EVERY DAY MATTERS

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!

“AND THE WINNERS ARE...”
WHO GETS THE MOST OUT OF THE AUCTION’S CLASS PROJECTS?

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WSMS Mom Becomes WSMS-TEP Student
Just as the various aspects of each person’s life are intertwined, so are that person’s self, family, neighborhood, and global community interconnected.

The theme of this issue of Great Beginnings is “nurturing the whole child,” but what do we mean when we say that? We can begin to answer that question by turning to Dr. Maria Montessori, who spoke of the importance of regarding each human being as a uniquely endowed whole individual living a whole life in a whole world. Just as the various aspects of each person’s life are intertwined, so are that person’s self, family, neighborhood, and global community interconnected. In applying this holistic outlook to early childhood education, we strive every day to nourish the minds, hearts, and bodies of our students while also forging strong partnerships with them, their families, and our larger community. By addressing every aspect of each child’s development, we are able to help our students lay a solid foundation for a lifetime of learning.

There are myriad ways to accomplish this vital task, and this issue of Great Beginnings explores some of the key ones. In “Nurturing the Whole Child: Every Day Matters,” I describe how our school stretches teachers intellectually so that they may continually improve in their ability to understand, support, and teach our children. “Food, Glorious Food!” takes us into the WSMS kitchen, where chef Jonathan Toogood and Operations Manager Barbara Grant concoct daily offerings that are as fresh and nutritious as they are kid-friendly. “And the Winners Are...” goes behind the scenes of a treasured WSMS tradition: the classroom art projects for our Annual Auction. While the finished works of art are always the most coveted items at the Auction, this article focuses on the many rewards our children reap from the process of creating them.

On the subject of community and partnership, we present a portrait of the Pollock-Berneys, a family with long and strong ties to WSMS. Their story is reflective of the many families who have discovered that the early friendships formed at WSMS have endured even as their children move on to other schools and new communities. And, finally, did you know that WSMS-TEP, our teacher education program, has been a consistent draw for WSMS parents? A number of moms—including Nissa Booker, who is profiled here—have been so inspired by what they’ve observed in the classroom that they’ve made the transition from WSMS parent to WSMS-TEP student to Montessori teacher.

What emerges from these articles is a strong sense of continual forward motion—not just for our children, but for all of us. In our busy lives, we are all finding the time to identify what matters most to us, to make the most of every day, and to be perpetually open to learning something new. Un coincidentally, these are the very qualities that bring us together and inform our ability to “nurture the whole child.”

MIMI BASSO
HEAD OF SCHOOL
“Every day matters” is the linguistic shorthand that the teachers and I use to center ourselves on the promise we make to the children (and families) we are privileged to serve. We are keenly aware that children between the ages of 2.6 and 6 are absorbing information and building brain connections at an astounding rate, and that our job is to prepare the classroom to enhance the across-the-board development—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—that must take place in each of our students. Maria Montessori understood that during these years children are constructing the pathways that will become the foundation of their approach to learning and to life.
Every Day Matters
Given the tremendous long-term impact of these preschool years and the relatively short time in which they occur, the faculty and I recognize that we must make the most of every moment. This sense of urgency informs all of our thoughts and actions—whether planning curriculum, identifying the strengths and needs of each individual child, or working with individuals or groups of children in the classroom.

In linguistic longhand our promise is this: We are dedicated to making a positive developmental difference in the life of each child every day. Our purpose is to nurture the whole child—mind, heart, and body—while partnering with parents to support each child's strengths and learning style.

