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A winter scene in Maine. In the foreground, a red portable toilet stands in a snowy field. To its right is a green sign that reads "WILLIAM MOSCOVIC PUBLIC LANDING". The background shows a line of evergreen trees and a distant mountain range under a cloudy sky.

FREEDOM RISING

*How this rural town
restored a mill and
rediscovered its identity*



COUNTY BOYS

*Snowmobiling back
trails through Aroostook*

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HOW FREEDOM WORKS

The Power of New Life at the Freedom Mill



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by Philip Conkling Photographs by Fred Field



Previous page: The renovated mill at Freedom Falls with the new bridge over Sandy Stream

This page: Laurie Grassi Redmond, founder and teacher, sits in the doorway of the Mill School with her daughter Adele.

This is a story of confluences—

of how a stream of ideas that begins with a family visit flows into another set of ideas, that then runs into another until there is a vigorous freshet coursing through the center of a town, lending energy to the process of rediscovery and reinvention. This process will change not only the town, but also the people who live there and the children who learn there.

The town of Freedom, along the banks of Sandy Stream, was originally settled in 1794 when Stephen Smith hiked to the headwaters of the Sheepscot River searching for a location with enough water to support a mill. Others followed him to the area and settled along the banks of Sandy Stream that flows through the center of Freedom.

The Mill at Freedom Falls, one of five built on the shores of Sandy Stream, was established in 1834 as a gristmill to grind corn, wheat, and rye for local farmers, and later converted into a turning mill. For decades, the mill was used to manufacture tool handles, broomsticks, spools, dowels, and other useful implements for farm and industry from the nearby hardwood forests, until it shut down for good in 1967. When the mill along the banks of the town's economic artery stopped, it was as if the village went into heart arrest.

How does a town find its future, when its
economic underpinnings have begun slipping away?

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"Education," she
thought to herself,
"is the ultimate
community value."



Multi-aged classroom of younger students with Laurie Grassi Redmond

Prentice Grassi may not have known exactly what he wanted to do when he graduated from Colby College in Waterville with a degree in biology in 1994, but he knew two things. He knew he wanted to work outdoors in an environmental job, and he knew he wanted to be self-sufficient. But to be self-sufficient required developing a set of practical skills that did not necessarily come with his college degree. While still in college, Prentice began apprenticing on farms with Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), including Darthia Farm on Schoodic Point. The following year, Polly Shyka of Orrington became an apprentice at the same farm. Prentice and Polly's paths crossed there and eventually led to the happy occasion five years later when the couple married.

Prentice and Polly were committed farmers, at least in their minds, although they knew they needed additional skills to survive the unpredictable nature of farm life. They understood that if you don't know how to fix your own tractor—not to mention how to construct farm buildings, fix the plumbing, and the like—you are unlikely to become a successful farmer. So Prentice went to work as a cabinetmaker for Cold Mountain Builders in Camden and learned how to work with his hands, while Polly went to work for the nonprofit Unity Barn Raisers.

The couple began looking for a piece of farmland to buy, initially in the Hope and Appleton area. The first affordable farmland they found, however, was a 120-acre parcel in Freedom on the western side of Sandy Stream, which they bought in 2001. Prentice and Polly began building their house on the edge of a big field. By 2007, with their four-year-old son, Joseph, a part of the family and another on the way, they took the plunge into full-time organic farming on their land, leaving Prentice's cabinet-making job behind.

To get to the next part of the story, we need to swim upstream all the way back to Prentice's mother's childhood. When Sally Grassi was a teenager, her father brought his family to an idyllic little fishing camp on West Richardson Pond, near Rangeley. And when Sally and her husband, Tony, were raising Prentice and his sister, Laurie, Sally brought her family back to her father's fishing camp whenever they could.

When Tony was ready to retire from his investment banking life, there was no question in Sally's mind about which direction to head from Connecticut: north to Maine. Tony and Sally found a piece of property in Camden and, through Prentice, hired Cold Mountain Builders to build their new home.

