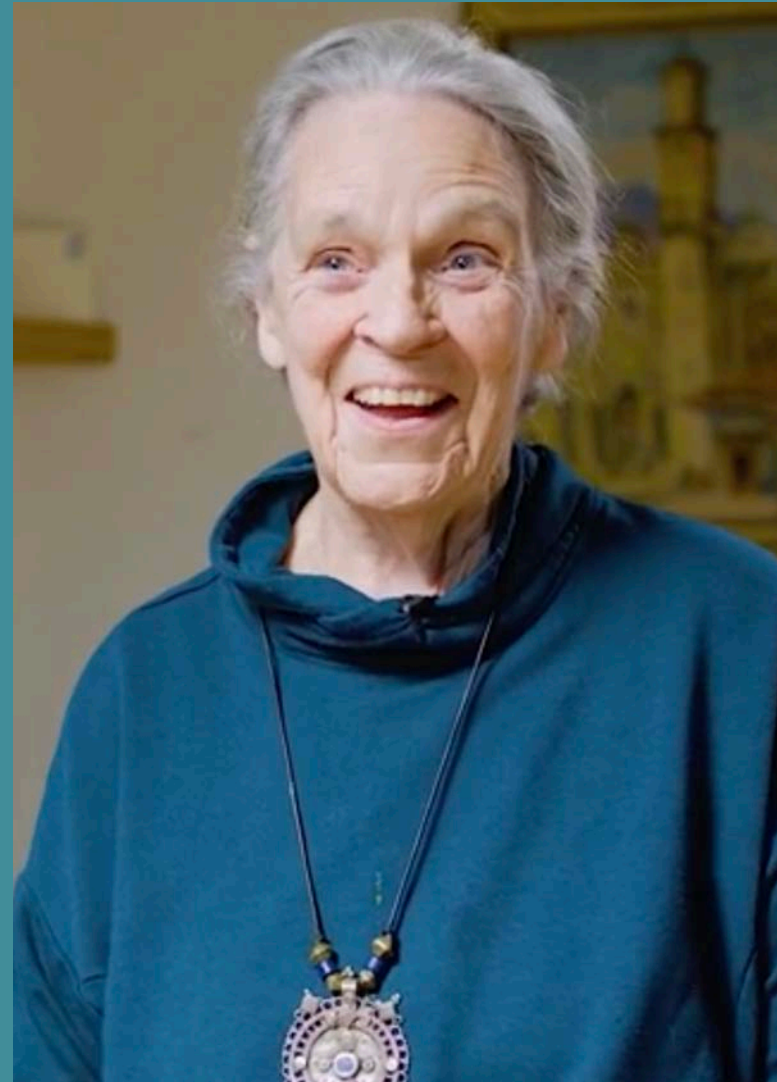
Wondertree was one of the main schools that registered homeschooled children in the years immediately after the *School Act* amendment, followed by a few Christian and public schools. Our registrations literally doubled every year for a number of years. We eventually had around 700 children registered. I think that was our highest number.

There was a whole community that was homeschooling for diverse reasons before it was legal. That's probably why we had such a response — families wanted to register with us because they appreciated being part of an organization that more fairly represented their values.

That's how it started.

We maintained services for our registered homeschooled children and families over the years, even with funding cuts by the Ministry of Education. And the interesting thing is, when we look at what's going on with SelfDesign Home Learning now, so much of what we started back in 1989 and in the early 1990s is still going on in some ways.

— Maureen Cameron,
Wondertree HomeLearners' Network coordinator,
1989–2001



Maureen Cameron

Heather: Supporting homeschooling families

As well as registering and offering an allowance to homeschooling families, we provided access to BC Ministry of Education text books and created a family networking list. Facilitating those connections among homeschooling parents was one of our strongest points.

The two of us – Maureen and I – did a lot of telephone counselling of parents who were wondering how they could possibly homeschool their kids or who had concerns about taking their children out of regular school.

We published a newsletter that provided a lot of resource links – remember, this was before the Internet. We had a drop-in space for the families when the Wondertree Learning Centre was in Vancouver’s West End – Wondertree ran Monday to Thursday, and we had the space on Fridays.

We started a course called The Learning Family and travelled around B.C. We hosted the one-day workshop, providing guidance and support for families either already homeschooling or on the fence about it.

We organized weekly field trips for the families in the Vancouver area. For three years, we held an annual home learners conference.

*– Heather Knox,
Wondertree HomeLearners’ Network parent and
assistant coordinator, 1991–1996*



Heather Knox

A large, two-story house with a gabled roof and two chimneys, surrounded by trees and parked cars. The house has a prominent front porch and several windows. The scene is set in a residential neighborhood with a street and parked cars in the foreground.

1993

Virtual High extends the
Wondertree approach to older youth

Brent Cameron and educator Michael Maser created and launched Virtual High in 1993.

Virtual High differed from most middle- and high-school programs offered in B.C. at that time. Funded by the BC Ministry of Education, the Vancouver Foundation and other organizations, as well as through monthly tuition fees from learners, it was an alternative program for youth at risk of dropping out of school.

Virtual High did not grant high school diplomas. Instead, it extended the same approach to learning that set Wondertree apart, providing learner-centred, learner-led learning supported by caring relationships with learning consultants and mentors and offering support for learning computer skills and access to high-end computers so that learners could take online courses.

As happened at the Wondertree Learning Centres, each of the approximately 35 learners enrolled with the program determined their own learning goals for the year and crafted their own learning plans and schedules to meet those goals, in consultation with the learning consultants. They pooled and budgeted their tuition to hire local experts who shared their skills and knowledge.

Brent rented a large, old house in Vancouver to serve as the school's physical hub.

“Because technology and computers were becoming more and more of a thing, in the original plan for Virtual High, my dad and Michael thought the house

would just be this casual centre where students would drop in now and then,” Ilana Cameron says. “The idea was that we’d mostly be learning online, doing courses online and connecting online, and occasionally stopping by the centre for meetings or whatever.”

However, by the end of September, what had been proposed as a loose, virtual network of learners learning online and at home instead coalesced into a tight-knit in-person community of learners, educators and others.

“A lot of us did 100 per cent of what we did on site, and there was almost nothing online,” Ilana says. “Everyone wanted to hang out and play games. There was a badminton court in the backyard. Humans are mammals, right? Being social and interacting is healthy for us. And that was the juiciest part: it attracted other people like Raffi [the well-known children’s music performer] and parents, and different people would come through and just hang out because it was just such a vibrant community hub with different things going on.”

In spring 1996, after almost three years, the BC Ministry of Education pulled its funding for Virtual High, a measure that would influence SelfDesign decisions about later programs for years to come. Virtual High continued for another year, closing its doors for the last time in June 1997, when its last funding ended and the building’s landlord notified Brent that the building was to be sold.

[Source for a detailed account of Virtual High: Michael Maser’s 1997 Master’s thesis: *Virtual High: Toward an ecology of being.*]

A consensus-based community

When Virtual High began, Brent introduced the idea of consensus to the learners. Over the next year or so, they and their learning consultants discovered what “consensus” meant and how to use it to create and support community. Decisions about what mentors to hire, what group projects to work on, and other matters affecting the program were made by consensus — unanimous agreement — during big group meetings, or BGMS, held every Wednesday afternoon and often into the evening.

Brent later wrote that, at first, “the meetings were painful, disruptive, rude, challenging, boring and chaotic.” Over time, however, as learners found that their voices, thoughts and opinions were welcome, encouraged and respected, the meetings became “a space where the young people truly felt heard, and they began to feel acknowledged for who they are.”

“ It was the kind of social place where the kids didn’t want to leave, they wanted to stay there. They stayed through the evenings. They went there on the weekends. They sometimes stayed overnight. It was their social home.”

— Pille Bunnell, Virtual High parent and former SelfDesign board member



Ilana: Learning through real-world projects

At Wondertree and Virtual High, we did things that were in the real world. In a way, it was like, “Let’s pretend this project is for an outcome in the community,” but then it would become sort of real, with real-world outcomes. We pretended that we were going to build a sustainable ecological village on southeast False Creek, and that led to us going to an international conference in Findhorn, Scotland and to the U.N. conference in Victoria.

