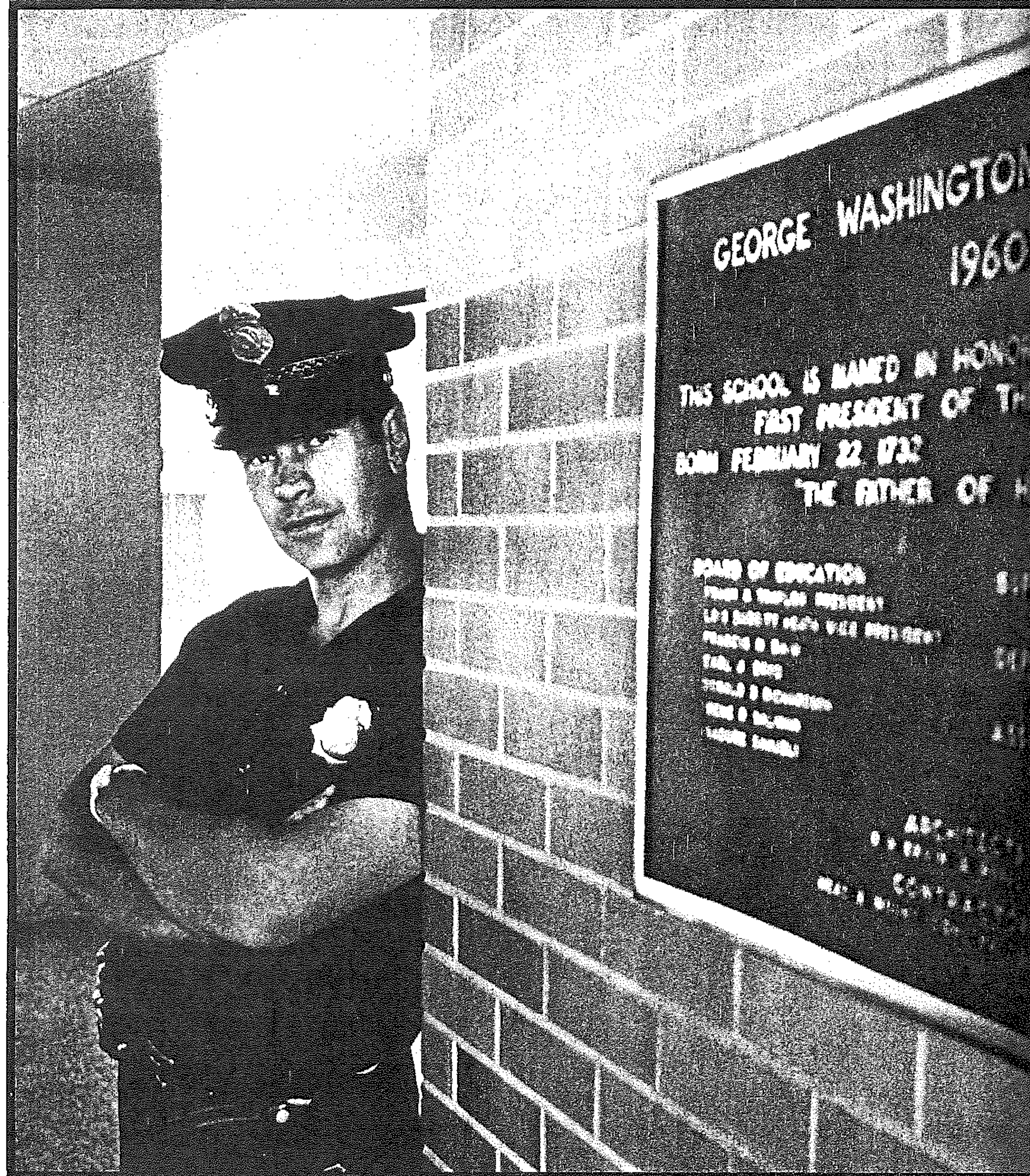
A high school fights for its life...



and a principal, for his

Three times since last September, riots have closed the school. All street doors are locked now, all comings are challenged. Squads of adults—teachers, parents and para-professionals—guard the corridors. From a concrete patio that evokes the exercise yard of a prison, students passing through corridors look like inmates en route to their cells. That is just how most of them feel.