More Than Just Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic
Focusing on academics alone at this stage would be a disservice to our students. Literacy and numeracy are essential, but equally important is the context in which these and other important life skills are gained. Our task is to provide a structured environment in which children:
- feel safe to venture forth and explore their own interests
- perceive adults as a reliable source of emotional support and security
- develop self-respect, empathy and respect for others
- discover their ability to be flexible thinkers and creative problem solvers encouraged to find solutions rather than “the one right answer”
- develop confidence and the capacity to communicate—the social skills so important to success in school and beyond

Visiting Scholars Help WSMS Faculty Become Even More Effective

Cutting-Edge Information
The WSMS mission statement describes our faculty as “a community of learners” who “use the process of reflection to continually improve what we know and what we do to best support our students.” One of the unique ways in which we advance this process at WSMS is by appointing a Visiting Scholar to work with faculty over the course of an academic year. This past year we engaged Lesley Koplow, Director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice (CERP) at Bank Street College of Education. I strongly believe that immersing the entire faculty in a focused and comprehensive exploration of a relevant topic every year is one of the most effective methods of keeping our school at the cutting edge pedagogically. I chose CERP because it is a renowned source of information and research related
to a fundamental part of our mission: creating classrooms that children experience as supportive and meaningful learning environments.

Lesley began our year with a series of introductory seminars on the stages of child development—a discussion that continued in more depth throughout the year. One of the most discussed topics centered on the fact that developmental stages (e.g., attachment and separation), if not resolved satisfactorily by the child, continue to reemerge at later stages and can prevent the child from maximizing her/his potential for exploration and learning, both in and out of the classroom. This knowledge made us understand even more clearly how social-emotional issues impact children learning.

Another important insight had to do with our role as educators. We realized that in order to support the emotional well-being of students, it is not enough to carefully observe their actions and listen to their stories; we need to be able to identify and effectively address both the subtle clues and the more blatant expressions of potential emotional stress. We talked about the fact that this definition of faculty responsibility encompasses more than what teachers and administrators in most schools would be willing to accept. Pedagogical education has, for the most part, relegated the emotional aspects of education to the realm of psychologists and social workers.

**Hands-On Strategies**

Helping us to take this understanding into the practical realm, Felice Wagman, a member of the CERP faculty, became a familiar and welcome face at WSMS, observing each classroom at several points throughout the year. Felice focused primarily on identifying the behavioral clues that might indicate the existence of emotional stress. Upon identifying a clue, she would model a strategy to address it. She then led team feedback sessions, in which she and the teachers analyzed and discussed these interventions. (Melissa Vallo, my right hand in education administration, attended all of these sessions to ensure that these new insights developed into a school-wide common language and approach.) These sessions not only provided the teaching team with insights about the interactions that Felice had witnessed, they also helped faculty hear and see the children’s communications and actions with newly sensitized ears and eyes, and provided us with a wide range of useful strategies. Here are two examples:

**Boys Don’t Cry**

One child, after having caused a spill, said loudly, “I’m a bad boy because I’m crying.” Another child responded, “It’s okay if you make a mistake.” Another said, “It’s okay to cry.” The crying child said, “No, it’s not okay, and boys shouldn’t cry.” After drawing the teacher’s attention to this incident, Felice helped the teacher facilitate a “then and there” discussion with the whole class about mistakes: mistakes are one of the ways we learn. And crying is one of the ways boys and girls express how they feel.

**Our purpose is to nurture the whole child—mind, heart, and body—while partnering with parents to support each child’s strengths and learning style.**
This incident heightened the teaching team's awareness of issues of identity and feelings that are on the minds of children. Moreover, addressing this issue in the context of the classroom community did not help just one child; it created a sense of security and intimacy in the classroom community. This episode also provided a springboard for rich and meaningful individual and collective classroom work in which notions of gender, feelings, and mistakes could be explored.

Go Away, Monster
A four-year-old boy was building in the block area. When asked about his structure, he said, “I’m building a strong room.” Felice asked, “Is the room in your house? What do you mean by strong?” The boy replied, “Every night I have bad dreams.” Felice asked, “What do you see in your dreams?” The child described a recurring dream about a “monster” that was going to take him out of his room and away from his mom and dad. At length Felice intervened. “I have a book that I think you will like to read. It’s called Go Away, Big Green Monster!” Felice read the book to the boy and then helped him “read” the book himself. Several classmates came over to listen and to share their own monster stories. This example reveals how one child’s fear was expressed, then validated by an adult in the room, and how it was then safely shared with and validated by peers through the reading of the book. In addition, a larger group of classmates could use the book and this one child’s “monster story” to share stories of their own, thereby increasing group trust and intimacy.