What was cool about that is that with this pretend stuff that we were doing as kids, we’d go to the top. I remember going to the U.N. conference, and there were all these booths about sustainable technologies we should be using to make our lives better. The technologies they were promoting were all the ones that we had figured out were the best through our own research for VillageQuest, our eco-village project – and this was before the Internet.

– Ilana Cameron



“ A moment that felt important at the time was an early ‘field trip’ up Mount Seymour. I remember several of us marvelling that we didn’t require permission slips — there was a feeling of an oppressive structure being lifted. As reasonable and understandable as it may be for a school to take legal precautions, it’s also part of a system of domination. For a teenager seeking autonomy, the idea that you could just do something — no need to get special permission, nobody we had to ask — felt revolutionary.”

— Travis Bernhardt, *Virtual High learner*

“ Virtual High was an extremely accepting place and was very supportive, despite the occasionally obnoxiously long meetings. The meetings were that long because the learning consultants were trying to make sure that everyone was being taken care of and was happy with the result. When you think of it, that’s really lovely and really unusual.”

— Katie McLean, *Virtual High learner*

“ I spent most of my time there. I lived six blocks away, and I wouldn’t always go home. It was definitely a community thing. It was a good community to grow up in.”

— Kalev Tait, *Virtual High learner*



Brent with Virtual High learners



Kalev Tait (far right)

“ Virtual High instilled a unique perspective on freedom and possibility. Perhaps a hint of this freedom always lingered within me, but it was there, amid those formative projects, that I discovered the courage to trust my instincts and shape my own destiny. For better or for worse, it was there I learned to design a self to harness the wilds of my own potential.”

— Jesse Blum, *Virtual High* learner



Virtual High's Devon Girard, Brent, Katherine Muncaster, Sunder Green and Jesse Blum

“ We had some misgivings when Kalev was going to Virtual High. We wondered if he was doing anything other than playing games all day. But he did learn.

And what he learned more than anything else was how to learn.”

— Pille Bunnell, *Virtual High* parent and former SelfDesign board member



Pille Bunnell (right), with David Tait, *Virtual High* parents and former SelfDesign board members



Katherine Muncaster (front row and third from left)



Katherine Muncaster (centre)

“ Virtual High was a transformative experience. It created a new reality for me, in terms of being exposed to different ways of thinking. It sparked a greater sense of self-awareness in a very conscious kind of way and a broader way of thinking — of thinking outside the box and being aware that you shouldn’t take everything at face value, that there may be other, better ways of doing things.

And there was a real sense of camaraderie and community — above all, community — that I’d never experienced before. I really loved that feeling of community and of acceptance — of feeling like I could do the stuff that I wanted and pursue my passions and interests, and everyone would be supportive and non-judgemental. It was a really supportive environment for people to flourish in, whatever they wanted to do.”

— Katherine Muncaster, *Virtual High* learner





1996

Learners write the Declaration of
Learners' Rights and Responsibilities

Ilana: How the declaration came to be

A group of us were studying the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and when we got to the point about education, we found it restrictive and non-inclusive. The wording implied that, if someone was Indigenous and lived in the forest, for example, they should be made to move to a village and go to school. It was advocating not exactly residential schools but a very western idea of education. And it didn't look at the rights of learners to learn in the way that works for them.

We worked on writing a learners' declaration. We met and talked through what we thought learners' rights were, workshopped it and figured out together which points should be included.

Then we presented it. A few of us went to the U.N. Conference in Victoria that year. Kofi Annan was the head of the U.N. at the time, and I was chosen to talk to him. I can't remember if I actually presented the declaration to him or if I just told him about it.

— Ilana Cameron

Declaration of Learner's Rights and Responsibilities

1. *As a learner I have the right to allow my own experience and enthusiasm to guide my learning.*
2. *As a learner I have the right to choose and direct the nature and conditions of my learning experience. As a learner I am responsible for the results I create.*
3. *As a learner I have the right to perfect the skills to be a conscious, self confident and resourceful individual.*
4. *As a learner I have the right to be held in respect. It is my responsibility to hold others in respect.*
5. *As a learner I have the right to a nurturing and supportive family and community. My family and community have the right and responsibility to be my primary resource.*
6. *As a learner I have the right and responsibility to enter into relationships based on mutual choice, collaborative effort, challenge and mutual gain.*
7. *As a learner I have the right to be exposed to a diverse array of ideas, experiences, environments, and possibilities. This exposure is the responsibility of myself, my parents and my mentors.*
8. *As a learner I have the right to evaluate my learning according to my own sensibilities. I have the right to request and the responsibility to include the evaluations of my mentors.*
9. *As a learner I have the right to co-create decisions that involve and concern me.*
10. *As a learner I have the right and responsibility to openly consider and respect the ideas of others, whether or not I accept these ideas.*
11. *As a learner I have the right to enter a learning organization which offers, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical support, and operates in an open and inclusive manner.*
12. *As a learner I have the right of equal access to resources, information and funding.*

*This document has been created by a group of learners aged 15-17. Serena Staples, Gregory Dean, Ilana Cameron, David Muncaster, Jesse Blum and Sarah Partridge, with the help of Wondertree co-founder and learning consultant Brent Cameron
© 1994 All Rights Reserved Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning*



2002

Life's spiral made visible

Brent saw life as a spiralling experience, reflecting ever-accumulating and interacting experiences, rather than the linear timeline it so often is depicted as. He developed a model to represent that idea, using as its base the Fibonacci sequence, a logarithmic series of numbers that translates geometrically into a spiral pattern common in nature. The sequence is found in the dimensions of spiral seashells, in the arrangement of seeds in sunflowers and pinecones, in the twisting of hurricanes and tornadoes, and in the shape of spiral galaxies.

In the SelfDesign LifeSpiral, each section of the sequence represents a phase of life.

The Wondertree community built the first permanent LifeSpiral on Bowen Island in 2002. Another was built later at Jericho Park, in Vancouver. Many individuals and groups have used the LifeSpirals as a reflective tool over the years.





2002

“We’re finally going to get our chance!”
SelfDesign Learning Community
launches online

When SelfDesign Learning Community began in 2002, it was an opportunity to apply all the learnings gained during the Wondertree and Virtual High programs to bring the new approach and model for learning to a broader audience.

The new distributed learning program was part of a pilot to design and run an online version of the earlier programs to learners across B.C. The pilot started with 100 learners.

“Based on the learning methodologies and community dynamics developed in Wondertree and Virtual High,” Brent later wrote, “I envisioned how we could extend these relationships into an online community. During that summer, I invited Michael Maser and Kathleen Forsythe to join me, and we hired 10 other educators and a technology person to launch the online SelfDesign Learning Community.”

Because SelfDesign is about allowing learners freedom and choice in what and how they learn, the team designed software to bring people together in conversation online to create learning opportunities.

Following the Wondertree and Virtual High models, SelfDesign Learning Community places the learner at the centre, where the learners' curiosity shapes their learning.

As learners in the earlier programs did, those enrolled in SelfDesign Learning Community designed their learning plans, based on their interests, for each learning year, in collaboration with their family and their learning consultants.

The children learn at home in their local communities, and take part in in-person learning opportunities within their communities, exploring nature, numeracy, science and technology, arts, cooking, and so on, within the context of their own interests. Parents and older learners are encouraged to document the learning that happens and share their observations and reflections with their learning consultants.

The school neither tests its learners nor assigns grades to the learning taking place. Instead, learning consultants map the children's learnings shared during weekly Observing for Learning meetings to the provincial curriculum, thereby meeting the BC Ministry of Education's requirements and guidelines for ministry-funded online schools.

Enrolment grows... and grows

Once the 100-learner enrolment cap for SelfDesign Learning Community was lifted at the start of the 2004/05 learning year, SelfDesign grew quickly. It surpassed 1,000 learners in 2010 and 2,000 learners in 2018. In 2024, more than 2,200 learners were enrolled, making SelfDesign Learning Community one of the largest online schools in Canada.