Denver's George Washington High School hovers these days near a death of the spirit—a condition as suddenly American as myths of cherry trees and truth. Eighty-five percent of some 700 urban high schools recently surveyed had suffered one or more disruptions during the last three years. The turbulence masks what is quite possibly the most insidious social phenomenon shaping in America today. For almost a decade, our eyes have riveted on the college as the campus of discontent. It's now clear that much of the college community's taste for absolutes has been imported from high schools that addict students to the very authoritarian modes they at first detest.

There are no heroes in this story. It mixes white bigotry, black venom, legal rigidity, parental vanity, students who brutalize teachers, teachers who hide behind textbooks and a principal who, for a brief spell last fall, was all but immobilized by doubt.

You've got to see firsthand to believe what's happening

"I sometimes feel the whole world's at a costume party, and I wasn't invited," says Jack Beardshear, above, principal of Denver's most prestigious high school. It's his whimsical metaphor for a nightmare that began when a hair-pulling contest between a white and black girl flared to chaos. Occupation of the school by police ended only after a sit-in protest at the school board. Said attorney Edgar Benton, who led it: "We're talking about the survival of an institution."

TEXT BY LEONARD GROSS

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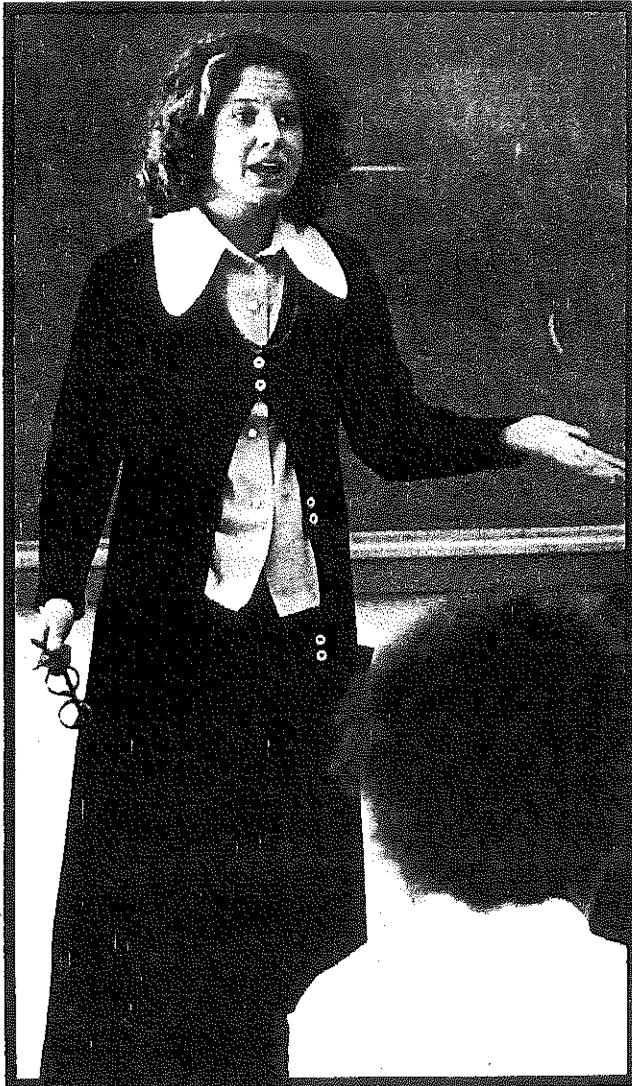


Like most of George Washington High School's brightest students, Judy Bershof, above, detests "structured" classes, rigid rules and fierce competition. "The faculty feels it has to control us and put us down. These are the things preventing me from getting knowledge. They're distracting. We know pretty well that we're going to make it. It's how we're going to make it that concerns us. We want to live."

"There's no feeling here. There's no belonging here."

