



CHRISTOPHER COATS MANHATTAN

By Kevin Crook

As winter began to frost the rooftop play area at West Side Montessori School and children bundled up against the cold, Christopher Liu was outside with his friends in 4E, playing in the season's first snowflakes. But while he was enjoying the fresh cold feeling of snow melting on his face, he wondered what it must be like for people his age that were not wrapped in the safety of a nice winter coat.

"It was winter," recalls Christopher, squinting into this morning's warm June sun, "and people that didn't have coats were cold." Christopher is taking some time out from shooting a basketball to explain how he came up with the idea that became a revolutionary school-wide coat drive for infants and toddlers.

"Other people had coats," says Christopher, "but they had outgrown them. So I told Natalie [Christopher's teacher], 'People need coats, and we should have a coat drive.'"

Natalie suggested Christopher write a letter to Mimi about his idea, and so he wrote the following:

Dear Mimi
I have an idea it is getting cold lots of boys
and girls dont have coats. what do you think
of a coat drive?
Love Christopher

Mimi loved the idea, and thus began the WSMS winter coat drive.

"I counted [incoming coats] every day and wrote the total on a piece of paper," says Christopher, explaining how he kept track of the overwhelming wave of support for his drive. "People gave coats, hats, mittens, scarves—oh." He pauses for a moment. "Scarf."

"Scarf?" I ask him.

"There was just one scarf," says Christopher.

Christopher is quick to point out those who helped him make the coat drive a success. Every morning as children came to school, Christopher would stand with a friend to remind people about the drive.

"Leo [Della Penna] helped me make announcements," he says. "We had a sign up, but we made announcements just in case. Anna, Natalie, and Megan helped too."

When asked if he could put a number on how many coats finally came in, Christopher says, "I don't remember...a lot—56!"

All donated items from the winter coat drive were given to Baby Buggy, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing New York City's families in need with essential equipment, books, and clothing for their infants and young children.

I thank Christopher for his time and he says, "You're welcome. Can I play basketball now?*"

*Christopher has since requested the story mention that baseball is actually his favorite sport.

HOW WE B

Kate Doyle, the lively two-year-old daughter of Susanna and Boker Doyle, was going to need a nursery school soon. Unfortunately the Doyles had yet to find one that they loved...or that didn't involve a lengthy commute from their spacious apartment on West 106th Street. So, one fateful night in 1963, they gathered like-minded parents of toddlers around their dinner table and took a giant step.

The Doyles and their dinner guests (Larry and Olivia Huntington, Fritz and Marian Schwarz, Joe and Bay Wasserman, and Gil and Sarah Burke) were pioneering residents of what was considered at the time a risky place to live ...but the large apartments at low rents (\$196/month for 10 rooms!) attracted individuals who could articulate their needs and were willing to act to implement them. Not for them were the early childhood programs at churches and synagogues where the children seemed submissive to group authority or controlling adults or religious ritual. They wanted their children to have fun, for their first school to have "nice edges."

While on a family trip to Ohio in 1962, the Doyles had been captivated by a visit to a Montessori school founded by a friend. Already familiar with Maria Montessori's the-

ory of education, Susanna Doyle and Bay Wasserman got to work, visiting Caedmon (brand new) and Whitby (the first Montessori school in the United States, located in Greenwich, CT). This was it: Montessori was "innovative, progressive, and readily adaptable to the diverse needs and lifestyles of families" on the Upper West Side.

The dinner party cemented the commitment of the five couples as partners in the founding of the West Side Montessori School.

It's easy to say that the West Side Montessori School was an idea waiting to happen in 1963, and indeed the school's founders were fortuitously positioned to identify and embrace a need and use their skills, talents, and backbone to turn it into the exceptional institution it is today.

To assess interest they posted flyers on lampposts and supermarket bulletin boards, inviting neighbors to a "town meeting"; 150 people showed up, and 60 families were willing to commit to funding the school for the 10 projected spaces. They hired Elizabeth Hopkins, the Montessori-trained Swedish sister-in-law of the Doyles' Ohio friend, who just happened to be moving to New York. In a few quick months they were affiliated with the American

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By Tina Connolly, WSMS parent '90, '96, '97, '00 & former trustee

Montessori Society, licensed by the city, and open for business with 15 students in a room they shared with the Children’s Aid Society on 104th and Columbus. The founders ran the school from Susanna’s kitchen.

The next years were a time of furious growth. By 1972 WSMS had 215 students and 25 teachers, was receiving public funding through the Agency for Child Development, and had 25% of the families receiving financial aid. To accommodate growth in the student body and the addition of afternoon and all-day sessions, WSMS moved to the Young Israel Temple on West 91st Street (where the kosher kitchen complicated lunch menus), to the Parish House of St. Michael’s Church on West 99th Street, and finally in 1974 to our current location.

For the first ten years the original founders did everything: created an application form and went to each child’s home to interview him in his own space; helped parents identify the right next school; hired and fired. One notable addition to the staff was a Mrs. Safier, the “Becky Bonelli” of the day, who could be “quite disagreeable” on the phone!

And WSMS was more than just an exceptional place for children. The founders, longtime friends (from child-

hood, from college), saw it as a place for adults, too. Initially they limited applications to families living between 66th and 105th Streets so there would be a feeling of neighborhood and parents could get to know each other well. They sponsored lectures on early childhood; one, held at a hotel and set up for 100 attendees, attracted 500 people!

They held street fairs on West 99th Street, and inadvertently held the first Auction as a result. The Doyles once again hosted a dinner to celebrate the day. Confronted with a substantial mound of uneaten hot dogs, Boker had the inspiration to auction them off at the table. Some \$200 later, Larry Huntington offered his tie to the highest bidder and raised \$300. The next year the first Annual WSMS Auction was formally on the calendar.

The children of the Doyles, Burkes, Wassermans, Huntingtons, and Schwarzes moved on from WSMS, and as the school grew explosively, it became clear that professional management was essential. Susanna Doyle left the Board in 1972, quipping that “WSMS will be the only thing on our tombstones.” One could argue that this would be a pretty impressive epitaph!