Kathleen: An invitation

Brent called me up in the summer of 2001 and said, “Kathleen, it looks like we’re finally going to get our chance!”

He said he’d received some funding to launch what he was going to call SelfDesign Learning Community and would I like to come in and help him do this? For this, I could earn \$500 a month.

At the time he approached me, I’d been the chair of the board of the Wondertree Foundation for about 10 years. I resigned as a board member so that I could work for SelfDesign, and I began working with the others who started SelfDesign Learning Community in 2001 to create the program that we now have.

– Kathleen Forsythe, *SelfDesign Learning Community co-founder and principal, 2012–2016, and SelfDesign Learning Foundation executive director, 2013–2016*

Kathleen Forsythe, 2011



Amber: The broader context

For the first 20 years that independent online schools existed, they were called distributed learning schools. SelfDesign Learning Community was one of the only online programs supported by provincial governments in Canada. British Columbia's online schools had their own rules and guidelines and were part of the *School Act*, and that was all fantastic.

But technically these schools, including SelfDesign Learning Community, were a project that the BC Ministry of Education implemented as a pilot 20 or so years ago, and we were continuing on like that. We weren't written into the books as something that had a commitment by the government, and every year we would receive a new contract, and every year we'd go through the year going, "Gosh, I hope we have another contract at the end of the year."

That was what was in effect when I joined SelfDesign in 2017.

— Amber Papou,
SelfDesign Learning Foundation President & CEO,
2017-2024

“ I always felt very supported by the teachers and the community at SelfDesign.

When I told my educator I was interested in becoming an interpreter, she didn't knock it down. She didn't say, 'That's not conventional. That's not going to pay.' She asked, 'What can I do to help you get to where you want to go?' And that was so nice.

It filled me with confidence. I felt like I could do this because I had the support of someone I trusted and cared about behind me.”

— *Isabeau, SelfDesign learner*



Isabeau, SelfDesign Learner and mother

“ What I love most about SelfDesign is two things. Number one is the support we have received throughout difficult and challenging parts of our lives. We felt always supported as a family. Our children were allowed to follow their passions, and we were allowed to also focus on other parts of our lives that needed to be focused on during the time of learning.

And number two is probably the most important thing for me. It helped me to develop the most amazing bond and relationship with my kids that I would not have had otherwise. It really helped me to be there for my kids when they needed me and to show up for them and carve that time out.”

– Mirella Russell, *SelfDesign* parent



A young girl with curly hair, smiling and pointing, holding a mandolin. The image is overlaid with a dark blue filter.

2004

SelfDesign begins formalizing and growing its special education offerings

SelfDesign Learning Community's Support Services for learners with special needs are in high demand, with a multi-year waiting list, depending on a learner's specific needs.

Learners with diagnosed learning difficulties are fully integrated into our kindergarten to grade 12 program. They learn, explore their interests and passions, and take part in activities and offerings alongside other learners. Our learner-centred approach to learning is well suited to meeting the needs of learners, regardless of their abilities, background, learning style, culture, race, personal or spiritual beliefs, or gender identity and expression.

“SelfDesign is committed to creating and providing a curriculum and learning events and offerings that are designed right from the start with every single one of our learners in mind,” says Educational Programs Team lead Janice Green. “By removing obstacles and providing a flexible curriculum, we allow for accessibility and extend the opportunities that will challenge our learners.”

Yet, in SelfDesign Learning Community's earliest years, it couldn't enrol kids with special learning needs. Instead, the learners were enrolled through Wondertree, and SelfDesign Learning Community provided support via the in-person sister school. It was only when the BC Ministry of Education lifted the cap on enrolment in 2004/05 that the online school was also allowed to enrol learners with special needs.

In addition, the BC Ministry of Education provided only half of the funding for each learner compared to what public schools received for each student. Then, in 2005, the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the ministry must provide the full funding amount for all special education learners in the province.

Siblings Kaitlin and Marty, two learners severely challenged with autism, were among the catalysts that led SelfDesign to enhance its Special Education program. The children came to SelfDesign in 2006.

During their years with SelfDesign, Kaitlin and Marty's progress contributed to the program's direction and development. In that time, the program went from a few dozen learners with special needs to hundreds of such learners. As of 2024/25, almost 900 learners and their families with diagnosed learning difficulties draw on learning supports. Support Services no longer operates as a separate program within SelfDesign Learning Community: learners receiving support are fully integrated within the school and its offerings. The name has also changed through the years, from Special Education to Support Education and then to Support Services.

Kathleen: “Our program can do this”

In 2006, Megumi Terashita-Clark asked me if SelfDesign would take her daughter as a learner. Rebecca McLure, who ran the program, said, “Well, she’s got huge needs, and we can’t deliver. We don’t have the trained learning consultants for her needs.”

I said, “I’ll be her learning consultant.”

I began to work with Kaitlin and her brother, Marty, that year, and I began to see and realize just how powerful what SelfDesign offered could be for learners like them for whom the programs available in public schools just were not a fit. I started saying to SelfDesign’s leadership, “We really need to deal with these kids,” and “Our program can do this.”

We began to train people and recruit more people for special education. We basically expanded the scope of the program when we found that learners thrived under the SelfDesign model.

– Kathleen Forsythe, *SelfDesign Learning Community co-founder and principal, 2012–2016, and SelfDesign Learning Foundation executive director, 2013–2016*





“ We were able to allow their learning to be around their passions and their strengths. We were able to set up a program around them, rather than them having to fit into a program.”

– Megumi Terashita-Clark, *SelfDesign* parent,
with children Kaitlin and Marty in 2019

Shelagh: Developing SelfDesign's Special Ed program

I took over from Rebecca McLure, who had spent several years developing the structure of the SelfDesign Special Education program and creating a viable name for the program with the BC Ministry of Education before I stepped in as Special Education Manager. Rebecca's technical foundation for the SelfDesign program was essential for the growth we went on to experience.

With all the procedures and requirements in place, I worked with a team of extremely skilled, passionate and dedicated administrative colleagues and Special Education learning consultants to grow a program that put the learners and families at the centre of our support efforts by meeting a child and family exactly where they were at in their strengths and abilities.

We supported them from a place of "can do." Our program embraced the differences that made each and every child and family unique, rather than imposing the goal of having all children and families do the same thing at the same time in the same way.

Our goal was to provide children and their families with a sense of belonging by embracing, accepting and even cultivating these differences and encouraging them. Our personalized approach, and our invitation to follow one's interests, nurtured deep respect and connections. It created easy spaces for learners and families to participate as they were willing to, with no stigmas attached.

It was a profound journey. So many children and teens and families benefited, and probably continue to benefit, from our program that promoted love, respect and acceptance of the individual learning paths, regardless of what direction they took. Vicious cycles were broken through positive relationship-building and a letting-go of unrealistic and often unfair expectations.

With our passion and diligence, the SelfDesign Special Education program charged into many uncharted waters in those early days as we tried to smooth the path for our learners, families and colleagues. Throughout all the ups and downs and twists and turns, the SelfDesign Leadership team supported us as we navigated the ins and outs of meeting the needs of our learners and families through technology and within their homes and communities.

— Shelagh Noonan, former SelfDesign learning consultant and Special Education program manager





“ I chose SelfDesign for my son, Kingston, because his needs weren't getting met in the public school system. He had an educational assistant from preschool to grade 4, and he wasn't thriving.

I made the decision when he was in grade 4 to start with SelfDesign. I had heard some great things about it. I had checked out a few different options, and I think a friend introduced me to SelfDesign. It was local, and I read Brent Cameron's book, and it just fit.

Once Kingston got into SelfDesign, I was, like, 'Oh, I wish I had done this from preschool!'"

— Gillian Walters, *SelfDesign* parent



2006

Annual Collaboratories bring contractors together

“We don’t just believe in in-person interaction for our learners, we think having our contractors come together in person is just as important,” says River Meyer, a member of SelfDesign’s leadership team from 2004 to 2024.

