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When Jean Van Sinderen donated her 110-acre Washington estate to the Devereux Foundation in 1965, it set in motion the creation of The Glenholme School, one of the most respected special needs programs in the nation.

The Van Sinderen family were already well known in town. They were instrumental in the construction of the elegant Mayflower Inn, the former site of the private Ridge School. By the 1920s Jean's husband, Adrian, had built an elegant country mansion, raising show horses on his "gentleman's farm."

And when an enraged Shepaug River wiped out Washington Depot's downtown business district in 1955, it was Harry Van Sinderen, Adrian's brother, who helped to spearhead the reconstruction of that devastated area.

Eight years later, the family donated 727 acres of undeveloped land to the Steep Rock Preserve. Today the property is known as Hidden Valley Preserve off Route 47.

Despite these milestones it can be argued that the family's greatest legacy lies with Jean in 1965. Through her daughter's urging, Jean met Helena Devereux, an educator and a pioneer in the field of special education. Traveling from Pennsylvania to the Van Sinderen's country estate, Helena explained that she had always wanted to start a school in New England. Ms. Devereux had led the charge to help children with behavioral health needs, starting her first school in 1918 and expanding on that in other parts of the country.

Jean did not need much convincing since she was personally well aware of families who needed therapeutic help for their children. Jean also felt that the estate had also become too much to manage, especially with the recent death of her husband. Three years after that meeting took place inside the stone mansion off Sabbaday Lane, the Glenholme School opened its doors in 1968 to a handful of students on the autism spectrum.

Since that time, the year-round school has grown to approximately 80 students in grades 5-12. Each receives the individualized support needed to succeed academically, emotionally and socially. Many of these high functioning students had previously not been able to fit in at private and public schools due to their difficulties associated with diagnoses such as autism, anxiety, depression and ADHD.

Even the Glenholme property exudes a therapeutic affect with its expansive manicured lawns and gardens. Here, students have a multitude of after school activities to choose from, whether it be performing arts, music, dance or robotics. The grounds include basketball courts, stables, a fitness center, soccer and softball fields and a nine-hole

Frisbee golf course. A track for go-carts is also used for fitness activities such as biking, running and walking.

Today, students throughout the world come to Glenholme, graduate and go on to college or a preferred profession, opportunities that seemed impossible to families when their child first arrived. And Glenholme has expanded over time, offering a transition program for high school graduates needing a year or two to strengthen independent living skills.

All of this was made possible by a little-known meeting between two women who met one day 55 years ago in the small town of Washington.

– David Dunleavy





At a Glance

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