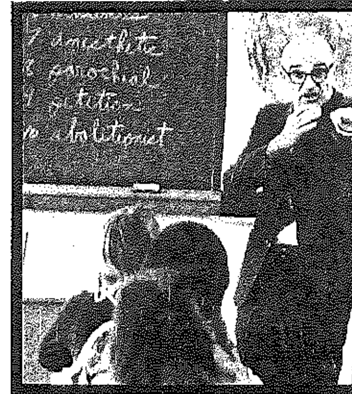
It probably had to happen. The people of Denver had elected new school-board members who promised to save them from busing. So involved did the board become in redeeming that pledge that no preparations were made for defeat. The court order compelling integration, which the board had sought to evade, hadn't considered that *some* black students would neither need nor want to move. Those blacks commanded to transfer "felt cheated," as one of them put it, "like The Man saying, 'Now that you've got your thing together, we're going to break it up.' " The blacks who arrived at George Washington knew they weren't wanted, and they were spoiling to fight. They did.

For all that, the black students might have taken to George Washington had it been a living school. "Nobody lives here," physics teacher Buel Robinson vouches, and on that point, there's full accord. There are over 3,000 students at GW, but only 73 bids were sold to the last homecoming dance. Off-campus pot parties win more support.

Part of the problem is a building so vast the construction foreman used roller skates on the job. But mostly, what turns students off is an imposed tradition for which parents blame teachers and teachers blame parents —an emphasis on academics at the expense of human development. "I could have learned so much this year if I'd just been permitted to know the other students," senior Gary Davis laments. Critics describe the school as a white suburban academic training camp. "The parents loved this school," says one mother. "It was structured to keep out undesirables." Teachers liked it too. At GW, they could teach Denver's most gifted, privileged kids. Some teachers had used the school as a vehicle out of the ghetto. Their new black students picked up on that at once. One bright newcomer told how her teacher, after explaining a point to the class, would ask her if she had understood.

But it was the academic reputation that most unsettled the incoming blacks. "There's no feeling here. There's no belonging here," Brian Fishburn, Jr., one of them, says. "The name of the game isn't education. It's beat the competition. They don't seem to be people so much as an act. It's like a refrigerator. If I were white, I'd say the same thing."

Jack Beardshear wanted to change the atmosphere. English teacher Jerry Protexter remembers: "He came to us two years ago and said, 'I had two daughters who went here, and they hated it. I'm your new principal.' "



"We prate about democracy," says Jack Beardshear, "but we don't practice it. The kids aren't free." What kids want are spontaneous encounters loaded with issues, like class above. What they mostly get are programmed lectures, which only consummate actors like Michael Mahonchak, far left, can pull off. Last spring, GW laid out a broad program to humanize the school. Riots killed it.

