



Supposing you lived in a town where even people who did not care for each other's company came running—running!—to work together in time of genuine need.

How to Build a Bridge

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Matinicus Island, Maine, lies roughly twenty miles from the mainland. The small island, two miles end to end, is surrounded by open sea; weather sometimes makes transportation to and from the mainland—by boat or small airplane—impossible. The population has been shrinking, and the one-room, taxpayer-funded, public elementary school—one of a half dozen one-room schools in Maine, all on islands—often serves only a few students. No physician, no law enforcement agency, and no store are on the island. Mail, freight, and groceries are delivered by a small “bush pilot” air taxi service, weather permitting. There are no preschool, no gymnasium, and no opportunity for participating in team sports. Teenagers leave the island to attend high school because a daily commute is not possible.

Obviously, there is no bridge. The island supports its own tiny electric company, its own school district, and its own limited municipal government. Telephone and Internet are beamed across the waters of Penobscot Bay to telecommunications towers on the island.

Why on earth would anybody want to live there? Wouldn't it be bordering on neglect for any parent to even consider raising children in such a place? No sports is bad enough—but no pediatrician? And how can a child from a one-room school with just a handful of other students, who may be siblings and cousins, be prepared to face the outside world?

Now, consider a community where, no matter what the emergency, everybody responds—where, in the event of a fire, a mariner in trouble,

even just a car stuck in a snowdrift, nobody capable of assisting ever turns away and casually says, “Hey, it's not my job.” Supposing you lived in a town where even people who did not care for each other's company came running—running!—to work together in time of genuine need. Would you like your children to grow up surrounded by such an ethic of community and human obligation?

I would, and mine did.

In 1987 I took the position of sole kindergarten-through-eighth-grade one-room elementary school teacher on Matinicus Island. At that time, teachers often worked alone, without the support of a principal, educational technician/paraprofessional, or specialist instructors of any kind. Isolation, both physical and professional, was

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the name of the game. On this island, it is customary to employ a new teacher frequently, so the job becomes nobody's career. After my stint as teacher ended I remained on Matinicus, married, and with my husband raised two children. I assisted with the school in other ways, serving over time as substitute, art teacher, bookkeeper, and school board member.

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Outer-island children grow up around fishing harbors, aboard work boats, in pickup trucks, and sometimes in four-seat airplanes. Despite the common but incorrect assumption that tiny rural schools are inevitably primitive and under-resourced, today's island children also grow up with computers. The one-room schools of Maine now make heavy use of technology, and the Internet has allowed virtual bridges to be built. Isolated students and teachers work together, online as well as face to face, through the Outer Islands Teaching and Learning Collaborative, an organization formed by teachers to support peer mentoring, academic partnering, staff professional development, and social connection. For example, reading groups made up of students and led by teachers from several different islands meet online, using videoconferencing platforms to hold book discussions.

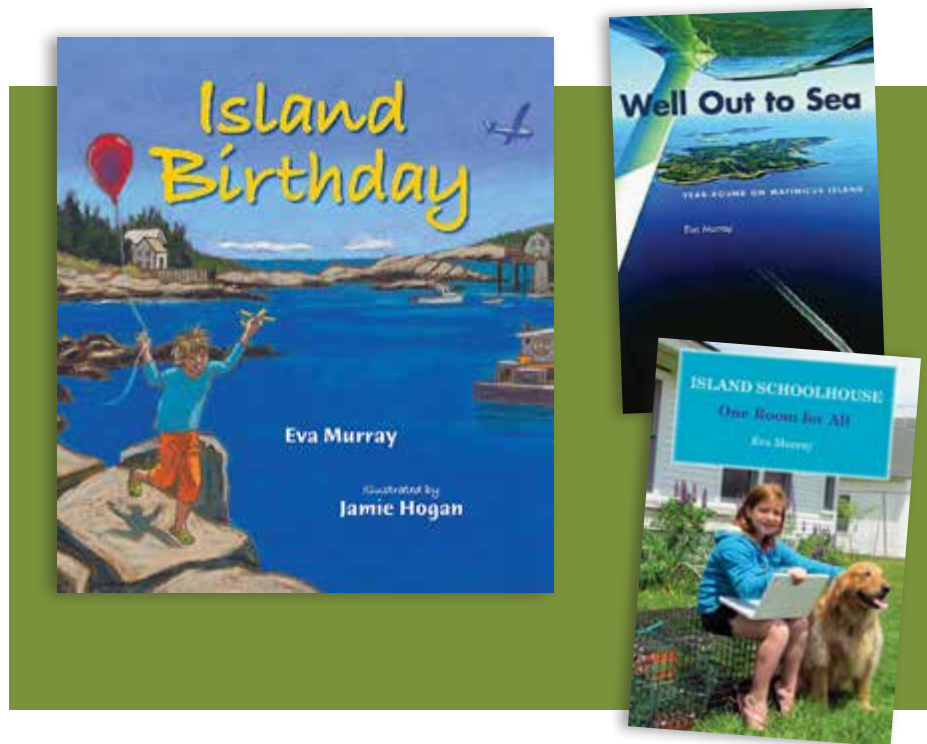
One thing has not changed. Islanders, with their lobster boats,