In the discussion that Felice led after this incident, the teaching team shared that the child’s grandmother, whom the child saw frequently, had died very suddenly. The discussion allowed the team to focus on other, more oblique clues to this child’s inability to be fully present and active in the classroom, especially after school vacations that included visits to his grandfather. After confirming their impressions with the child’s mom, the faculty was able to put the puzzle together and use their extensive skills and knowledge to develop strategies to help this child—and by extension all of the children at WSMS—feel safe and engage joyfully in classroom activities.

Teachers Praise the Program
In the words of one teacher who has been at WSMS for three years: “Having a yearlong, in-depth, scholarly discussion on an important topic with the entire faculty not only brings us to the cutting edge of knowledge in this area, it also builds a common language that we can all use in understanding the needs of kids. The net result is that the quality of what we can deliver on behalf of children is continually getting better.”

A master teacher with more than ten years at WSMS remarks: “Lesley and Felice have taught us to hear things that we might not have heard, and see things that we might not have seen. This new depth of understanding helps us know children better and provide better information to assist parents in being
knowledgeable advocates and guides for their children."

Another teacher adds: “We are confident that we can successfully address issues that might have seemed sticky to us in the past. For example, when a classmate asks, ‘What’s wrong? Why is Johnny sitting in your lap?’ I now feel that I can say, ‘Johnny is not feeling well, and he needs a hug until his Mom gets here to pick him up.’ In the past I would have felt awkward defining Johnny’s emotional state, thinking that it might cause him more distress. But now I know that the truthful answer is a good response. It lets Johnny and the rest of the class know that it is okay to ask an adult for comfort, and that it is okay to feel sad. Johnny’s sad demeanor and his choice to sit in my lap is already a clear non-verbal communication of the reality. My validation of it simply helps children better understand that the classroom is a safe and secure environment in which to grow from every kind of experience.”

“This school focuses on the details; [the faculty and education administrators] really know everything about my child.”

Ultimately, our continual efforts to strengthen the skills and the confidence of our teachers are all about the students. As one WSMS mom put it: “This school focuses on the details; [the faculty and education administrators] really know everything about my child.” Hearing a comment like this lets me know that our actions match our belief that every day matters for each child. It’s not enough to have a beautiful physical environment. Nor is it sufficient to have a well-thought-out curriculum. What is absolutely essential is to keep abreast of the best practices that evolve in early childhood education and research, and to use that information to provide each student at West Side Montessori School with a strong foundation for school and for life. By engaging a Visiting Scholar every year we are able to keep our school at the forefront. Our children, who will soon enough be asked to take on the known and unknown challenges of the future, deserve nothing less.
FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!
Setting Nutritious Patterns for a Lifetime of Healthy Eating

When Operations Director Barbara Grant began to work at WSMS in 1987, the kitchen was—as it is today—on the Garden level, but the food was in a very different place. The menu relied heavily on canned and frozen goods. Barry Owens, the cook at the time, shopped on his way to school and managed to cook, serve, and clean up lunch before trading his chef’s toque for his afternoon role as a beloved teacher in 4E. As Barbara says, “Barry’s chicken was terrific, but we have come a long way in terms of variety—organic, whole grain, and many healthy options.”

Today, after a succession of chefs, a renovation, and a major change in how we think about food, the WSMS kitchen serves over 75% of the student body, and adults at school rave over the delicious and healthy menus.

Barbara works closely with chef Jonathan Toogood, who has been at WSMS since December 2009, and his assistant, Julia Jimenez. Together they plan the daily menus, working ahead about a month at a time. The meals are as visually appealing as they are healthy; they also accommodate special dietary needs such as food allergies and vegetarianism. A consistent favorite has shiny string beans balancing creamy macaroni and cheese and whole grain bread. The savory string beans come in two versions: one braised with smoked turkey and another meat-free. Jonathan is especially clever when it comes to making mystery vegetables (like bok choy) kid-friendly and sneaking some protein in where children least suspect it.

