



Olivia Kim and James Lochart and their daughters, Evelyn and Kathryn

# PARENT TO PARENT: WSMS'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO ADMISSIONS INTERVIEWS

by Olivia Kim (Evelyn Lochart '06, Kathryn Lochart '10)

The hysteria surrounding the preschool admissions process in New York City is so legendary that friends on the West Coast have asked me about it. In the fall of 2002 my husband and I were dutifully filling out our applications and taking tours, often noticing some of the same glassy-eyed parents we'd seen only a few days before at another school. When it came to the admissions interviews, I once caught myself pausing in front of my open closet, pondering the mission of that day's school as it related to the items in my wardrobe. Imagine our surprise and delight, then, when we walked into West Side Montessori School for our interview and were warmly greeted by...a parent. Just a plain old friendly parent. I've forgotten her name, but I will never forget the half hour James and I spent with her, relaxing and chatting about WSMS. To be honest, James and I were already sold on the place, but nine years later that interview stands out in my memory as a shining example of why WSMS was our first choice for our older daughter, Evelyn.

As is the case at most preschools, there are countless ways parents can become involved at WSMS, from serving as a class rep to working on the annual Auction or Spring Fair. What sets WSMS apart is its involvement of parents in the interview phase of the admissions process. These interviewers meet individually with parents of applicants throughout the admissions season and share their observations with Director of Admissions Suzanne Day (herself a former WSMS parent), who factors these comments into her overall evaluation of each applicant. That WSMS has been conducting interviews this way for as long as anyone can remember speaks volumes about both the school's ongoing trust in its parent body and the parents' eternal loyalty to the school.

From the prospective parents' point of view, being interviewed by a current WSMS parent makes for a much more relaxed meeting. Chris Leon and Tina Stege, whose older daughter, Kiepp, will be starting at WSMS in the fall, had an experience similar to mine.

“Once we got there, it didn’t feel like an interview; it felt more like a conversation with someone who was interested in the same things we were,” Tina recalls. “A lot of it had to do with the school, but the interview never felt structured, and I found the process very enjoyable, relaxed, and informative, and that made me want to go to this school.”

“The fact that it was a parent interviewing us never struck me as out of the ordinary. If anything, it struck me as the way interviews *should* be done,” Chris adds. “Talking to a current parent made us feel that the person really understood what we were asking, what we wanted to know about the school.”

Having served as a parent interviewer in the 1980s, Mary Sachs (Andrew ’80, Chris ’83, and Tim ’86; see “Some Things [Happily] Never Change: The Sachs Family Looks Back” on Page 16) brings a historical perspective to the discussion, reminding us that WSMS was founded by parents.



Catherine McKinley and her daughter, Shalom

“I COULD TALK ABOUT MOMENTS WHEN I HAD A CONCERN AT THE SCHOOL, AND IT WAS NICE TO BE ABLE TO REPORT HOW WELL THE SCHOOL ADDRESSED IT.”

- CATHERINE MCKINLEY



I got a chance to occupy the other chair in the room when I was asked to serve as a parent interviewer in 2005. I gladly accepted then, and served again in 2008, while my younger daughter, Kathryn, was a student at WSMS. I can say without hesitation that it was the most rewarding volunteer work I performed at the school. To be able to meet with prospective parents and answer their questions while also sharing my sincere high regard for WSMS was truly a pleasure.

Catherine McKinley (mother of Ephrem Davis ’09 and current student Shalom Davis) volunteered as a parent interviewer for a year, and she points out how parent-to-parent interviews allow for more forthright exchanges: “I was really candid about a lot of things, and I think the parents appreciated that. I could talk about moments when I had a concern at the school, and it was nice to be able to report how well the school addressed it. Also, my kids are in LAP, so I could talk about my own feelings about a nanny vs. LAP, and those kinds of things.”

Henna Haque (mother of current student Rania and Amira, entering WSMS this fall) served as a parent interviewer last year, and places the interviews in the context of the preschool application process: “All these parents are seeing a bunch of schools, and they’re looking for a feeling of affinity with a school—they want to see if their family is going to fit in. So they definitely appreciated getting to meet with someone who could give them insights about how it all works, how parents come together, what the expectations are.”

That affinity is most certainly a mutual goal, and given the extent to which parents at WSMS work together on a wide range of school events and committees, it makes perfect sense for current parents to participate in the admissions process in this way. Down the road it’s gratifying to interact with parents you once interviewed, whether by volunteering alongside them or by becoming friends with them.



Chad Gifford and Betsy Morgan and their daughter, Lake



While the school has changed in innumerable ways since Mary's sons were students here, the home-school connection that WSMS prizes today was just as vital then. "I think the strong participation of parents—while the classroom is run by professionals—is important, especially given the ages of the children," Mary observes. "Ideally the amateur and professional elements of a school exist in a healthy balance. The proven ability to maintain that balance is one of the things that differentiates WSMS from other schools, and it benefits the children in at least two ways: the school reflects the parents' values, and the child is particularly comfortable and secure sensing his parents' enjoyment and involvement. If Mom or Dad likes it, it must be good."

