

SEEING A NEED AND MAKING IT HAPPEN: The Story of the Hippo Playground

Even before they enroll their children, WSMS parents often have the “let’s make a difference” gene. It started with our five founding families and continues to this day.

In the spring of 1988, Anna Sakellariadis was about six months old and her mother Julie was looking for somewhere to make connections with other parents (and use her consulting skills). Spotting a sign for a meeting of the Playground Project, the rest is, as they say, history.

In the late 1970’s, the 91st Street playground was a common hangout for the neighborhood homeless, having two entry points and convenient bathrooms. Local parents with young children found this discomfiting—and scary. The Playground Project committee formed to make things better. They approached the city Parks Department, which agreed to lock one gate and provide attendants (who later worked with the homeless to allow access to the bathrooms at times that did not interfere with the needs of small children). They initiated the annual Halloween Parade and Spring Festival, both still popular and successful events.

As the parent of an infant, Julie was warmly accepted by parents whose kids were “aging out” of the playground, and she became more involved. Questioning the future of the broken fountain in the middle of the playground, she found herself in charge of finding a better way. She quickly realized that small children wanted more than a sprinkler to cool them on hot days: for very young children the process of filling a bucket of water was mesmerizing entertainment!

One day Calleen King Letaconnoux, whose son Max was Anna’s age and who, like Julie, was looking for a way to be involved and meet other parents with similar interests and backgrounds, came to a Playground Project meeting. The two mothers found a common goal in upgrading their local playground.

DEFINING THE ELEMENTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

They soon discovered that Henry Stern, then

Parks Commissioner, was a sucker for animals. Visiting family in St. Louis, Julie went to the local zoo and was fascinated by the way children played on and about a life-size statue of a hippo. Contacting the artist, Bob Cassilly*, they brainstormed ways to combine hippos with water to replace the faulty sprinklers in the center of the playground.

Of course, nothing is simple, and there were some protests from parents who feared that hippos in the center of the playground would absorb important open space. They also worried about the effect on trees, which were already showing signs of deterioration. Julie and Calleen engaged an arborist who identified the issue and recommended expanded tree pits, and the trees are still flourishing more than 20 years later.

Julie describes West Side Montessori as among their most enthusiastic supporters. She cites input from Suzanne Peebles—at the time Associate Head of School at WSMS and now Head of the Lower School at Brooklyn Heights Montessori, who helped them analyze how kids used the playground space: they noted that children never stayed in the open middle space—they crossed from swings to slides to climbing apparatus.



TURNING A GREAT IDEA INTO REALITY

Meanwhile Calleen put her expertise to work at fundraising. When Robert Moses famously built playgrounds all over New York City (the 91st Street playground opened in 1937), money wasn't an issue, but fiscal problems in the '60s meant an end to renovations and upgrades, not to mention regular park attendants. In the early '90s the Parks Department was renovating one playground every four years, and the cost was astronomical. Calleen and Julie came up with a budget of \$240,000 and got to work.

They quickly learned that fundraising is really "friend-raising." They solicited donations through the quarterly newsletter of the Playground Project, by networking (they personally visited every building in the neighborhood), by reaching out to then Assembly Member Ronnie Eldridge, by amping up the income-generating opportunities of the Spring Fair.

The Hippo Playground opened in 1993. Bob Cassilly and the Playground Project were awarded the Arts Commission Award for Design Excellence at City Hall. Their children (Anna was joined by Sophie, Mary Jane and John, and Max by Isabelle) and those of countless families—and school children—throughout the Upper West Side had a state-of-the-art playground and a destination place to have fun.

SECURING THE FUTURE

Julie and Calleen knew their job wasn't done—they had to ensure that the playground would survive and thrive. The Playground Project began to fund the attendant (it already funded a security phone), to ensure that city financial issues would not affect safety. As they transitioned out, they handed the responsibilities on to their successors. As Julie says, "Public-private partnership works in New York City. What matters is having stakeholders run things."

Over the years the Hippo Playground has had various upgrades, including recent renovations to the Park house, which is available to rent for parties and events. There are swings with safety surfacing, wooden play equipment and slides, green metal play equipment, a spray shower, picnic tables, benches, sand pit, a drinking fountain, and public restrooms. And it's still the go-to place for our children.