In the early 2000s, SelfDesign invited all of its learning consultants from both Wondertree and SelfDesign Learning Community to gather for three to seven days every summer before the learning year started. These early professional development workshops were an opportunity to introduce new learning consultants to SelfDesign’s philosophy and approach, orient everyone to the new learning year, and provide support. Those present would explore topics of interest together, deepen their understanding of the philosophy, and get to know one another.

As the number of educators grew, the gatherings became somewhat more structured and organized. In 2006, the first official “Collaboratory” (“Collab,” for short), was held. Each year, a Collab was held in a different location in western B.C., usually in a camp-like and campground-type setting that provided communal cooking, washing and workshop facilities. By the end of SelfDesign Learning Community’s first decade, Collabs had moved to Quest University in Squamish.

“ I started with SelfDesign in 2009/10. For the Collaboratory that year, we all fit into one room.”

– Michael Bender, SelfDesign educator



“ I suppose the very first Collaboratory was in 2002, and it took place at Brent’s home in the Kootenays. It was a small group — Colin Fox, Heidi Neil and myself — and we spent the day working with Brent and ended the day with margaritas.

That was the beginning.

Now we have 175 learning consultants. We have a huge community across the province. It’s really exciting.”

– Verena Gibbs, Wondertree learning consultant and vice principal, current SelfDesign board chairperson

Collabs shift to LocalLabs

As the number of SelfDesign educators and contractors grew, the size of the annual Collaboratory outgrew the organization's capacity and budget.

"We were hampered both by the scope and the economics of getting everybody there and all the food and lodging and everything connected with bringing a whole organization together in one place," River says.

In 2018, the focus shifted towards regional gatherings held around the province. After a three-year hold on in-person activities during the pandemic, LocalLabs returned in 2023.



River Meyer (centre), Michael Maser, Kathleen Forsythe and Brent Cameron



Brent Cameron and Wondertree and Virtual High learner Devon Girard at the 2011 Collaboratory



Collaboratory 2005



Todd Butler at the 2011 Collaboratory



Clara Foulds and Michelle Buck at the 2012 Collaboratory



Clarissa Tufts and Shari Russell, 2023



LocalLabs 2024



Nikki Kenyon and Vanessa Kuran, 2024



Contractor and educator Amber Santos, 2024



Sandy Steward, 2024



Vanessa Kuran, Catherine Dinim and Clarissa Tufts, 2024

A photograph of four hikers with large backpacks jumping on a road at sunset. They are all making peace signs with their hands. The scene is silhouetted against a warm, orange sunset sky. The hikers are positioned across the width of the road, with the person on the far left having their arms raised highest. The person on the far right is also jumping with one arm raised. The two people in the middle are jumping with their hands near their heads. The road is a two-lane road with a white line down the center, and the surrounding landscape is grassy and hilly.

2009

SelfDesign reaches beyond B.C.'s borders

SelfDesign (then still called the Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning) began enrolling learners from outside B.C. in SelfDesign Learning Community in 2009 as part of an initiative called SelfDesign Global.

A few families enrolled each year with the new program from as far away as New Zealand. The learners enrolled through the foundation and paid tuition; SelfDesign received no BC Ministry of Education funding for these learners.

In 2012, SelfDesign Learning Community became accredited with the U.S.-based international school accrediting organization, Cognia (then called AdvanceEd). This allowed SelfDesign's out-of-country learners to graduate from grade 12 with a SelfDesign diploma certified by Cognia and based on B.C. standards. The learners could also receive transcripts for the SelfDesign courses they completed.

SelfDesign began winding the program down in 2018. The last SelfDesign Global learner finished grade 12 in 2022.



SelfDesignGlobal reach by 2018



A blue-tinted photograph of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a group of people, including children and adults, are sitting on a rocky outcrop, possibly having a picnic or a break. The background shows rolling hills and mountains covered in dense forest. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

2009

SelfDesign Learning Community offers
high school options for B.C. learners

From its start as an distributed learning school in 2002 until 2009, SelfDesign Learning Community offered choice in education to learners in kindergarten to grade 9.

In 2009, SelfDesign Learning Community merged with the International School of the Kootenays, a private school in Nelson. Beginning that September, young people across B.C. could enroll with SelfDesign for grades 10 to 12 and finish high school with either a Dogwood Diploma, an Adult Dogwood Diploma, or a BC School Completion Certificate.

The merger was a solution that worked for both schools. SelfDesign had the students but not an accredited high school program, whereas the International School of the Kootenays had a BC Ministry of Education-approved and -accredited high school program but not the students.

“We dissolved the International School of the Kootenays and brought the program over into SelfDesign Learning Community with the support of the Ministry of Education,” says Barbarah Nicoll, the international school’s principal who first approached SelfDesign about partnering and was vice principal of SelfDesign’s grade 10 to 12 program until 2015. “We brought along a number of the faculty that were with the international school and, over the next few months, we merged. By September that year, everything was a go. We needed to be a go right off the bat so we could enrol students.”

After the merger, SelfDesign learners in grades 10 to 12 took online courses and engaged in personal projects of their choice to explore their interests further and deepen their own learning. They could also access learning opportunities within their local communities. They could, for example, take singing lessons with a local voice teacher, sign up for art classes at a local studio, or join a local hockey or basketball team.

In the Nelson area, they could also use a community space arranged by SelfDesign to come together, take workshops, engage in projects and hold events in community with each other within the larger Nelson community. Some of the offerings provided were more structured, offering a combination of online learning, in-person workshops, group presentations, and project-based learning several days each week, as well as group trips to places in B.C., Canada and elsewhere.

Beginning in 2017, SelfDesign began integrating how it offers its program across all grade levels, including grades 10 to 12. Over three years, the process fundamentally reshaped the grade 10 to 12 experience and aligned it more closely with what learners and families experienced in the school’s earlier grades.



“ I found so much joy in learning again. Truly! To have left a high school experience and to want to pursue more schooling — that was not something I had thought during school that I would want to do. SelfDesign really helped me find the things that I was deeply interested in in my life.”

— Sarah Graeme, Class of 2013



“ SelfDesign really fostered curiosity. The educators were so encouraging and nurturing of what I was interested in and of my asking questions, and they really made me feel it was okay not to have all the answers.”

— Axel McGown, Class of 2013



“ SelfDesign gave me a lot of responsibility early on. It placed a lot of the responsibility for learning on me in a way where I could follow my interests and I could make courses if I stepped up and did that.”

— Wyatt Miller-Unser, Class of 2013





2010

A SelfDesign Path course is launched

The SelfDesign Path is a guided, interactive online course designed to help SelfDesign parents explore the SelfDesign philosophy and apply it to their daily family lives.

Path is aimed towards parents but also is useful for learning consultants. It looks at some of the key elements of SelfDesign, like curiosity, playfulness, advocacy and other elements that are inherent in SelfDesign but aren't necessarily spoken, and it turns those into a self-paced course.

River: Path steps up for parents

I wrote the original Path course in 2010. It's designed to deepen the relationship between parents and children in ways that benefit living and learning together. It offers parents new tools to encourage them to consciously explore their everyday interactions with their children and others. They can then use those tools as a foundation for the observations and reflections they do each week about their children's learning.

I felt we needed a supportive resource for parents, who can feel challenged about SelfDesign's unique way of looking at learning.

I rewrote Path in 2016. We started offering real-time conversations about Path in 2022, as well as the online discussions offered since the course first started.

— River Meyer, member of the SelfDesign leadership team from 2004 to 2024



River Meyer, 2023

A group of approximately 15-20 people, mostly young adults, are standing in a loose circle on a vast, flat, snow-covered field. They are dressed in winter clothing, including jackets, hats, and backpacks. The background shows a dense line of evergreen trees under a cloudy sky. The entire image has a green color overlay.

2012

In-person camps bring SelfDesign learners together from across B.C.