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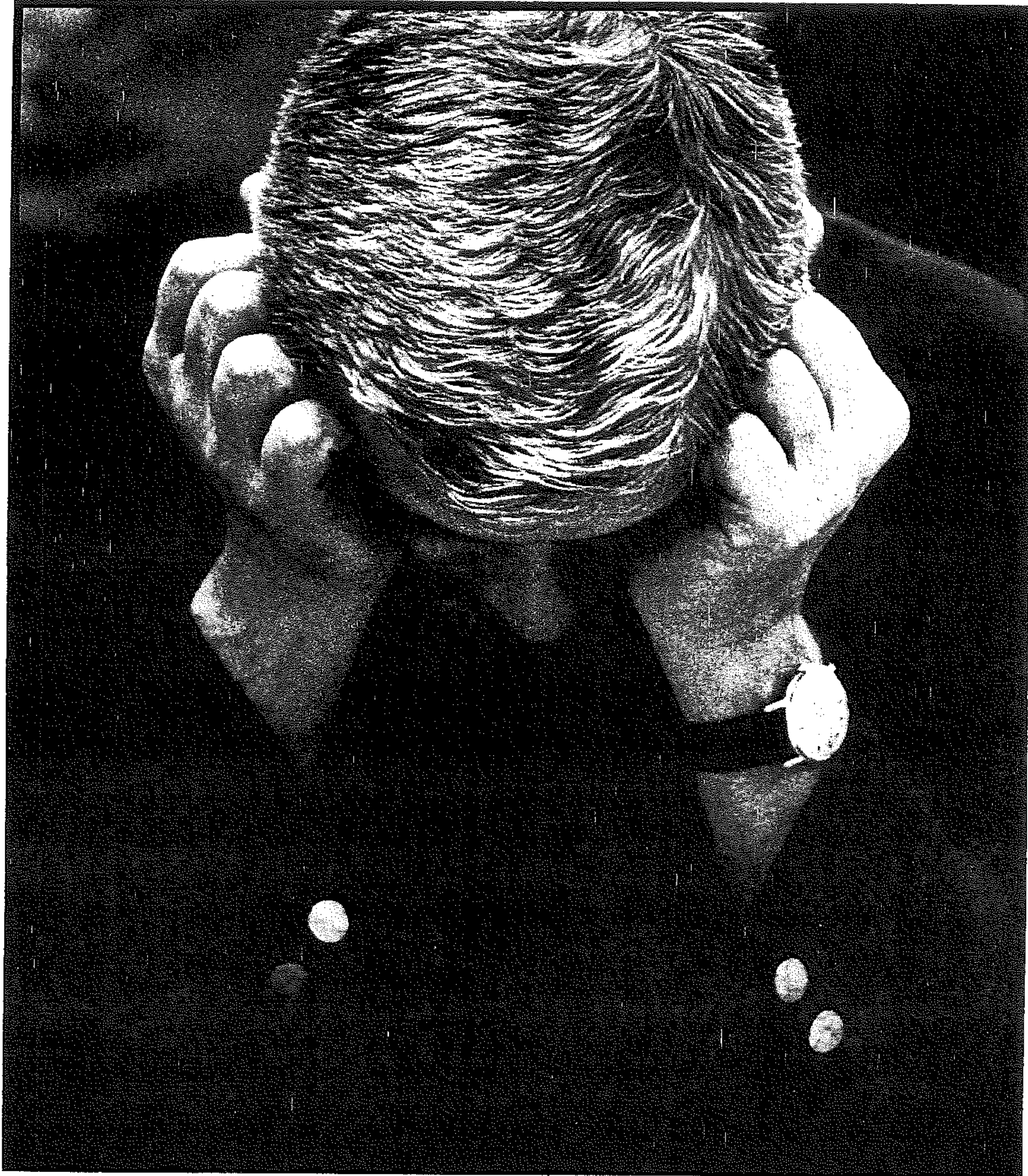


PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES H. KARALES

The blonde girl sat in the principal's office, tears creeping down her cheeks. The librarian had sent her to him because she'd acted up. "What's the matter, Jill?" the principal asked. "Why do you need to act out against everyone this year?"

"I'm really sick of high school," she answered.

"Jill, so am I," he replied.

A few months back, that was almost literally true. Jack Beardshear couldn't sleep. Some mornings he was so upset, he'd throw up. "It's a goddamn mess, and I hate it," he blurted at one point, "I hate going to work every day of my life."

Yet dealers in absolutes should proceed with care. Jack Beardshear is not easily typed. He dresses Ivy but chills great Bordeaux, looks like a golf pro but tears over Steinbeck. Throughout the fall, he delivered up contagious laughter while he was clinically depressed. Most contradictory is the reflexive integrity that blurts through his verbal defenses. Asked once what he did to relax, Jack Beardshear replied, "I drink."

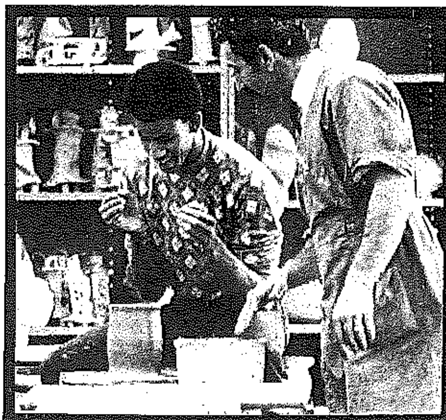
Beneath his fetching modesty lies a need to be liked and to lead, not for the sake of power but for the validation power provides. His long record as a principal has earned him the esteem he craves. "He wasn't assigned to GW because he had a poor work record. GW's the showcase," a consultant to the schools declares. Says contemporary-issues teacher Dick Jordan, a leader of GW's progressives, "I was so excited when he came to this school that I didn't know what to do."

What excited Jordan and others was Beardshear's one-to-one feeling for kids. He sees students as individuals, not as globs or groups. When one brilliant senior insisted on dropping out last year, Beardshear arranged to get him a diploma. The boy soon won a scholarship to Yale.