The food is of the highest quality and mostly organic, and is delivered fresh several times a week. Menus are posted online, so parents can anticipate any potential
issues ("I hate meatloaf!") , and there is always enough so that any child who normally brings her/his own lunch but is captivated by the day's enticing aromas can enjoy a special treat. Any leftovers may be offered to teachers or parents or donated to a local soup kitchen or homeless shelter. The most popular meal among the children is "breakfast for lunch": pancakes, turkey sausage, and home fries or grits.

Jonathan regards recipes as "just a basic outline." The trick—and talent—of a good cook is to get creative with what you have in the kitchen. His usual spin on macaroni and cheese uses evaporated milk for creaminess. Cheesiness is important too; he is careful to use plenty of cheddar, a bit of mozzarella, and—especially for an adult version—other cheeses that may be sitting in the fridge.

Attention is paid to making sure the children will actually like the food. About twice a year Chef Jonathan visits each classroom and asks for menu suggestions from the kids. He and Barbara then develop (and post online) menus attributing meals to each class: for example, Monday's meal was proposed by 2E and Tuesday's by 2W. This is truly a Montessori approach: empowering kids to make good choices and trusting their judgment.

Everything we do at WSMS has an application to children's learning, and the food service is no exception. The teachers incorporate food into the curriculum in numerous ways. As described by Robyn Mernick, head teacher in 4E, food has played a big part in cultural studies this year: brewing tea from lavender buds (England); slicing tomatoes, shredding basil, squeezing lemons for bruschetta (Italy); sampling cheeses from four countries and then charting the class's preferences (a math exercise!). The food prep expands the children's knowledge of nutrition; also, as Robyn says, "a child is more likely to try something he had a hand in making."

In the fall 4E made a trip to a local farmer's market; in speaking with apple sellers, the children learned about where apples come from and how they grow. Back in the classroom they compared different varieties of apples, then peeled, sliced, mashed, and cooked them into applesauce on the class hot plate.

The two daily snacks are always fruits or vegetables, and the children do the prep work: they slice cucumbers; peel and separate clementine sections; spread soynut butter on celery sticks. They learn to work together and to share, and treat each other with grace and courtesy.

Every day, in each classroom, the Leader of the Day creates a snack menu that describes (via pictures or words) the snack ("2 apples"). Around 11:00 a.m. the class's tables are "closed" to work. The leader and his or her chosen assistant don aprons and help the teachers clean the tables, set up chairs, and count out placemats, napkins, and cups.
At 11:30 the leader and assistant from each classroom accompany their teachers to the kitchen to pick up lunch: the teacher carries the hot food, while the kids are responsible for the milk, fruit, bread, etc. Jonathan is on a first-name basis with every child in the school, and getting a turn to visit the kitchen is a treat that every child eagerly anticipates. Back in the classroom the food is displayed buffet style, and the children are encouraged to sample everything.

After lunch the children scrape and rinse the plates and load the dishwashers (the upstairs classrooms have energy-efficient machines dedicated to the plates and utensils). And then, with full tummies and clean tables, the kids settle down for their well-deserved rest time.

**Healthy Eating At Home**

A particularly good source for incorporating vegetables into your children’s culinary life is *Early Sprouts: Cultivating Healthy Food Choices in Young Children*. While focused on a program at an early childhood school in New Hampshire, the activities and recipes included in the book are readily adaptable as enjoyable parent-child projects at home—and may just expand adult food options as well!


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**JONATHAN’S MACARONI & CHEESE**

(ADAPTED FOR PREPARATION AT HOME)

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 1 stick butter
- 1 pound shredded cheddar cheese
- 1/2 pound shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/2 pound shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- 2 12-ounce cans evaporated milk
- 1/4 tsp granulated garlic
- 3 eggs, beaten
- salt & pepper to taste

**DIRECTIONS**

Boil macaroni in lightly salted water until al dente. Drain macaroni. While still hot, add butter and mix until melted. Stir in cheeses, evaporated milk, and garlic. Add eggs, mixing well. Stir until combined and pour into greased casserole dish. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes. Let sit about 15 minutes before serving.

**NOTES**

This is a basic recipe. Jonathan suggests that you be creative and use whatever cheeses you may find in your refrigerator!
AND THE WINNERS ARE...
WHO GETS THE MOST OUT OF THE AUCTION’S CLASS PROJECTS?