A 2012 winter camping trip brought SelfDesign learners in grades 10 to 12 and learners at the Waldorf School in Nelson together to explore the winter outdoors together and learn new skills. It proved so popular that SelfDesign Learning Community began offering camps every year for its learners aged 15 and up.

Encounters began bringing learners in grades 10 to 12 together in the Vancouver area every spring. Peace Camp and Arts Intensive were offered each summer in the Kootenays. The week-long Gateways camp provided learners in grades 8 and 9 with an opportunity to explore the SelfDesign approach in person before enrolling with the school for grades 10 to 12. Surpass, a week-long leadership camp, was offered until 2017.

Family camps for younger learners and their parents were also offered.

“ It was unlike anything I had experienced before as a home learner. The activities were fun, too, but it was the social side of the camps that made me want to go back and do it again and again. It changed me, you know. It drew me out of my shyness. I made friends. I actually had a reason to have an Instagram account.”

— Mason, *SelfDesign learner, Class of 2020*



“ When I started going to camps, my whole outlook and personality changed. This change was because I found like-minded people, people I liked, people my age – and through the experience of meeting these people, I was able to discover within myself what it was like to be outgoing and fun.”

– Erik, *SelfDesign learner, Class of 2019*

“ A lot of the friends that I still have now I met at camps, and we remain really close to this day. Each camp was quite a bit different than the next, but there was always this underlying foundation of inclusivity and opportunity for trying new things and keeping it really learner-based.”

– Maia, *SelfDesign learner, Class of 2019*



Photos are from SelfDesign camps



Photo at right submitted by SelfDesign parent Shawna Litten

A stack of books with the word 'SELFDESIGN' printed on the spines. The books are arranged in a slightly curved line, receding into the background. The background is dark and out of focus, showing a silhouette of a person standing in a room with a light source. The overall color palette is monochromatic, with shades of brown and sepia.

2012

SelfDesign Graduate Institute provides
training for educators

As more families enrolled their children in SelfDesign Learning Community, the school's need for educators trained in the SelfDesign approach to supporting learners and families in learning increased.

To meet the school's demand, SelfDesign Learning Foundation worked with partners to set up a degree-granting graduate school.

From 2012 to 2018, the SelfDesign Graduate Institute, operating out of Washington state, offered educators across North America an accredited Master's program. The program was later integrated into the graduate program at Antioch University, where it continues to allow graduate learners to design and direct their own graduate studies.



Fleurette Sweeney (left), shown with River Meyer in 2009, was one of the proponents of the SelfDesign Graduate Institute.



SelfDesign Graduate Institute residency, 2014

A monochromatic photograph of a man with a beard standing on a rocky shore. In the background, a city skyline is visible across a body of water. The text '2012' is overlaid in a large, white, serif font on the left side of the image.

2012

Brent Cameron passes

Brent Cameron passed away from prostate cancer in 2012, leaving behind an educational legacy and a community of more than 1,400 learners, as well as their families and educators, that year.

The SelfDesign community has since grown to more than 2,600 learners in SelfDesign Learning Community and SelfDesign Home Learning combined.

“ Looking back, knowing what I know now, I probably would not have begun. It has been too hard. Yet knowing what I know now, it has also been worth it, so I would begin it again. Hopefully I could do it again knowing what I know so that I would not make so many embarrassing mistakes along the way.

It has been a great adventure, far more than I ever would have imagined. We do not have to understand what we are doing or why. We do not always need to be fully behind what is in our heart. Sometimes our doubt brings forth reason. However, we do need to live from our integrity and our passion. This is what our children will learn of most importance, to live a life of passion for what is real and worthwhile, day by day.”

– Brent Cameron, unpublished writings



“ My dad was diagnosed with cancer about six years before he passed away. He was able to do a lot of things he wanted to do in that time, and I know he was pretty excited about where SelfDesign was heading. At one point he said he was jealous of people getting to take SelfDesign to new places and that he wouldn't be around for that.”

– Ilana Cameron

A woman with short, light-colored hair and glasses is sitting in a dark armchair, reading a large open book. She is wearing a dark zip-up jacket. The background shows a wall with three framed pictures. The entire image has a dark, monochromatic overlay.

2013

SelfDesign begins its
transition to a new generation of leaders

After Brent passed, the SelfDesign Learning Foundation's goal was to conserve the unique vision, approach and philosophy he and the SelfDesign community had created over the previous decades, while seeking out opportunities for sustainability and stability.

In 2017, the Board of Directors hired Amber Papou to lead the foundation as executive director. Amber became President & CEO of SelfDesign Learning Foundation the following year.

Kathleen: Transitioning the leadership

When I took on the role of executive director of SelfDesign Learning Foundation in 2013, I was tasked with transitioning the foundation after Brent Cameron's death into an organization that was freestanding and able to develop coherently from the historical background and the people and personalities that had shaped and influenced it to that point.

The school's organizational focus was shifting towards a more integrative approach. That change was needed, and for it to happen, it seemed that the leadership needed to change — and that included me leaving, as well.

I finished that work in December 2016, and then I retired from the leadership team.

— Kathleen Forsythe, *SelfDesign Learning Community co-founder and principal, 2012–2016, and SelfDesign Learning Foundation executive director, 2013–2016*

Amber: Growing the organization

Growth at SelfDesign doesn't necessarily mean becoming bigger. It means building on SelfDesign's strengths, growing new programs from our strengths, and taking advantage of opportunities. Growth at SelfDesign also means sustainability and diversified resources.

During the first few years after I came to SelfDesign, we really focussed on ensuring that we really knew ourselves and on identifying areas we could improve, and then improving those. We worked hard on strategically consolidating and strengthening the organization's foundations. We streamlined our systems and processes and optimized the organization's structural and operational efficiencies while supporting SelfDesign's long-standing culture of community and collaboration. We fostered and built teams that have amazing, innovative thought patterns, that work well together under any kind of challenge, and are quick to identify opportunities as they emerge.

And with those foundations now in place, we've been able to move into the next phase of growth as an organization.

— Amber Papou,
*SelfDesign Learning Foundation
Former President & CEO, 2017–2024*



2015

BC Ministry of Education moves to
competency-based curricula and
personalized learning

The BC Ministry of Education changed its curriculum from one where learners had to demonstrate knowledge in particular subject areas to a competency-based curriculum. With the new curriculum, every school in B.C. had to focus on building core competencies in their learners. The ministry began rolling out the change in 2015, starting with kindergarten to grade 3, then grades 4 to 9, then high school.

“ It was interesting to see that show up in the province-wide curriculum after we’d been doing it for so many years. It aligned perfectly and naturally with what SelfDesign Learning Community had been doing since the early 2000s.

When the Province adopted that approach, we were able to shine because we already had many years of experience offering competency-based learning opportunities.”

– Nikki Kenyon, *SelfDesign Learning Community principal, 2017-2021*



Nikki Kenyon



Wyatt Miller-Unser (right), class of 2013

A photograph of three children sitting on the grass in a garden, looking at a laptop. They are all smiling and have their arms raised in celebration. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal filter. The background is filled with various green plants and flowers.

2015

A new library changes the way we learn

SelfDesign Learning Community's Learning Experience Library is an online resource that links learners to thousands of curated online resources that are high-quality, appropriate and advertisement-free.

Launched in 2015, the library provides learners with the freedom to choose the topics they want to learn more about and to explore them to the depth and breadth they wish, while allowing educators to connect those personalized learning paths to the B.C. curriculum easily and holistically.

Over the years, BC Ministry of Education inspectors have repeatedly commended SelfDesign for how the Learning Experience Library supports personalized learning.

Catherine: Necessity + innovation = library

I was a learning consultant at the time and, with another learning consultant colleague, had dreamed up some ideas about how to reshape the structured way SelfDesign educators mapped what learners were sharing in Observing for Learning to the B.C. learning outcomes. We envisioned a kind of library of resources that learners could choose from according to their interests and that would also allow us to more easily document what they were exploring and focusing on.