and their bush pilots, and their one-room schools that you may think of as old-fashioned, learn early that when they need something done, they'd better get to work.

In that spirit, a few residents of Matinicus recently took up the task of forming the island's new public library. I find myself the secretary and treasurer of the Matinicus Island Library Association, serving perhaps the smallest such institution in existence that is not actually on wheels. As I write, we haven't even gotten the electricity

connected yet, but the younger children are asking when we'll be holding story hour. The sense that we are doing something good and creating something welcomed by the community is palpable—and wonderful.

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In these schools, the best of the “old ways” can meet the best of the new. Older students still do help younger students, whether in the reading corner, on the playground, or with technology. All students can work at their own academic level in all subjects, without their advancement to another “grade” or their need for support parting them from friends and age-mates. Little time is wasted on procedure and bureaucracy required when crowds must be safely managed, and the student-teacher ratio is enviable. True isolation, in which children rarely leave the island and miss out on important experiences, is a thing of the past.

Still, it is not uncommon for island parents to be questioned or judged by mainland acquaintances. This questioning is usually gentle, beginning with the supposedly earnest query: “Don’t you worry about how she’ll manage in the *real world*?” Sometimes the criticism is more aggressive. Parents are told that they are damaging their child’s prospects because Junior may get to high school without having learned the rules of soccer. What a disaster.

The suggestion is that the “real world” means things like soccer, while developing a sense of oneself as a valued community member and even a potential emergency responder is not the real world.

To be sure, technology has made a significant difference in the lives of offshore students and teachers—and librarians!—but “bridge-building” means so much more than

videoconferencing. The emphasis placed on the importance of everybody’s help and on individual involvement in local affairs has not faded with the years. As a result, children grow up connected to their fellow humans in a deep, abstract way. No matter where they make their homes as adults, should somebody need help, the islanders will respond. The bridge has been built.

Eva Murray is a regular columnist for five Maine publications, a freelance writer, and the author of three books: *Well Out to Sea—Year-Round on Matinicus Island* (2010), *Island Schoolhouse—One Room for All* (2012), and *Island Birthday* (2015), the most recent a children’s book illustrated by Jamie Hogan, which won the esteemed *Lupine Award* for children’s literature. All were published by *Tilbury House Publishers of Thomaston, Maine*. A 1985 graduate of *Bates College*, Eva has made her home on *Matinicus Island* “full-time and year-round” since 1987, when she was the island school’s one teacher. Along with husband *Paul Murray*, she raised two children on *Matinicus*, both now college graduates. In addition to writing, *Eva* serves as an emergency medical technician, wilderness first responder, and search and rescue volunteer; she runs the municipal recycling and solid waste program in her community; she operates a small seasonal bakery, and she is deeply involved in the formation of the new island library. Although not currently teaching, she is a certified K–8 teacher and recently earned a graduate certificate in *Gifted and Talented Education*. At the time of this writing, *Eva* is a pilot, a truck driver, a ham radio enthusiast, a hand spinner, and a blacksmith.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP
AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE
OF CIRCULATION

(“Average” figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; “actual” figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2015 issue). Total number of copies printed average 7,798; actual 8,175. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 6,631. Free distribution actual 294. Total distribution average 7,798; actual 8,175. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 614; actual 1,250. Total: average/ actual 7,798/ 8,175. Percentage paid: average 95.7; actual 95.7.