Every year, at every West Side Montessori Annual Auction, the bidding becomes fiercest—and the atmosphere the liveliest—when our children's class projects are up on the auction block. After all, what WMS parent wouldn't want the opportunity to take home a beautiful, one-of-a-kind work of art created by the kids in his or her child's class? What is important for all of us to remember, however, is who reaps the richest rewards from the creation of these projects: the children.

The planning of the class projects begins early in the school year. Prior to winter vacation, the teachers in each classroom brainstorm with the students, discussing the topics they have studied and exchanging ideas about what has most ignited their curiosity and excitement. Inspirations for this year's projects ranged from the work of beloved children's authors (4W’s continent map, featuring the techniques of Eric Carle; 2E’s transportation collage, inspired by the global perspective of Ann Morris; 3Wam’s mirror framed with colored tissue paper collage, an homage to Leo Lionni) to discussions of such important universal topics as friendship (2Wpm’s friendship wheel) and self-image (Garden’s self-portrait collage); from paintings by famous artists (1W’s splatter painting, à la Jackson Pollock; 3Wpm’s multimedia work, based on Vincent van Gogh’s “Iris”) to the children’s love and respect for nature (2Wam’s butterfly collage; 3E’s sphere sculpture and 4E’s four seasons tapestry, both made with twigs and sticks found on nature walks).

The teachers come up with the actual projects, and they provide the materials, but it is then up to the children to bring their unique artistic vision to the task, sometimes on their own, sometimes collaboratively. To observe the creation of a class project is to witness so many aspects of Montessori education at work simultaneously: the building of fine and gross motor skills; the teaching of respect for other people's opinions and abilities; the nurturing of self-esteem by entrusting children with working independently; and the strengthening of social skills derived from working as a team toward a shared goal.

Upon completion of their class projects, the joy and pride shared by the children are boundless. At a celebratory class breakfast, we congratulate them on the beautiful results of their creativity, diligence, and collaboration. And every year we are eternally grateful to the teachers for their seemingly endless supply of energy and ingenuity in guiding our children along their artistic journey. Truly, this is a case in which the process is as valuable, if not more so, than the end result. Regardless of who takes home the class projects at the end of the Auction, ultimately, everyone wins.
Garden Class Project “Friendly faces”
The children of the Garden class chose to create self-portraits using a favorite medium of theirs: collage. After studying self-portraits by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo, and Andy Warhol, each child outlined his or her own head on cardboard while looking in a mirror. Then they created hair and facial features using glue and an assortment of collage materials (buttons, feathers, yarn, ribbon). Mounted together, the collages offer a beautiful and creative portrait of the Garden class.

1W Class Project “Pollock Pizzazz”
As part of their exploration of the works of Jackson Pollock, the children of 1W created a canvas painting inspired by the artist's “splatter” painting style. After learning to drip paint onto paper with the different tools that Pollock used (brushes, sticks, whisks, spoons), the children made small-scale paintings and mural-sized practice runs, then worked together to produce their final masterpiece.
**4E Class Project “Weaving a Natural History”**

The children of 4E created a woven tapestry celebrating their exploration of the natural world and the four seasons. This theme was even reflected in the tools for the project: the class used a loom made of sticks found on nature walks in Riverside Park. As the children learned the art of weaving, they also developed a tactile appreciation of the many art materials nature has to offer.

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**3Wam Class Project “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”**

Inspired by beloved children’s author and artist Leo Lionni, the children of 3Wam made a beautiful decorative mirror frame out of colored tissue paper collage. In so doing, the children gained a thorough knowledge of the collage process (cutting, glue brushing, composition), as well as elements of color blending and geometry.
“A circle is round, it has no end. That’s how long I’m going to be your friend.”

2Wpm Class Project “The Friendship Wheel”
This decorative bicycle wheel represents the circular, eternal nature of friendship and of life. The children of 2Wpm wove strips of colored ribbon, fabric, and yarn through the spokes, revealing lovely patterns of triangles reminiscent of a flower, a star, or the sun. As they worked, the children sang songs about, and reflected together on, the nature of friendship, community, and peace.