Unbeknownst to us, other people in SelfDesign had similar ideas at around the same time. The idea of the library was popping up in a bunch of different places, likely because of the situation we were facing.

So, as a group, we reimagined the idea, and the library was born. Over the first year, we created about 150 learning experiences, according to the interests, passions and activities shared with us by learners and learning consultants.

– Catherine Dinim,
former Educational Programs team lead,
current SelfDesign Learning Community Principal

“ Our job at SelfDesign isn't to direct the learning pathways that learners take. Our job is to create the opportunities so that learners can find their pathways.

The Learning Experiences Library checked all the BC Ministry of Education's boxes at the time as an online learning program but still allowed learners to explore different topics and find their way to their own interests and delve more deeply into those, as fits our approach. The library also showed the ministry that we were providing a program that met their definition of 'program', and it allowed us to speak their language, while allowing the flexibility our approach needs.”

– Nikki Kenyon,
SelfDesign Learning Community principal,
2017-2021



2017

SelfDesign Learning Community
integration begins

By the mid-2010s, SelfDesign Learning Community had grown to more than 1,500 learners and more than 150 educators.

However, although it was one school, it essentially encompassed three distinct programs: the original, core kindergarten to grade 9 program, the Support Services program that started growing in 2004, and the high school program, which came on board in 2009.

“Families who had children in each of the three programs often were not having a good experience,” says Nikki Kenyon, who joined the school’s leadership team as vice principal in 2016 and became principal in 2017. “They had to learn and navigate three different learning platforms, each of which had its own rules and user interfaces. They had to use three different email systems to communicate with their educators. They could be reporting in three different places and engaging in learning in three different ways, with three different educators, each of whom might have a different title.”

“Some philosophical through-threads ran between all of the programs, ways of thinking and talking about learning, and about how learners and families engage in learning — being reflective and parents being welcome underpinned all three,” says Catherine Dinim, who started as a learning consultant in 2004 and joined SelfDesign Learning Community’s Educational Program team and then the Principals team in 2017. “But the actual day-to-day experience of navigating through the systems and communicating with their

educators was sometimes very discombobulating for families.”

Integration meant aligning technology, culture, philosophy and approach throughout the school, as well as addressing changes and opportunities that were emerging within and beyond SelfDesign.

Technological integration

Kathleen Forsythe, principal of SelfDesign Learning Community and executive director of SelfDesign Learning Foundation from 2013 to 2016, and Nikki began integrating the school in 2016.

By the following September, the first step towards integration and realignment of SelfDesign Learning Community had begun. The school’s Support Services program moved out of the series of spreadsheets that had been developed and used since 2004 to a learning platform that allowed educators to document learners with complex needs, the supports they needed, and the funding the BC Ministry of Education provided for those supports.

Nikki: Three programs into one

Part of the challenge and the reason the way we got to that point was that SelfDesign Learning Community started as strictly a kindergarten to grade 9 program. After using a few cutting-edge (at the time) technology tools, eventually a custom-built learning platform supported the kindergarten to grade 9 program's unique approach and needs.

The custom-built platform the school focused on that program and didn't accommodate the additional requirements related to supporting learners with diverse needs. Instead, the Support Services team developed a series of spreadsheets to track learners' needs, supports and funding.

And then in 2009, we merged with the International School of the Kootenays, a liberal arts school that shared similar philosophical underpinnings as SelfDesign. Due to the short timeline for merging and getting things ready to start the learning year, we incorporated into SelfDesign their programming, curriculum and specific approach and structure for grades 10 to 12, which included the learning management system and platforms they were already using.

In 2016, we decided we would start by moving everyone into one learning management system, PowerSchool. It was the one platform we were currently using that could support our kindergarten to grade 9 offering and the grades 10 to 12, inclusive of our learners with complex needs.

It was hard. The situation with the multiple systems was becoming unwieldy and difficult to support. Getting everybody onto the same learning platform and speaking the same language was an important step.

– Nikki Kenyon,
SelfDesign Learning Community principal, 2017–2021



SelfDesign High Learning Centre, 2013

The grade 10 to 12 pilot unfolds

Integration meant more than moving to one learning platform. It meant incorporating the learning experiences, approach and structure of all SelfDesign learners into one cohesive school program based on SelfDesign's core philosophy and approach. It meant reorganizing the entire school, from the leadership level to the educator level and across and through every team.

External events helped set the stage to more tightly integrate the high school program into the school's core approach and philosophy.

"The Province's new grade 10 to 12 curriculum was coming," Nikki says. "We'd seen the draft and were aware we would need to implement it at around the same time that we were going to be changing our learning platforms. That forced our hand with a number of things we'd been considering for grades 10 to 12."

Much of what was offered in SelfDesign's grades 10 to 12 at that time was strongly influenced by the International School of the Kootenays' approach and structure.

"We brought in the grades 10 to 12 from the international school, which had been doing things in a certain way for years, and we valued and wanted to honour the good work that had been happening before it changed to SelfDesign High," Nikki says. "And it was great work. The people really cared, and they connected with SelfDesign's philosophy. But grade 10 to 12 learning happens in a certain way

in B.C. and has done for years and years, and the international school's curriculum had developed within that context."

Those differences created a disconnect within SelfDesign Learning Community. Crossing from grade 9 into grade 10 was like entering an entirely different school.

Today, SelfDesign Learning Community's grade 10 to 12 curriculum takes a cohesive approach to competencies and the BC Ministry's graduation requirements. At the start of each learning year, learners select the offered themes — for example, photography, digital technology, outdoor adventure, or animals — that will guide their learning, projects and course selection through the following semesters. They meet weekly online with peers in their theme groups and their themes' learning specialists, and they undertake weekly exploratory assignments, called challenges, and semester-based projects through the lens of their chosen themes and personal interests. They also meet weekly with their learning consultant to reflect on the learning they experienced during the previous week.

"Grades 10 to 12 are still unique compared to what we offer in kindergarten to grade 9, but the gap is smaller than it was," says Nikki. "We now talk about learning in the same way across all grades. The learning consultant role runs right through, providing consistency and opportunity for deep supportive learning relationships. We can go into any virtual class space on our learning platform and know we're still in the same school."

Catherine: The pilot

The rollout was messy. There were tricky bits. We made some missteps and had to recalibrate and pivot.

I'm still so impressed so many learners stuck it out with us that year. We had many parent meetings, many learner meetings and many educator meetings. We were continually asking learners and their families for patience — “We’re doing something really new: please be patient. We’re building something with you. We’re all trying to do something that’s hard. We’re charting a new path we don’t have models for, and we’re trying out great ideas that we don’t exactly know how to apply, but we’re going to figure it out together.”

The approach, the structure and pacing, and the curricular offerings improved immeasurably for those learners’ grade 11 year. The second cohort who came through grade 10 also had a hugely improved experience compared to the first cohort.

Almost all of the piloting learners stayed with SelfDesign until they graduated. They were a significant part of making the program what it is now. They gave us so much feedback. I don’t think we could have done the redesign without that particular group of young adults and the dynamic they brought to the process.

It was a deep, iterative team effort, involving many people — learners, families, learning specialists, learning consultants, the Education Programs team and so many more. And every time we went through the cycle, we improved.

— Catherine Dinim, former Educational Programs team lead, current SelfDesign Learning Community Principal



“ I loved watching all the different ‘editions’ the program went through, trying out different things and learning what works and what doesn’t. I felt like I really got to be a part of the change in the B.C. education system by being able to give feedback and find resources and understand why certain things did or did not happen. I liked having options for how I wanted to engage with any given material or course, and I felt the importance in thinking about the connections between competencies and interests.”

– Hannah Costello, Class of 2020

“ Practising the skills of being self-directed in high school and learning all that long before I even stepped foot into a university lecture hall was so helpful. Seriously, I don’t think there’s anything that could have prepared me better, because the way that work is assigned in university feels like the same format of the course work I did with SelfDesign.”

