

Family Practiced What They Teach

The Bornsteins bused their kids in the 70s and now operate a dual language charter school in Canoga Park.

Gayle Bornstein Nadler knows what it's like to be in the minority at a public school and to take a long daily bus ride to an unfamiliar neighborhood, as she did at age 9, back in the late 1970s.

Bucking the anti-busing sentiment of many other white families in their west San Fernando Valley neighborhood during Los Angeles' heated period of mandatory integration, Nadler's parents, Toby and Alan Bornstein, sent her and her little brother to a magnet school near USC.

"It was such a rich experience," said Nadler, despite some obstacles to forming new friendships with her mainly Latino and black classmates.

Two decades after Los Angeles' mandatory busing for integration ended, the Bornstein family opened a charter school built on the same ideals that put their youngsters on the bus — that diversity is important and valuable.

As the nation observes the 50th anniversary of the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, in which the Supreme Court struck down government-sanctioned separation of schoolchildren by race, the Multicultural Learning Center that the Bornsteins founded in Canoga Park is working to bring people together, despite language barriers and housing patterns.

But their experience also demonstrates how difficult it remains to achieve racial balance and to use nontraditional teaching methods while being evaluated like more conventional schools.

Compulsory busing in Los Angeles began in the fall of 1978. It was the result of a school desegregation court battle stretching back to 1963, one of many around the nation spawned by the *Brown* decision. It ended in the spring of 1981, brought down by a resoundingly popular state ballot initiative and an appellate court.

By then, many white families had fled to private schools or suburban districts — hastening the Los Angeles Unified School District's transformation into a predominantly minority system serving large numbers of poor and working-class families. And a Valley-based coalition called Bustop, formed in 1975, had risen to political power on the school board and elsewhere.

But the Bornsteins' belief in integration, and their young children's experiences in a minority elementary school far from home all those years ago, had planted the seeds for the now 3-year-old charter school.

"If we help children to learn together, to be at ease in another culture, they will grow up to be better people and help us live in a better world," Toby Bornstein said during a recent interview at the school's rented quarters at a Lutheran church.

Bornstein had taught in the 1960s at a South Los Angeles elementary school — then predominantly African American — before she left the classroom for full-time motherhood. She and her husband, a general contractor, strongly supported integration, sometimes drawing

hostility from other parents. In the spring of 1978, when Toby Bornstein, then a classroom and PTA volunteer, was working with some other parents to diffuse the mounting tensions over the coming busing program, she learned that many white families were planning a one-day boycott of their elementary school. She vowed to send her children to school that day.

As luck would have it, her daughter awoke that morning with a fever and sore throat. Her mother sent her to school, just for roll call, later to be wracked with guilt.

"'What am I doing?' I asked myself," Bornstein recalled. "'I am using my child as a tool to make a statement.' I felt terrible about it."

When the busing started that fall, the Bornsteins selected 32nd Street Elementary School — which offered a magnet program in performing arts, science and math — for Gayle, 9, and Steven, 6.

"I can remember standing in front of a mirror the night before school started, practicing how I would introduce myself to my new classmates," Nadler recalled. "I was so excited!"

Her mother's emotions were more mixed.

"It was hard to put my children through a difficult experience, but I felt this would make them better people, and I did not want them to grow up to be like some of the adults I was seeing around me" during the busing controversy, Bornstein said.

Gayle's delight in what she considered "a big adventure" soon was tempered with frustration. She was assigned to the school's only bilingual fourth-grade teacher, so most of her classmates spoke only Spanish.

"I wanted to make friends, but I couldn't speak the language," Nadler said. "A girl named Monica, who could speak both English and Spanish, let me follow her around the playground at recess, and she would translate for me. She became my best friend."

There were other complications. Neighborhood parents were reluctant to let their children go to the Valley for play dates and Gayle couldn't miss the bus home to visit her classmates' houses.

Still, Nadler treasured her time at 32nd Street school, and it strengthened her family's belief in diversity's value.

Years later, when the charter movement increased opportunities for alternative public schools, the Bornsteins opened their kindergarten-through-fifth-grade campus. It uses a "dual immersion" teaching method. Ninety percent of kindergarten and first-grade instruction is in Spanish, but that shifts until half the teaching is in English by fifth grade.

The school, which received a five-year renewable charter from L.A. Unified, is overseen by an independent, nonprofit board of directors. Its \$1.6-million annual budget comes mostly from state education funds; the school has raised about \$150,000 in private donations over the last

three years. The Bornsteins lent the school \$25,000 to get started and the amount has been repaid.

Alan Bornstein, who handled building projects for the new campus, died unexpectedly 19 months ago. His wife, who has an extensive background in education, is the school's executive director. Nadler, now 35 and the mother of two, handles fundraising, recruitment and public relations. Her daughter, Lexi, 6, attends kindergarten there.

"I could have put her in our very good, all-white, suburban school district, but that wasn't an option in my mind," Nadler said. "I want her to experience diversity ... and not have the language barrier that I did."

Spanish-speaking families, many of whom live within walking distance, like having their children learn English without having to give up their primary language first, Bornstein said. English-speaking families, who come from throughout the Valley, want their children to become bilingual.

"It was a strong leap of faith for us," Craig Anderson said of his and his wife's decision to enroll their son, Jack Henry Anderson, in kindergarten when the school opened in 2001. "But we loved the idea of him learning Spanish, and we thought it was good for him to learn about different cultures."

Marco Cerna, an engineer, has two children at the school, Josue in second grade and Celeste in kindergarten. He said he and his wife, both of whom are bilingual Latinos, were drawn by the opportunity to have their children taught in two languages.

But Cerna said they soon came to also appreciate the high caliber of teaching, the school's welcoming of parent participation and its intimate, caring and "bureaucracy free" atmosphere.

Bornstein and Nadler plan to add additional grade levels to the 218-student school as their pupils advance. Yet they are finding that diversity still can be a hard sell. Currently, 91% of students are Latino, 7% are white, and African Americans and Asians each account for 1%.

All students are enrolled through a single lottery system. With the school's location in a mainly Latino neighborhood, it has been a challenge to attain the ideal 50-50 mix of English-speaking to Spanish-speaking families. The ratio currently stands at 70% Spanish to 30% English, including some Latino families. The school is trying to even things out by recruiting more English-speaking families; this fall's kindergarten class will have a 52%-48% balance.

Another issue is standardized testing. Overall, the school earned a rank of 1 on last year's Academic Performance Index, placing it in the lowest of the state's 10 tiers.

The low ranking, however, does not reflect the substantial strides the school had made. It achieved an 84-point growth in its API score, well above the 15-point growth target set by the state. This occurred while most of the students were Spanish speakers taking a test in English.

Caprice Young, who leads the California Charter Schools Assn. and was a member of the L.A. Unified board of education that authorized the Multicultural Learning Center, said the school should be lauded for its "impressive growth" rather than its overall score.

"It speaks a lot to how committed she is to really solid academic achievement and student improvement," Young said, adding that Bornstein and other charter operators are sometimes penalized for "reaching out to kids who weren't being well served."

Test scores bothered some parents, Bornstein acknowledged. Others expressed concerns that their children might miss out academically if they have to learn a second language while trying to master subjects.

"I ask them to consider what kinds of educational experiences and opportunities they want for their children to have," Bornstein said. "And do they want them to be able to move comfortably through our diverse society?"