While on a visit to Prentice and Polly before the older Grassis had moved permanently to Maine, Tony and Prentice walked across one of the fields through a narrow strip of woods to the edge of the village, where Tony saw the abandoned Freedom mill. "When I first saw the building," Tony recalls, "I said, 'this is so cool.'" It took a great deal of imagination to visualize how this once-proud building, crumpled nearly to its knees, had once been a humming industrial enterprise, but Tony could see its potential, including for generating power without obstructing fish passage.

Tony wondered what it would take to bring the mill back to a useful life, but was leery of "messing around" in his son and daughter-in-law's "backyard." After Prentice and Polly talked it over and spoke with some of their neighbors, they told Tony that if he was willing to renovate the mill, it would be great for the community—maybe it could even become an asset for farmers in the area.

Tony and Sally each had their own reasons for being interested. Sally had seen how the



town of Rangeley, which she had known for most of her life, had fallen on hard times, but had come back to life as winter sports, like snowmobiling, began making year-round life more viable. As the local economy improved, houses got painted, “but nothing really changed,” she said. There was progress, but the community had stayed intact.

Meanwhile, Tony had served on the board of the Nature Conservancy, the most successful conservation organization in the country. He had seen how the organization had saved a lot of land, including some

properties that required sophisticated understanding of how to manage freshwater ecosystems that flowed through them, including, in some cases, removing dams that had outlived their usefulness.

In 2006 Tony began the due diligence process. First he brought in Jay Fischer, Prentice’s former boss at Cold Mountain Builders, for an opinion on the condition of the building. When Fischer first entered the cavernous basement of the mill where the turbines had once thrummed, he was concerned that the whole works might collapse at any moment. Fischer, however,

was impressed by the heft of the original beams—especially the quality of the joinery that had withstood the persistent shaking from the pressure of the rushing waterpower.

After careful work and many consultations with experts in the field, Tony concluded that with time, patience, skill, and cash, the mill could be saved. In 2010, Tony and Sally obtained an 18-month option to purchase the mill, and in 2012 they exercised the option and began reconstruction.



“It took a great deal of imagination to visualize how this once-proud building, crumpled nearly to its knees, had once been a humming industrial enterprise.”

The Village Farm family:
Prentice, Abel, Polly, Ben,
and Joseph Grassi (from
left to right)

This was all exciting and heady, but naturally, it raised the question of what new uses the mill might serve. There were suggestions from all quarters: a glass-blowing studio or commercial refrigeration unit to take advantage of the mill’s power generation potential; a gristmill for organic grains; a pottery studio; bakery; even offices. But Polly kept asking herself, what uses would really serve the community? And then it came to her one day while standing at the sink. “Education,” she thought to herself, “is the ultimate community value.” What about a school?

And here another tributary flows into the stream of ideas. Prentice’s sister, Laurie, had gone off to Mills College in Oakland, California, where she got a degree in education and then a job at Mills College’s lab school, where educational ideas get tested in a real-world setting. While still in California, Laurie met and then married Chris Redmond, who grew up in Waterville. The couple decided to move back east to be near their families.

After moving to Maine, Laurie taught in public schools during her first four years before taking time off to raise their

daughters, Elsa and Adele. Although Laurie valued the expertise of her colleagues in Maine’s public schools, she had been dreaming of starting a school ever since she moved back to Maine. When she consulted others who had done so, however, they all gave her the same advice—don’t even think about starting a school when you have young children—the demands on your time are so exhausting, someone is sure to get shortchanged.

Still, the school idea percolated in the back of her mind; Adele had turned four and soon would be off to kindergarten. Maybe Laurie





Tony Grassi and his grandson, Joseph, walk the edge of the millpond behind the Freedom Falls dam.



"I was just like this building, about to fall into the river, and yet it came back. This building was reborn and I was reborn here."