– Amanda Hodges, Class of 2020



Justine Bowman, Class of 2023



Raina LeBaron (right) with daughter Gwynna McCaskill, Class of 2023



Amanda Hodges, Class of 2020



2017

Indigenous Education task force charts
the way to furthering reconciliation

When SelfDesign established its Truth and Reconciliation Indigenous Education task force in 2017, Canadians had had almost three years to review the final report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Based on the findings of seven years of meetings, interviews, research and disturbing revelations, the commission's report documents the terrible history of Indian Residential Schools in Canada and their sad legacy among the country's Indigenous Peoples and broader society.

The SelfDesign Indigenous education task force was how SelfDesign accepted that history and made the choice to do what it could to further healing and reconciliation. Task force members included an Indigenous elder and SelfDesign parents, learners and educators who self-identified as being of Indigenous heritage.

The goal was to identify ways the organization could integrate Indigenous culture and perspectives into all aspects of everyday learning and working at SelfDesign.

"Today's learners are tomorrow's leaders, and they will be the ones to carry reconciliation through and see it made part of everyday thought and action," says Nikki Kenyon, who at the time of the task force had just become SelfDesign's Principal of Educational Programs. She is now SelfDesign Learning Foundation's Director of Organizational Learning and Culture. "Reconciliation is one of Canada's great challenges and opportunities that learners will engage with."

The more than 80 recommendations that the task force put forward guide our efforts. They serve as a roadmap to how we shape our offerings, how we embed Indigenous culture and heritage in our programming, and how we engage with the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

"Our vision is for the learning community to be in a space where Indigenous education and mainstream education are integrated and woven together so seamlessly that you can't separate the two," says Patricia Collins. As our Indigenous Education Facilitator from 2017 to 2021, Patricia was responsible for initiating the recommendations' implementation at SelfDesign. "Wouldn't it be fantastic to reach the point when a young person looks at a learning challenge and automatically considers the Turtle Island Indigenous perspective as well as the national or international perspective, and has access to fully integrated resources to help them learn more?"

Today, the work continues, coordinated by Indigenous Educator Amber Santos, who took over from Patricia in 2021. We provide learners and families with offerings that help them explore Indigenous ways of knowing and being, work to reflect the diversity of Indigenous nations and cultures present in B.C. in our offerings, and offer professional development to our educators and community members. In 2023, Gitxsan Elder Michael Harris became our first Elder-in-residence.

Michael: A Knowledge Keeper role

I've been involved pretty much on a weekly basis with the youth, with the people who work at SelfDesign. My role is to be the Knowledge Keeper, the one to ask the difficult questions and share with the youth the understanding, the history of what the First Nations have gone through from before contact with Europeans and how it transformed into what we have today. We share that in a good way. I've worked with First Nations in many different ways. I share lunches with the staff. They have questions.

What we've done so far in the last 10 years and in particular in the last year is we've started learning how to develop a program for them has been kind of exploratory. When we're looking at SelfDesign and how we're working in the curriculum, First Nations Indigenous education is so important for them to understand it from the history point of view, from the length of time it went through and how we work with it.

— Michael Harris,
*SelfDesign Learning Community's
first Elder-in-residence*



Photos (opposite page) from Crafty Fridays.

Crafty Fridays are Indigenous-led spaces where learners gather online on Fridays to work on their own Indigenous-inspired craft projects.



2019

Learner Council gives learners
greater voice



Hannah: Laying Learner Council's foundations

A mention by a grade 11 SelfDesign learner in a post on one of the school's communication forums in late 2018 about the need for a council representing learners led to the creation of SelfDesign's Learner Council.

I was one of the learners who responded to that initial post. I joined the learner who posted the mention and five other learners to form an interim acting Learner Council in early 2019. We were supported by SelfDesign Learning Community Vice Principal Vanessa Kuran, who volunteered to be our teacher-sponsor.

Our biggest priority for the Learner Council was to make sure the learner-base of SelfDesign feels heard. That was our founding principle.

Another of our main goals as acting council was to create the foundation for a council that would last beyond any one member — a system that would remain long after we graduated.

Summer 2019 was intense. We were learning how to create a council that would be effective and inclusive, would be elected fairly while recognizing the work of the acting council, and would have clearly defined goals and values. Election guidelines that I drafted to allow us to start the election process, as well as some communication issues, led to fierce debate and forced us to solidify our priorities as a group.

We emerged with clear roles and responsibilities, a transparent election process, a pathway for learners to become a part of the council outside of fall elections, and defined values.

We spent August and September planning, reviewing and rewriting, but all our hard work preparing paid off when we held our first election. The results were posted in October 2019.

That fall, the newly elected Learner Council drafted guidelines for running council and created the process for governance, the format for meetings, and methods of communication — all to ensure learners have an active voice and presence in the larger SelfDesign community.

— Hannah Costello, Class of 2020 and Learner Council's first elected president





2021

SelfDesign goes fully remote

In 2021, SelfDesign Learning Foundation became a fully virtual organization, with no physical location and all operations decentralized. This makes us unique among schools in B.C.

“Being in a remote organization gives SelfDesign Learning Foundation two huge advantages,” says SelfDesign Learning Foundation Chief Operating Officer Sandy Steward. “We are able to recruit people from wherever they are geographically. We’re not confined or limited by location. Similarly, we are able to offer a level of flexibility to people in terms of their work arrangements. That is unprecedented. People who work for us don’t have to worry about commuting. They don’t have to spend that time going back and forth to the office.”



Sandy Steward (right),
SelfDesign Learning Foundation Chief Operating Officer, 2018-2024
Amber Papou,
SelfDesign Learning Foundation President & CEO, 2017-2024



2021

HomeLearners Network launches

HomeLearners Network is a community that supports children, youth and adults with online activities that inspire, empower and foster passion-driven learning.

Conceived at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in part as a response to the need within the greater educational community for affordable, high-quality self-directed learning options, SelfDesign Learning Foundation's newest educational program furthers our philosophy and approach to learning and provides our own community with new learning opportunities.

It was initiated to complement SelfDesign Learning Community and SelfDesign Home Learning, and to invite learners from outside of our community to discover new interests and passions.

HomeLearners Network activities involve hands-on creativity both on and off the screen. They help children and youth explore ideas and skills such as critical thinking, physics, and social justice while developing meaningful qualities like empathy, self-expression and collaboration through live, educator-led or downloadable activities.

In 2022, we began integrating HomeLearners Network into SelfDesign Learning Community, with learners and families having access to the program as part of their enrolment in the school.



HomeLearners Network activity

“ HomeLearners Network is a space for us to provide additional learning opportunities for the kids who enrolled in SelfDesign Learning Community and in our homeschooling program. It also is a place where we are able to offer the benefits and great things about SelfDesign to people outside of the province of B.C.”

— Amber Papou,
SelfDesign Learning Foundation
President & CEO, 2017-2024



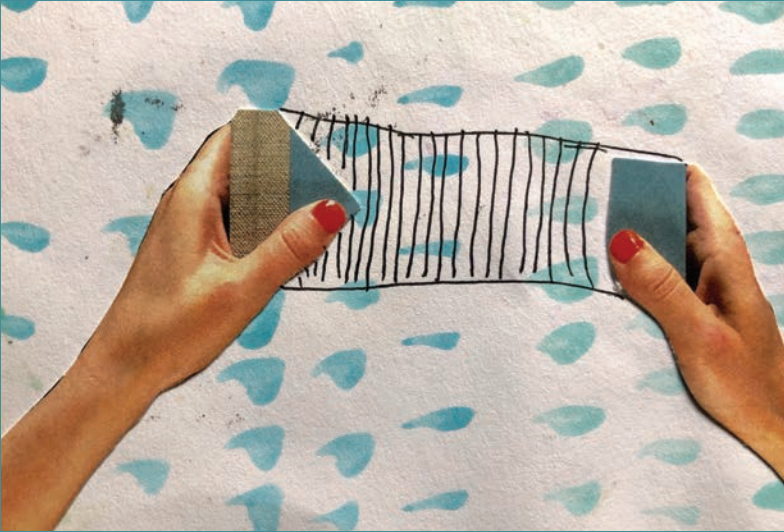
“ As an educator with more than 25 years of experience and a lifelong artist, I have really honed my skills. I have more than 10,000 hours of time making art and teaching art, and I love it. My approach is to make the activities accessible to all learners and bring in an art history context with an intersectional lens. At HomeLearners Network, I get to bring the best of everything I’ve learned with all of my experiences. I get to connect with young people, with youth. We get our hands busy, we make stuff together, so we leave each session feeling excited and satisfied that we’ve done something and made something.”

