

PANCAKES, PLAYS, NOVELS & NBC THE ACKERMAN-WESTON FAMILY

If you ask the members of the Ackerman-Weston family what they love most about their time at WSMS, the answers all come back to creativity and the importance of play.

Lizzi and Emme Ackerman, now 29 and 26, have pursued different but highly creative careers, certainly influenced by parents who pursued their own dreams in the theater, television and literary world.

LIZZI

Spring 1989. Lizzi Ackerman, at two, was happily engaged in a neighborhood nursery school when her parents found out that the school was closing. Carol Weston, Lizzi's mom, called West Side Montessori School, which was only a few blocks farther away, and reached Judy Lyons, then in her first run as Director of Admissions. It was past admissions season and there were no open spots, but Judy agreed to meet with them. It must have been karma, since a few weeks later, a family dropped out and Lizzi had a place to go in the fall.

Lizzi credits Deirdre Kaufman (a long-time WSMS head teacher, who passed away too young of a heart attack) with changing her life. Lizzi arrived at WSMS having difficulty

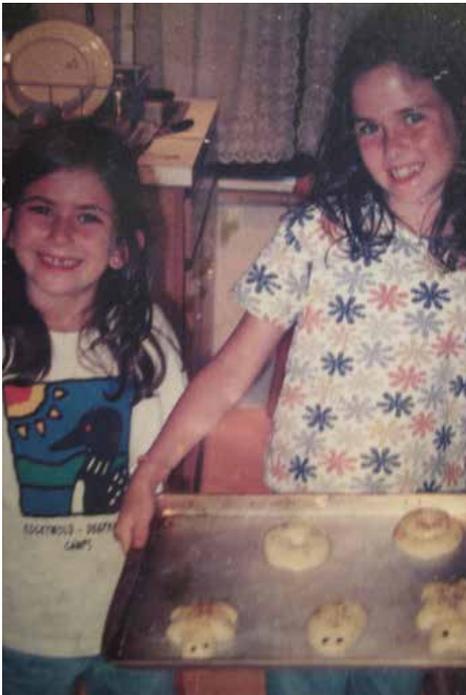




expressing herself. Deirdre helped the family seek speech therapy, while encouraging Lizzi to explore the classroom, and make new things by using art supplies and Montessori materials in nontraditional ways. And Deirdre always called Lizzi “a star.”

Trinity took her, and thirteen years later, so did Yale. Majoring in history of science and medicine, Lizzi intended to go to med school. After getting a post-bac at Columbia, she headed to Colorado to take organic chemistry (and ski between classes...). She was joined there by Matt LaCasse, her Yale boyfriend/now husband, who was working as a waiter and hoping to become an entrepreneur (and also skiing). One day they had a craving for pancakes, but realized that there was no way to make organic delicious pancakes except from scratch—and their kitchen wasn’t stocked with the right ingredients.

Click went the light bulb above their heads. The next few months were spent (when they weren’t working, skiing or in classes) exploring alternatives: What flour/sweetener/liquid/starch makes the best pancakes? What balance of ingredients works best? Double-blind taste tests (inspired by those chemistry courses?) identified the ideal contents for their first mix, and a local grocer, Lucky’s, gave them a place to experiment with mixes for sale until they found the right price/ingredient point. Now their company, Birch Benders, has fifteen different versions for sale nationwide in places like Whole Foods and Target and on their web site. And they are hard at work on a new product.



Although Lizzi does not credit her cooking abilities or food creation to WSMS, she does connect her persistence in trying so many different options, willingness to start again when something didn’t work, openness to suggestions and new approaches, and ability to work in a group, to the way Deirdre and her other teachers encouraged her in those early days.

EMME

Emme followed her sister to WSMS three years later. She has fond memories of walking in line, holding the railing, on the way to the “great big upstairs.” She loved “how the teachers took you seriously, made eye contact, built your confidence,” and how the multi-age classroom meant you could interact with older as well as younger kids...and even adults. Emme repeated a story her best friend’s father still tells about his first conversation with her in the Trin-



ity kindergarten. She sat next to him on a bench and interviewed him with the confidence of someone much older than five—and she credits her time at WSMS with instilling that ease.

To Emme, WSMS was where she learned life skills. Teachers did not “helicopter” but were there to help. They recognized that children learn in different ways and let them explore on their own terms. She remembers Windy as a big influence, and Joseph and Chrystal as well. And even after she moved on to Trinity, she and her close friends Julia Black and Mary Jane Sakellariadis would still stop by the Spring Fair; a favorite part was watching the parents play!

Emme majored in film/minored in Japanese at Middlebury and sang in an all-girl a cappella group which exemplified her WSMS background: mixed ages, learning from each other. She is now living in Brooklyn and working at NBC Universal in the News Archives Division.

