

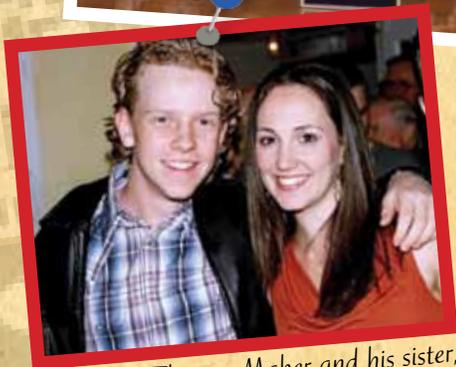
Thomas Maher



Julia Cohen at WSMS in 2002



Julia Cohen practices Montessori philosophies working with WSMS kids...



Thomas Maher and his sister, Jamie Bonelli McMahan



Back Where It All Began: Three Alums Return to WSMS

Thomas Maher, Molly Connelly, and Julia Cohen

What do this 18-year-old, this 16-year-old, and this 13-year-old have in common? Each had a “great beginning” at WSMS and returned years later to help out at the school, thus playing a role in ensuring a great beginning for the children who have followed.

Thomas Maher (WSMS Class of '97), son of longtime WSMS receptionist Becky Bonelli, has just begun his freshman year at Fordham University this fall. But Thomas has been a familiar face at West Side for many years. During his time as a student here, Joan Shisler and Marcia Polanco were among his favorite teachers. (Naptime was less of a hit with him; he dubbed it “the curse of nursery”!) While at Hunter, Thomas would often spend his holidays and afternoons at WSMS, in the classroom as a special assistant or at the front desk, helping his mom.

Thomas’s involvement with WSMS became a more structured commitment when he was in high school. To fulfill Hunter’s community service requirement, Thomas chose to volunteer several hours a week working with children at WSMS in the fall of 2009. Initial hesitancy turned into enthusiasm: Thomas found himself looking forward to his interactions in the classroom. When he returned to WSMS this past spring to work as afternoon receptionist during his last term at Hunter, Thomas enjoyed seeing his little friends again.

Thomas is currently leaning toward a career in business, and he credits WSMS with providing the foundation for his college studies and, ultimately, his career: “I didn’t realize until now what a positive impact [WSMS] had on what I am doing today...how important early learning is. [I can see] bits and pieces in my current interest in learning.” His experience with the kids at WSMS has prepared him for another important job as well: being an uncle to his four-month-old niece Bonnie (daughter of Thomas’s sister, Jamie, WSMS Class of '88, and first grandchild of Becky).

Becky has seen literally thousands of children graduate from WSMS over the years, but the school’s mission has remained unchanged. “Even when my daughter Jamie was applying, way back in 1985, WSMS had the reputation of being a magical early childhood school—where kids were respected and encouraged to explore and learn at their own pace,” Becky says. “Both Thomas and Jamie developed some lasting habits of mind and values at WSMS, and I learned some dynamite parenting skills. I’ve been so fortunate to be a part of this community, first as a parent and now as a staff member, and hopefully soon as a grandmother. WSMS indeed lives up to its promise of providing kids with an exceptional educational beginning—one that gives them a strong foundation for a lifetime of learning.”

Sixteen-year-old Molly Connelly was the fourth in her family to attend WSMS, so she started making daily appearances at school when only a few months old. Now a student at boarding school, Molly made daily appearances once again this summer as an essential part of WSMS Summer Camp: at the front desk, welcoming campers and their parents or caregivers as they arrived every morning; in the classroom, where she was delighted to see familiar Montessori materials



Molly Connelly greets students for summer camp



Molly Connelly reads WSMS campers a story



Molly Connelly aspires to be a professional singer



Julia Cohen with her grandmother at WSMS



in beautifully and ecologically updated settings; and outside WSMS, escorting campers on swimming lessons and other outings. Her favorite moment of every day was “walking into the classroom and having the kids shout my name.”

Molly aspires to sing professionally, and she delighted in teaching the children new to WSMS such lyrics as “we’re at the corner...” and “turning the corner...” Although the songs she wrote and recorded this summer are aimed at an older audience, perhaps she’ll be back at WSMS in a few years, sharing her talent in those music classes up in the gym.

Molly’s mom, Tina Connelly, marveled at seeing her daughter back at WSMS in this new context. She recalls, “I loved bringing her the occasional Starbucks and watching her interactions at the front desk with children and parents. It was exciting as a parent to see Molly so clearly comfortable in a role that required maturity, diplomacy, and enthusiasm!”

Julia Cohen (WSMS Class of ’02), an 8th-grade student at Columbia Grammar, is an avid equestrian and tennis player, but she leaped at the opportunity to spend time back in the WSMS classrooms this summer. When asked why she felt drawn to working at WSMS, she replies simply, “I love working with younger children. I worked with them in my After School program at Columbia Grammar, so I thought this would be a good way to spend some time this summer.”

Julia says that the best part of her experience this summer was being in the classroom with the children and working with the teachers, some of whom she had known earlier. “It was the same activities—some were exactly the same—and it was nice to be in the classrooms because I remember being there and doing the activities,” she explains. “I especially loved the

sewing work when I was little, and the pouring work, and I loved seeing the children using them again now.” She also enjoyed helping the children learn to use familiar materials, like buttons and zippers, and she was impressed with the renovated classrooms.

Like Molly and Thomas, Julia embraces the Montessori philosophy: You don’t tell a child what to do, but rather acknowledge her/his ability to be independent and make a decision. But when asked about her greatest challenge this summer, she mentions a child who spilled yogurt on herself and then refused to change her clothes!

Julia’s mom, Elizabeth Cohen, appreciates the continuity between attending WSMS as a student and working there alongside the teachers. She says, “When Julia started school, we were so happy to be sending her off to WSMS, where we knew she would be respected and appreciated for who she was. Ten years later, we couldn’t have been happier that she was getting her first work experience in that same environment. She loved going off to WSMS every morning, this time on her own!”

The skill and confidence with which Julia, Molly, and Thomas have interacted with children in the classroom reinforces how important and long-lasting early childhood experiences are. Each of them knew instinctively how to use the varied materials in the classroom, how to give students gentle direction while allowing them the chance to figure out what to do. And each of them is building upon the strong foundations of their own WSMS experiences in forging unique and exciting academic and personal opportunities—a priceless gift at any age.