"We must predicate everything we do on kids' feelings," he says. "We need to do so much to let kids ventilate, enter into roles, see how other people feel. They wish the masks weren't there.

"You've got to concern yourself with the feelings of people much more than with curriculum adjustment. If teachers can ever make an adjustment to the feelings of kids, they can make a helluva lot relevant to them."

The unkindest thing said of Jack Beardshear is that he talks out of both sides of his mouth. That *could* be weakness; it could also be willingness—rare in this age of absolutes—to reach out to both sides in a fight.



Does he deal from weakness—or from willingness to hear both sides?

Riot postmortems showed almost total lack of preparation for blacks. "Everything we did was just kind of Band-Aid work," Jack Beardshear, left, reflects. "Somehow we've just got to do something about our inability to talk to one another." In gym and in classes like Mark Zamantakis', above, human chemistry begins.

Riots petrified teachers, but they all stayed on the job. Above, Beardshear summons his faculty to post-riot "meeting," surprises them with kegs of beer, a Dixieland band and a bow: "I owe you people so much."

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Jack Beardshear has mounted a daring, subtle game to save his school—so subtle most of his colleagues can't understand it. Some wonder if he understands it himself.

The Beardshear game—or non-game—is conceivably the elaborately contrived evasion of a man unwilling to act. But it is just as conceivably the only game that anyone can win. The game might be called "Being Human," and it homes in on the authority crisis besieging our schools.

"Our schools are now educating millions of students who are not forming an allegiance to the democratic political system simply because they do not experience such a democratic system in their daily lives at school," says Alan F. Westin, head of Columbia University's Center for Research and Education in American Liberties.

What Jack Beardshear is proposing goes to the heart of that issue: to change the authoritarian process by changing his own role first.

I cannot act, he is saying. I can only create a climate for action—and hope the teachers will act. In so doing, I am only treating teachers as I hope teachers will treat kids.

There are no experts yet in the handling of today's new demands. What makes Jack Beardshear valuable to the rest of us is that he has the humility to admit it. "I'm groping. I'm not a professional administrator. Everything I do is an experiment. I never sought this job. I never anticipated I could do it. All I *can* do is encourage teachers to believe that vulnerability isn't such a bad posture. As soon as you start to let down your defenses, life begins to open up."

What almost no one—students, least of all—appreciates is the threat this poses to most teachers. In effect, the Beardshear Game requires that students be taught the inevitability of change by some of the very people for whom change presents the greatest risks. Freedom can be frightening to people not used to it; those who have never been treated as humans might find the process unnerving.

There are some perfectly superb teachers at GW who resonate comfortably with kids; there are dozens more who, raised in authoritarian structures, cannot reach out at all.

What students fail to see is that the changes they seek can only be accomplished through these teachers. Students indulge themselves with unbridled fantasies of rebellion, but their teachers will not disappear.

Yet those same teachers might gratefully do what they must to lend substance to their roles, if they were given a dignified chance to do so. Threatened, they retreat to the trench of habit. Encouraged, they might modify to more contemporary ways.

A daring game could save his school, if teachers and students will play

Brief encounters are under way now at George Washington High School. Participants believe crisis exposed defects badly in need of airing. And Principal Jack Beardshear invokes the wisdom of Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

The first part of that process Jack Beardshear has correctly identified. Teachers must be treated as humans before they can treat others that way.

At some point in the Beardshear Game, teachers would step from behind their textbooks and ask the kids what they want. They might be surprised at how thoughtful some of those demands can be: schools within schools; one subject all day, even all month; three months on, one month off—the list is long. But what kids want most of all is that the democratic process be lived.

The solution is not to be found in absolutes. Students need *some* of the freedom George Washington tried to offer last year. But they need *some* of the structure the school in its zeal abandoned. They need an authority in which they participate. "We want the freedom to be involved in what we're learning—but we don't want to be cut loose," a Denver student observed recently. That is a memorable formula for change—and if events of recent weeks are any indication, a realistic one as well. As the new semester began, rapping teachers and students had begun to form what a school psychiatrist called "islands of health" as a basis for future growth. For the moment at least, the Beardshear Game had a chance to pay off.

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