The "everybody wins" nature of the process is neatly summed up by veteran parent interviewer Chad Gifford (father of Lake '10): "WSMS's decision to have current parents interview applicant parents benefits everyone involved. Being a parent interviewer is a great way to give back to the school that's doing such an amazing job educating your child; it's also enjoyable to meet so many parents, some of whom will be a part of the WSMS community. If you're a parent applying to the school, these interviews give you a one-on-one insider's view that is more spontaneous and open than your typical meeting with an admissions officer. In short, it's a wonderful system, and I'd be hard pressed to come up with a show of parental support more compelling than this team of parents who gladly show up week after week to tell applicant parents how much they love this school."

In terms of best serving the needs of prospective parents and the school, Director of Admissions Suzanne Day explains how this process enables WSMS to maintain an

"I'D BE HARD PRESSED TO COME UP WITH A SHOW OF PARENTAL SUPPORT MORE COMPELLING THAN THIS TEAM OF PARENTS WHO GLADLY SHOW UP WEEK AFTER WEEK TO TELL APPLICANT PARENTS HOW MUCH THEY LOVE THIS SCHOOL." - CHAD GIFFORD



Chris Leon and Tina Stege and their daughters, Kiep and Malolae

"TALKING TO A CURRENT PARENT MADE US FEEL THAT THE PERSON REALLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT WE WERE ASKING, WHAT WE WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE SCHOOL."

- CHRIS LEON

unusually large applicant pool in which all applicants are given individual attention: “We believe that having current parents interview prospective parents reflects the strong sense of community that is central to our school’s identity. Using a parent-based interview team allows us to consider all interested applicants and accept applications as late as the first week of January. With this relatively late application deadline, we typically receive more than 350 applications each year. It would be nearly impossible for one director of admissions to meet with that many prospective parents; thus, our team of parent interviewers facilitates our promise to consider all applicants with equal care and consideration. WSMS has been doing parent-to-parent interviews for many years, and to the best of our knowledge we continue to be the only school to have parents participate in the admissions process in this way. We are proud of what that says about both our school and our families.”

Head of School Mimi Basso couldn’t agree more. “Every year I am delighted and honored by the willingness of so many WSMS parents to lend their time and talent to the vital task of interviewing parents who are applying to the school,” she says. “Not only does this practice help put prospective parents at ease, it also sends a strong message about the extent to which WSMS parents believe in and support what we’re doing. It also enables me to allocate more of my time for focusing on our curriculum and working with current parents to address the needs of our students.”

Yet another advantage of having parents conduct interviews is that they can be counted on to be particularly attentive and conscientious interviewers. Because WSMS parents play such an active role in the life of the school, they have a vested interest in helping to identify those applicant parents who will contribute meaningfully to our community and add to our diverse mix of families. Catherine McKinley concurs. “I think interviewing parents really helps us to invest even more in the community and to think about it from a different angle. It made me think about what’s special about this community, what I want to help preserve, how our community can be stretched. Also, I found it delightful to talk to parents I wouldn’t necessarily have connected with otherwise, and to realize that we did have quite a bit in common and that they would bring a lot to the school.”

“I also think it’s helpful for Suzanne to receive assessments of families from people she trusts as members of the school community,” adds Henna Haque. “I’m the kind of person who wants a second opinion, and I think she appreciates getting additional perspectives beyond her own. The school is certainly better for it. Our community is much more tightly knit as a result.”

As for Chris and Tina, they can’t wait to become a part of the WSMS community with Kiep. When asked for a broader interpretation of the parent-on-parent interview process, Chris replies, “To me it says that parents are involved in lots of ways, that they don’t regard WSMS as just a place to send their kids. It’s a community they’re involved in and are willing to take the time to be involved in. Also, to me it says that the school doesn’t have just one gatekeeper. There’s community involvement, which I think is great.”

This three-way synergy—among the school, current parents, and applicant parents—is largely what has kept and will continue to keep the WSMS community so vibrant and connected. It’s a vibrancy and a connectedness that are unquestionably felt and shared by our children, whose education and development are what brought us all together in the first place. And if WSMS’s parent interviews manage to dispel some of the legendary New York City preschool jitters, so much the better for us all.



Shalom Davis and Ephrem Davis (children of Catherine McKinley)

“WSMS HAS BEEN DOING PARENT-TO-PARENT INTERVIEWS FOR MANY YEARS, AND TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE WE CONTINUE TO BE THE ONLY SCHOOL TO HAVE PARENTS PARTICIPATE IN THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS IN THIS WAY. WE ARE PROUD OF WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT BOTH OUR SCHOOL AND OUR FAMILIES.”

- SUZANNE DAY