A full house at Erin French's The Lost Kitchen restaurant on the main floor of the mill. The restaurant takes reservations weeks in advance.

could start something small, perhaps even in her own house. She had been hearing from parents in the area that they really valued spending time teaching their kids, but what they wanted was a three-day-a-week school schedule that would also enable their children to benefit from spending time with other kids and allow professional supervision over the curriculum. That's when she got a call from Polly, who suggested, "Why don't you start a school at the Freedom mill?" There was plenty of space for both a school and other compatible uses.

Laurie started to think harder about starting a school. How could she organize the schedule to fit the needs of the community, including those from families with home-schooled children like Polly and Prentice's three sons? The more she thought about it, the more feasible it seemed to her. Tony quickly researched what regulations would be required if the mill were to house a school—a separate parking lot where parents could drop off their children and a playground for outdoor education could be accommodated on land belonging to the mill across Sandy Stream. That also meant a bridge for students to walk across and critical fire regulations that would have to be addressed.

Laurie organized community informational meetings during the winter of 2012, announcing a March deadline for enrolling. In a month, the Mill School capacity of 20 students—half in the lower grades (K-2), and half in the upper grades (3-6)—was fully enrolled with a waiting list. Laurie recalled how she and some colleagues at the lab school in Oakland had uncovered a 30-foot-long section of a stream that ran through their urban environment. This stream provided their science curriculum for the year. Now in Freedom, according to Laurie, "We have ten years of a science curriculum within walking distance." Joseph Grassi showed me the path he walks with his two younger brothers to school three days a week. "I know a lot about the mill because I was here every

weekday for four months," he tells me. He even had his own hard hat. We walked along the edge of the millpond, and into the multi-age classrooms where the older kids help teach the younger kids and where everyone works in small groups or "workshops."

Joseph next led me around to the front of the mill, opened the main door, and walked me into the spacious dining room, which is also the preparation area for the Lost Kitchen restaurant, established by notable local-food chef Erin French. Beginning this summer, French brought her talents (and her enthusiastic clientele) to this "destination" restaurant at the mill. Joseph and his family had supplied fresh vegetables to French's Lost Kitchen when it was located in Belfast and they had become good friends. But the restaurant closed down during a painful divorce, so when Polly called her and asked whether she would consider reopening in the Freedom mill, it felt right to Erin, even though she would be taking a big chance and moving from a community of 6,000 to a community of 700.

"I grew up on a farm two miles down the road," Erin told me. "I don't know that I appreciated it when I was growing up, but it's where I 'got' simplicity. Honest food, straight off the farm. Cukes for lunch. My dad ran a greasy spoon and that's where I learned to cook—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I started working when I was 12. My dad thought if he trained me, he could get some time off. I would run the line at lunch and get to do what I wanted—a lobster roll with nasturtiums. I picked the rhubarb for pies out of our garden."

As we talk, women appear and disappear, delivering armfuls of vegetables, packages of chicken and duck, and "specialty" flowers, which Erin tells me are from bolted vegetables that she has asked her staff of female employees to cut from their own farms. Erin looks proudly and determinedly at the surroundings and says, "I was just like this building, about to fall into the

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Recess at the Mill School
playground across Sandy Stream
as Alma Dertnig watches Laura
Hepner climb a tree.

river, and yet it came back. This building
was reborn and I was reborn here.”

Finally Joseph leads me down to his
favorite part of the mill, down into the
basement, where products from the mill
are displayed in a small museum. We open
a door with the sound of the water rum-
bling beneath us and proceed out over the
catwalks to where new turbines will soon

be installed, hopefully before next year’s
spring thaw. These turbines will capture
the power of rushing water and turn it
into productive energy—energy that will
help illuminate young minds and satisfy
appetites. Thanks in part to this water,
this energy, the small town of Freedom is
rediscovering a piece of its rural pride and
reason for being. +