CAROL AND ROB

It will come as no surprise that Lizzi and Emme have creative, focused and motivated parents, who credit WSMS with providing them as well as their daughters with a great beginning.

Rob Ackerman describes the WSMS parent body as “warm, fun, embracing, and in their own learning process,” and sees what he loved about WSMS reflected in his life

experience. Rob is a playwright who writes about people “trying and failing to work together.” His plays and musicals, including *Tabletop*, *Call Me Waldo* and *Volley-girls*, have been reviewed in the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine and other media. His “day job” since he moved to New York (after earning an MFA in stage direction at Northwestern) has been backstage, including 25+ years as prop master for *Saturday Night Live*, where he has worked with a diverse group of writers who (as he put it) “cover every permutation of human nature”—almost like a WSMS classroom! He is currently working on a play with Allen Davison, whom he met preparing chicken and collard greens for the Spring Fair.

As Rob says, the WSMS culture became part of their family: “The words ‘work’ and ‘play’ are interchangeable: work is energized by fun, and the serious side of play is recognized.” Even today Rob and Carol use the five-minute warning as a head’s up before dinner time. One will say to the other, “Five more minutes to finish your work and then it’s time to come to the group area.”

Meanwhile Carol Weston is the author of 16 books. Her first, *Girltalk*, has been published in a dozen languages; *From Here to Maternity* was a hit with WSMS parents when it came out in 1991; *Ava and Pip* and *The Di-*

ary of Melanie Martin series are highly popular with the fourth and fifth grade crowd; and the *New York Times* Book Review just called her latest, *Speed of Life*, the story of a young girl coping with the loss of her mother, “a funny, perceptive and moving new novel.” Carol has also been the “Dear Carol” advice columnist in *Girl’s Life* magazine since 1994 and has had over 45 letters to the editor published in the *New York Times*.

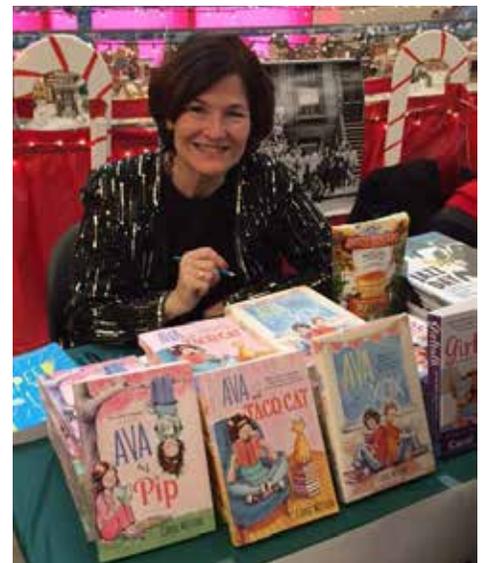
Carol has fond memories of the regular parent workshops hosted by the school’s psychological consultants. She loved the opportunity to sit with fellow parents after drop-off, enjoy a cup of coffee and share concerns and insights: “group therapy in the Parents Room.” As Carol says, “You didn’t have to be in crisis. We all benefited from a calm helpful hand.”

She shared a story about Deirdre recommending that Carol give Lizzi some special “mommy time” after Emme was born. Carol asked her three-year-old, “What’s something really special that you’d like to do, just us?” then secretly hoped Lizzi wouldn’t request something that was impossible to deliver. Lizzi thought hard and said she wanted to make “Little Mermaid” cookies. Perfect! They spent hours on end baking and decorating until...ta-da! A whole tray of green and red mermaids! Who knows? Deirdre’s suggestion just might have lit the spark that turned into Birch Benders!

This is a family whose ties to WSMS remain strong through long-time friendships and the impact of what they discovered about themselves and how to work with others. Their embedded creativity was enhanced by their time at school and is reflected in the myriad things they do and how well they do them.

LINKS YOU MIGHT FIND INTERESTING

<https://birchbenders.com>
<http://bit.ly/BirchBendersToday>
<http://www.carolweston.com>
<http://bit.ly/NYTSpeed>



THE WSMS STORY EVERYONE IN THE FAMILY TELLS

One afternoon, Carol’s trusted baby-sitter Matty walked in with Emme but not Lizzi. Carol and Matty stared at each other, wide-eyed. They’d gotten their signals crossed and each thought the other was picking up Lizzi. It was already ten minutes past pick-up, and Carol high-tailed it to school. When she entered the classroom, panting and apologizing, Lizzi and Deirdre were cheerfully engrossed in a Montessori project, and Deirdre lifted her hand to indicate that they wanted to finish the experiment and to please not add unnecessary stress. The family cites this story as emblematic of both Deirdre’s warmth, talent and understanding, and of the way the Montessori approach engages children while trying to help parents stay sane and happy too.

