Desegregation was just one social change at the Demonstration School. The pictures below show how quickly the school and Nashville were being transformed. The photo of the Student Activities Committee officers appears in the 1970 Volunteer. The photo of the Student Council president, the long-haired Irwin Kuhn with bullhorn and pipe, was taken two years later.

Coming to the End of PDS

Whatever was on their minds, and in the early 1970s American teenagers had plenty to think about, it was not worries about the future of their school. Peabody Demonstration School had been there for fifty years—forever, it seemed.

In 1970, history teacher Leland Johnson looked to the future of PDS. He was concluding The Past Is Prologue, the history of the school written by his American Problems class. PDS “faces the future with the same spirit of adventure which brought the pioneers to Middle Tennessee two hundred years ago,” he wrote.
Meanwhile, across the street, Peabody College was still struggling to survive. Nothing seemed to work. John Dunworth, who became president of the college in 1974, wanted to keep it open. He appointed a Select Committee of only three professors to consider the options. The resulting report, *Design for the Future*, changed everything for the college and for the Dem School.

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**Excerpts from Saving PDS**

Betty Werthan answered the phone and listened intently as her father-in-law delivered the shocking news: the Board of Peabody College had just voted to close Peabody Demonstration School. With four kids happily attending PDS, Betty felt deflated and devastated.

Across town, Janet Carney (now Schneider) was summoned with other Peabody Demonstration School faculty to leave the auditorium where they were registering students for the new school year and attend an emergency meeting in the library. It was August 19, 1974, Carney’s first day on the job, and she had the jitters typical of someone starting a new position.

“My focus was quickly taken off myself when Ed Pratt, director of PDS, stood up and made the announcement that PDS would be closing at the end of the school year due to financial reasons at Peabody College,” Carney recalled. “The tie with Peabody had been severed and the school would be no more. I didn’t know most of the faculty and didn’t know how to process this information except selfishly. I quickly found Claudia Thompson, a friend from Vanderbilt. It was her first day on the job as well, and we commiserated about our futures. Our first employer was ‘going out of business.’”

Feeling frazzled, Carney scooted out of the meeting to a pay phone in the school lobby (cell phones did not exist) to call her mother, who had been teaching for 37 years. “Her response was calming,” Carney recalled. “She said, ‘Learn as much as you can, get a year of experience, and then you can find another position.’ I figured she knew what she was talking about.”

There had been a warning.

In a confidential memo two years earlier, Peabody College President John M. Claunch had foreshadowed the possibility of closing PDS. In most years, Claunch observed, the school had lost money, putting financial pressure on the college’s already strained budget. Furthermore, Claunch questioned whether the college would be better served having its student teachers get all of their experience in Nashville’s public schools, rather than spending time teaching at PDS, which he viewed as a college preparatory school.

“From time to time, when the Demonstration School tuition has not produced enough income to meet all of its expenses, we have had the suggestions from different sources that the Demonstration School should be permanently dissolved...
or discontinued,” Claunch wrote in the memo dated October 6, 1971. “This year the Demonstration School has the largest enrollment in many years and, speaking financially, is one of the bright spots in our total operation.”

PDS, according to financial records, generated $135,272 for the college in 1971-72. The reason was a dramatic surge in PDS enrollment stemming from a federal court decree mandating cross-town busing to integrate Nashville’s public schools. After the court ruled in mid-summer of 1971, PDS was immediately flooded with applications and phone calls from anxious parents; enrollment increased so much that the school had to lease five classrooms on the Peabody College Campus to make room for all the new students.

“It was white flight,” recalled Heber Rogers, who estimated that PDS enrollment increased by more than 20 percent in one month, to roughly 800 students.

Just three months before Peabody College dropped the ax, its president, John Dunworth, reaffirmed his commitment to keeping it open.

“Peabody should have a fine Demonstration School as an integral part of its teacher education programs,” Dunworth wrote in a May 16, 1974 letter to a concerned parent. “One measure of a great school is that it helps a child to be as well as to know. As long as the Peabody Demonstration School accomplishes this objective, and in addition helps prospective teachers gain the insight and skills necessary for them to be truly great educators, be assured it will have my full support.”

