

INSPIRING IMPACT

The Mullen Family's Unwavering Generosity

by Ankur Keswani, WSMS Board of Trustees Development Chair and Allison Kohrs, Director of Development

For over 60 years, West Side Montessori School has been the educational foundation for thousands of NYC children, creating opportunities for the future. Children learn how to learn at WSMS. One family who intimately understands this idea is Amanda and Don Mullen.

The Mullen family's history with WSMS dates back to the 1990s, when Don's three oldest daughters, Sara, Annie, and Isabelle, attended WSMS; Amanda and Don Mullen's son, Freddie, attended the Twos program just three years ago. Their longstanding relationship with the school is matched by their extraordinary generosity, donating \$360,000 in the last two years.



Freddie's 21–22 WSMS Yearbook Photo

As WSMS reflects on its history, we recognize our alumni community for their continued altruism and stewardship. Allison Kohrs and Ankur Keswani (our Director of Development and our WSMS Board of Trustees Development Chair, respectively) had the privilege of spending some time with Don Mullen and his daughter, Annie, who spoke about the importance of their philanthropic mission

and their experiences at WSMS and what makes WSMS so special. They were both struck by how the Mullens' love and gratitude for WSMS continues to shine through, even after all these years.

Annie, who from WSMS went on to Riverdale, Yale, and NYU, still cherishes the formative years she enjoyed at WSMS. In her words, "WSMS was a place to be a kid, a little sanctuary in New York City ... a special sanctuary for kids. WSMS is the place to be a kid and not realize that you are actually learning." Annie greatly appreciates the warm and wonderful educational foundation she received at WSMS, and how it prepared her for her ongoing school years. Don's fondest memories from WSMS were dropping off his daughters in their classrooms and spending time in the library getting to know our amazing parent community ... something he missed when Freddie attended in 2021–2022 with Covid restrictions.

In Don's view, the biggest impact that WSMS had on his children's lives was the foundation it built for their lifelong love of learning. He also feels WSMS is unique in the educational field for providing the essential combination of nurturing and learning in perfect balance. "Other schools are either nurturing, but you aren't learning as much, or there is learning, but it is not nurturing. It's that balance that really differentiates WSMS over all the other schools my kids have been to." WSMS has been the only school (pre-K and ongoing) where his family has experienced "the kids learning so much in a nurturing environment," and Don noted that, "frankly, I wish there were more schools, further along in a child's life, that were like that."

"In some ways," Don added, WSMS is also "a secretly demanding school. The kids don't realize how demanding the process is "as they learn math, reading, and other foundational skills while engaged in play. WSMS is making them learn without them feeling like they are learning—it's secretly demanding ... The school's process gives the kids a sense of respect and independence."

We asked Don and Annie about the Mullen philanthropic mission, which has also become a large part of their lives. As the family's fortunes evolved, Don said, "What became apparent to us is that we wanted to focus our philanthropy on institutions that have been an important part of our family's life or the community that we have raised our children in."

Annie spoke about how her father's journey shaped both his view and her and her siblings' opinions about the importance of philanthropy. According to her, Don views his journey as "deliberately lucky." Having worked hard to achieve his position in life, Don also acknowledges that he got to where he is today because of luck and all the help he received along the way. One aspect of that help was his full scholarship to Yale. Don's father, an elevator repairman, and his mother, a school teacher, would never have been able to send him to Yale without such assistance. Annie said that when Don arrived at college, he realized he was at a disadvantage; his peers had attended schools that prepared them for the rigors

WSMS Yearbook photos from the 90s of Don's three daughters



Sara



Annie



Isabelle

and expectations of such an institution, and he had not. That experience at Yale made a strong impression on him, as he realized that the best education starts at a very young age.

The Mullen family became vested in supporting educational institutions and helping others have the same opportunities and experiences that they did. As Annie said, "We want to help open doors for others who didn't even realize such doors existed for them. At WSMS, children gain a love for learning and confidence while having fun. Our dad realizes how critical that was for us, and wants us to give back to the community that was there for us."

In line with their expressed values, the Mullen family has been a major contributor to the Annual Fund at WSMS; they annually sponsor four full scholarships at Yale, and are major contributors to the High Line in Manhattan.

In Don's words, "West Side is an amazing experience for the child and the parent. It is a New York institution; we want other families to experience this wonderful school. WSMS checks every box of our giving mission."

WSMS is committed to our robust financial aid program of \$1.5 million, supporting 20% of our families. Remarkably, 99% of students receiving aid continue to independent schools, where they are awarded financial assistance, opening doors to their next academic chapter. Our exceptional early childhood education prepares all WSMS students to thrive in new schools, equipped to think creatively and critically, engage with the world through kindness and empathy, and succeed academically.

We are so grateful to the Mullen family and our community of alumni families, grandparents, friends, and current parents who enable WSMS to be ... where to begin!

Where the Mullen Kids are now

Sara (age 32) attended Riverdale after WSMS and is now

working as a veterinary technician at an emergency clinic in Maine.

Annie (age 31) also went to Riverdale after WSMS, followed by Yale for undergrad and NYU for grad school. She's currently part of the Business Development team at Pretium Capital and recently married this summer.

Isabelle (age 30) went on to The Brearley School from WSMS and completed her undergrad at Yale. She's recently graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and is currently an Internal Medicine Resident at Weill Cornell.

Freddie (age 5) is the youngest and is currently attending pre-K at The Cushman School in Miami.



A recent photo of the Mullen girls, clockwise: Katarina Mesarovich (their youngest sister), Annie, Don, Sara, Olivia Defechereux Dejah (an WSMS alum and life long friend of Annie and Isabelle) and Isabelle.