THE SAKELLARIADIS FAMILY

For the Sakellariadis family, West Side Montessori was definitely where to begin ... Julie describes WSMS as the perfect school for her children—especially for John, who thrived at being able to work on something for as long as he needed to by placing his name on the mat next to his work. Their favorite teachers include Windy, Neeta and Joan, and they all still remember their WSMS days with great fondness.

All four Sakellariadis children went from WSMS to Trinity to Harvard. Anna, now 27, earned a master's at the Yale School of Forestry and works in Washington, DC, at Sun Edison, a global renewable energy corporation. Sophie, 26, works in San Francisco for Stripe, a tech company that enables businesses to accept payment online and through mobile devices. Mary Jane, 25, lives in Paris and works for Value Retail. Her next stop may be Shanghai. And, John, at 21, is a senior at Harvard, where he runs the grill at Dunster House in his spare time!

In addition to her myriad family and volunteer obligations over the years, Julie has put her energy into supporting her love of nature. She is currently Vice Chair of the New York Botanical Garden, Chair of Strategic Planning and Co-Chair of the



Botanical Science Committee, and Second Vice President of the Garden Club of East Hampton, in charge of Community Gardens and an orchid monitoring and conservation project on the South Fork.

Her husband, Nick, who retired after a long career at Citibank, most recently as Managing Director in the Mergers & Acquisitions Department, is the proud owner of the Dayton Dragons, a single A minor league baseball team affiliated with the Cincinnati Reds. *Maybe dragons are the ancestors of hippos?*



THE LETACONNOUX FAMILY



Like the Sakellariadis family, for Calleen and Francois Letaconnoux there was never any doubt about their number one choice for preschool. As Calleen says, “WSMS is such a huge part of the preschool community of our neighborhood. It embodied the open and intellectual spirit of the Upper West Side and was in a strong geographic comfort zone.”

Max loved making chocolate truffles for the Spring Fair. Calleen remembers gathering a big group of kids in their kitchen to make them. A large percentage of the chocolate landed on their faces and hands, but it was fun, and the truffles were a huge hit at the Spring Fair.

As a toddler Isabelle usually accompanied them when Max was dropped off at school, and when she had her admissions interview, she assumed that school was starting for her, and planned to stay for the day, and every day after that. Her best memories are of her freedom to leave class and go upstairs to visit Max in his classroom. She felt right at home at WSMS instantly.

Max, now 27, left WSMS for Collegiate and graduated from the University of Rochester. He is now the general manager of Noux Sound Music Productions, where he builds on his previous experience at AOC/BOD Productions composing original music for commercials, recording/mixing voice-over talent, and managing various aspects of recording sessions.

Isabelle, 25, attended Brearley, graduated from NYU, and then taught English in China. She is now Head of Content at Fancy.com, an international social shopping platform, which allows users to post pictures of items they wish to own. Users can purchase products that they see directly from the website, which acts as an intermediary between the consumer and the retailer.

Calleen had a busy Wall Street career but still found time to be an active volunteer at WSMS, Collegiate and Brearley. Now retired, she serves on the International Board of Regents of Bethlehem University, whose mission is to provide quality higher education to the people of Palestine and to serve them in its role as a center for the advancement, sharing and use of knowledge.

Francois is the CEO of Lepercq de Neuflyze & Co., a firm which advises U.S. and international clients on investments and wealth management. He is also a member of the boards of several organizations, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music.



WSMS REAPS THE BENEFITS

Riverside Park and the 91st Street playground had long been a go-to destination for WSMS classes; teachers would take advantage of clear weather and stroll down the hill to use up some energy on the swings and climbing equipment.

But, it was the remarkable transformation into the Hippo Playground that brought sparks to the eyes of children—they loved seeing the mama hippos and their offspring, climbing on and around them, especially the ones “swimming” in the concrete (and therefore easy to climb on). WSMS trustees and many WSMS parents contributed to the fundraising in the early ‘90s.

Generations of WSMS children have been enthralled and engaged by the hippos that Julie and Calleen made possible with their commitment to making a difference in the lives of neighborhood children. Today our Parents Association supports the annual spring “SandSational” program by encouraging WSMS families to volunteer for the family bucket brigade, transferring new sand into the sandbox. This year’s event was held on April 11, and featured a strong turnout by WSMS families. The event was co-chaired by Tomomi Friedman and Bradley Honan.

*Bob Cassilly was a talented and eccentric sculptor, entrepreneur and creative director. This article in St. Louis Magazine was published after his death in 2011. <http://www.stlmag.com/Deconstructing-Bob-Cassilly/>