In August, 1974, a committee charting Peabody College’s future had delivered a report to President Dunworth and the college’s board of trustees calling for PDS to be closed, describing it as a money-losing luxury the college could no longer afford. “It serves primarily as a private school for its paying clientele, contributing little to the realization of the central mission of the college,” the report said. “THE PEABODY DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL SHOULD BE CLOSED.”

The Rescue Begins

As soon as he heard the news about the PDS crisis, Bernard Werthan Jr. spearheaded an effort by parents to save the school. With deep Nashville roots and a history of community leadership, Werthan and his family had long ties to PDS, Peabody College, and Vanderbilt University. While his father Bernard Werthan Sr. served on the Peabody College board which had voted to close the school, the elder Werthan had alerted his family to the news and floated the possibility that the school operate independently. Wasting no time, Werthan met swiftly with Peabody College leaders to ask for their cooperation.

continued on next page

School To Buy Its Building, Land

Peabody College will sell the building and property housing the University School of Nashville to the school next week for $1.5 million.

University School board member Ronald Addlestone confirmed the sale this morning and said final arrangements on the sale would take place Thursday.

The University School took over running what was called the Peabody Demonstration School two years ago when the college announced it was no longer planning to administer it.

Addlestone said the board has been paying Peabody rent, for using the property but that a fund raising drive has been under way for two years to either build a new school or purchase it from Peabody.

The board is made up of parent’s from the school’s approximately 720 students, Addlestone said.

The school, which enrolls students from kindergarten through high school, is located on the corner of 21st and Edgehill avenues.

Included in the purchase agreement will be the school’s main building, an annex and about seven acres of land, Addlestone said.

Addlestone said the school will continue with the same philosophy and one reason the buildings where purchased from Peabody is that the parents wanted it to remain in the university area.

He also said the school expects to hire a new headmaster shortly after Jan. 1.

The school’s current headmaster, Dr. L. Edward Pratt, announced earlier this year his intentions to resign.
He sought to stabilize the situation by asking the college for three things:

- the right to set up a new corporation that would continue using the “Peabody Demonstration School” name (the answer was “no,” but a newly named school could use the phrase “Successor to Peabody Demonstration School” on its letterhead);

- the ability to lease the PDS building and grounds for one additional school year (the answer was “yes,” for about $80,000 plus expenses);

- the opportunity to buy the PDS building and grounds, or enter into a long-term lease, in the future (willing to discuss, but highly unlikely).

A Transition Committee comprising parents, students, and faculty members began meeting almost immediately on Saturday mornings, working to quarterback the herculean effort it would take to build a bridge from PDS to a new school that, at least in the beginning, did not even have a name.

The Transition Committee also formed a new entity, PDS Patrons Inc., to tackle the mission of raising the money needed to fund the new school’s operations. Suzy Morris took a hands-on role, along with Werthan, as leader of the fundraising effort.

The pace was breathtaking. Within months, the school had a new name and more than $300,000 in contributions from 86 families, and teachers had been offered contracts for the following school year. Meanwhile, the PDS colors, maroon and blue, appeared on bumper stickers proclaiming, “University School of Nashville, Successor to Peabody Demonstration School.”

“I forever will be grateful for that experience on the transition committee,” said Ann Teaff, then a fourth-year middle school teacher, who would become head of Harpeth Hall School. “I had the opportunity to observe the leadership of Bernard and Betty Werthan and other committed parents. Much of my philosophy of education emerged during that exciting time.”

Peabody College eventually agreed in June 1976 to sell the building, grounds and adjacent properties for $800,000, enabling the newly-named University School to remain in its historic home. Suzy Morris, who co-chaired fundraising, described it as the fulfillment of a dream and a bargain too: “7.15 of the choicest acres in all Nashville, and at a reasonable price.” Though there had been scary moments, the experience of saving the school reflected bold action, giving students a profound life lesson that dire situations could be turned into promising opportunities if they acted confidently, decisively, and swiftly.