– Amber Santos, HomeLearners Network lead guide
and SelfDesign learning consultant



“ I’d been working as a SelfDesign educator for a couple of years, and I really, really missed that connection piece that I got to have with kids when I was in a classroom. I was looking for more ways to connect. I’d had a couple of learners who had done offerings on HomeLearners Network, and I think it was really, really valuable for them. They really enjoyed them. That’s kind of what made me interested.”

– Alecyn Lea, HomeLearners Network lead guide
and SelfDesign learning consultant



Activities offered through HomeLearners Network

2023

SelfDesign Learning Community becomes an independent provincial online learning school

Community Report 2023

SelfDesign
LEARNING
FOUNDATION

SelfDesign
FOUNDA

After more than a year of discussions, planning and contract reviews, SelfDesign Learning Community began the 2023/24 learning year as a B.C. independent provincial online learning school.

SelfDesign is one of 16 independent provincial online learning schools, which provide online learning services to kindergarten to grade 12 learners across B.C. Any online school in B.C. that isn't a designated provincial online learning school can offer online programs and courses only to students residing within their school district.

The designation provides an additional degree of stability that allows SelfDesign to plan even more effectively for the future.

The change also means SelfDesign Learning Community and all other provincial online learning schools, both public and independent, are engaging in the same accountability and quality assurance framework of continuous improvement by the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care.

“For years the independent online schools in B.C. have had annual inspections and monitoring visits, alternating on a two-year cycle,” Principal Catherine Dinim says. “With the provincial online learning school designation, the accountability and quality assurance framework will support all provincial online learning schools in a cycle of continuous improvement focused on student success, with the

goal of creating equity of access and outcomes to all learners in our vast and diverse province. We'll still engage in annual evaluation experiences with the ministry, but we'll expand the way we are reviewed in new ways.”

“**The biggest thing is the consistency and the commitment that we have from the government in regards to having a three-year contract with them. That provides learners and families and our contractors and educators with a sense of peace and a sense of being able to continue the work over a period of time and hopefully way into the future. It's the first time that we've been officially recognized by the province in the whole system. So having that provides a sense of the future that we really didn't have before.**

The three-year contract also provides consistency and support for the technology that supports the school, which is really important when you're an online school.”

— Amber Papou,
SelfDesign Learning Foundation
President & CEO, 2017-2024



“ SelfDesign for me represents a way of being.
And that way of being is continuously growing.”

– David Tait, Virtual High parent and
former SelfDesign Board member

40  YEARS SelfDesign.

Credits & Acknowledgments

As we celebrate 40 Years of Lifelong Learning, we extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to the creation of this commemorative book. This milestone reflects the passion, dedication, and collective efforts of an extraordinary community.

A special acknowledgment

We honor the vision and legacy of our founder, Brent Cameron, whose groundbreaking ideas and unwavering commitment to personalized education laid the foundation for SelfDesign. Brent's belief in the power of lifelong learning continues to guide and inspire us.

We also extend heartfelt thanks to his daughter, Ilana Cameron, for her dedication to preserving and expanding her father's vision. Ilana's contributions to SelfDesign and her support in curating and sharing treasured memories and photos for this book have been invaluable.

Project Leadership: Karen Zukas, SelfDesign Director of Marketing & Communications
Researcher, Writer and Editor: Monique Kieran
Art Director & Graphic Designer: Alexis Taschuk
Project Coordinator: Preet Jaswal

Contributors, SelfDesign Leadership

- Catherine Dinim, Principal
- Dave Conroy, Chief Information Officer
- Debra Sigfusson, Human Resources
- Karen Zukas, Director of Marketing and Communications
- Mara Hawkins, Director of Programs and Services
- Nikki Kenyon, Interim President & CEO, 2024
- Paul Mackisoc, Director of Procurement
- Shirley Smith, Chief Financial Officer

Credits & Acknowledgments

Contributors

- Alecyn Lea, HomeLearners Network lead guide and SelfDesign learning consultant
- Amanda Hodges, Class of 2020
- Amber Papou, SelfDesign Learning Foundation President & CEO, 2017-2024
- Amber Santos, HomeLearners Network lead guide and SelfDesign learning consultant
- Axel McGown, Class of 2013
- Clara Foulds, Collab Assistant Coordinator 2012
- Clarissa Tufts, Vice-Principal
- Darcy Kaltio, former Wondertree learning consultant, now a SelfDesign education assistant
- Devon Girard, SelfDesign Learning Foundation Board Member
- Erik, SelfDesign learner, Class of 2019
- Fleurette Sweeney, one of the proponents of the SelfDesign Graduate Institute
- Gillian Walters, SelfDesign parent
- Hannah Costello, Class of 2020 and Learner Council's first elected president
- Heather Knox, Wondertree HomeLearners' Network parent and assistant coordinator, 1991-1996
- Ilana Cameron, Daughter of Brent Cameron, first Wondertree Learner
- Isabeau, SelfDesign learner
- Jesse Blum, Virtual High learner
- Jonathan Ireland, Wondertree learner
- Josh Bloch, Wondertree learner
- Justine Bowman, Class of 2023
- Kalev Tait, Virtual High learner
- Katherine Muncaster, Virtual High learner
- Kathleen Forsythe, SelfDesign Learning Community co-founder and principal, 2012-2016, and SelfDesign Learning Foundation executive director, 2013-2016
- Katie McLean, Virtual High learner
- Lauren Goldman, Wondertree mentor
- Lia Meyer, Wondertree learner
- Maia, SelfDesign learner, Class of 2019
- Maren Dancer, one of the first Wondertree parents
- Marielle Soong, Wondertree parent, and former Wondertree assistant
- Mason, SelfDesign learner, Class of 2020
- Maureen Cameron, Wondertree HomeLearners' Network coordinator, 1989-2001

Credits & Acknowledgments

Contributors continued

- Megumi Terashita-Clark, SelfDesign parent and children Kaitlin and Marty
- Michael Bender, SelfDesign educator
- Michael Harris, SelfDesign Learning Community's first Elder-in-residence
- Michael Maser, Co-Creator of Virtual High with Brent Cameron
- Michelle Buck, Collab Coordinator 2012, Guidance, Ed Support, LCLI, Commencement and LocalLabs host
- Mirella Russell, SelfDesign parent
- Pille Bunnell and David Tait, Virtual High parents and former SelfDesign board members
- Raina LeBaron and daughter Gwynna McCaskill, Class of 2023
- River Meyer, member of the SelfDesign leadership team from 2004 to 2024
- Sandy Steward, SelfDesign Learning Foundation Chief Operating Officer, 2018-2024
- Sarah Graeme, Class of 2013
- Shawna Litten, SelfDesign parent
- Shelagh Noonan, former SelfDesign learning consultant and Special Education program manager
- Tallisen Soong Smith, Wondertree learner
- Todd Butler, Family Services Team Lead
- Travis Bernhardt, Virtual High learner
- Vanessa Kuran, Vice-Principal
- Verena Gibbs, former Wondertree learning consultant and vice principal, current SelfDesign Learning Foundation board chairperson
- Wyatt Miller-Unser, Class of 2013

Special Thanks

To our community of learners, families, educators, and supporters who have shaped SelfDesign over the past four decades. Your stories, memories, and contributions are the heart of this book and our shared journey.

Finally, thank you to everyone who believed in and supported this project, ensuring that the legacy of SelfDesign continues to inspire lifelong learning for years to come.

With gratitude,

The SelfDesign 40th Anniversary Book Team

40 YEARS SelfDesign®