3E Class Project “Naturally Light”
Taking their cue from artist Andy Goldsworthy, the children of 3E chose to make a project out of materials found in nature. Using twigs and sticks collected during nature walks in the park, the children created a large spherical sculpture. They wrapped gold and yellow ribbon around some of the twigs and placed a golden light bulb inside. The result is an extraordinary ceiling lamp derived almost entirely from the natural world.
2E Class Project “ON THE GO”
This splendid collage depicts the various modes of transportation used around the world. The children of 2E got their inspiration from author Ann Morris, whose books explore the world’s different cultures through a variety of universal topics (e.g., hats, tools, houses, food). In creating their project, the children mastered the skills and techniques of weaving, drawing, and cutting.

3Wpm Class Project “IRIS INSPIRATIONS”
Vincent van Gogh’s masterpiece “The Irises” was the primary inspiration for this multimedia work on canvas. After studying van Gogh’s works and various painting techniques, the children of 3Wpm examined actual irises. For their project, the children painted, cut apart, reassembled, and glued their individual iris portraits onto a large canvas, then painted over the collage with acrylic paint, producing a dazzling artwork of their own.
**2Wam Class Project**

**“Flying Colors”**

Inspired by their study of the butterfly life cycle, the children of 2Wam decided to make an oversized butterfly out of collage. In the process the children employed a host of skills, including color mixing, finger painting, stenciling, cutting, and gluing. The rich, vibrant colors of the finished work reflect a color wheel.

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**4W Class Project**

**“Hand by Hand Around the World”**

As part of their yearlong study of the continents, the children of 4W made a Montessori continent map using the techniques of children’s author and illustrator Eric Carle. The whole class finger-painted large swatches of paper, traced the continents on them, and used pushpins to punch out the continent shapes. Using watercolors for the oceans and textile materials for added texture, the children created a map that is as cheerful as it is educational.
Fostering Friendships: One Family’s Experiences at WSMS...and Beyond

When our children start out at West Side Montessori School, we have many hopes for them: a warm and nurturing environment, caring and stimulating teachers, good friends who will be both playmates and supporters. We also have hopes for ourselves and our families: we look forward to becoming part of the warm and welcoming WSMS community. A dad brings his three-year-old to school that first day and looks around the classroom, wondering which child is going to bond with his daughter, and which of those impressively attentive parents he'll meet up with for coffee someday. A few short weeks later, a mom watches with delight as her little boy—no longer the baby he seemed so recently—makes independent friendships, just as she has taken the first steps to making some new friends herself.

Jane Pollock and Phil Berney are the parents of three WSMS alumni: Jack (’00), Annabel (’04), and Charlotte (’08). In their years at WSMS the Pollock-Berney family had many opportunities to explore all that makes the school such a great place to begin a life of learning. Jane credits West Side Montessori School with giving each of her children the chance to make enduring friendships and the wherewithal to pursue his or her individual interests in a focused and motivated way.

“WSMS helped them find their voices,” Jane asserts. “Their respective experiences at WSMS helped each one of them to build a foundation that enabled them to become independent thinkers and hard workers.”

Jack, now a sophomore at Trinity School, entered 1Wam in 1998. Jane was thrilled to be offered a morning spot; Jack was one of those kids who, at three, still needed an afternoon nap. She soon found that Jack thrived in an environment where he could work with focus on a particular project, while his teachers gently ensured that he was broadly exposed to the wealth of the Montessori curriculum. In particular Jack remembers teachers Marcia Polanco and Melissa Crosby with great fondness, and he loved the science classes with Naomi Stern. Among the students, he found a special affinity with Tanner Morris, Owen Kaye-Kauderer, and Sara Frost, all of whom continue to be among his closest friends. And he went on to flourish at Trinity, where he currently manages to juggle academic achievement, impressive musical talent (singing with the a cappella group Sons of Pitches and performing in school musicals), and varsity lacrosse.

The Berney children are evenly spaced four years apart, so each child was able to enter WSMS unencumbered by a sibling in residence. Jack moved on to Trinity in 2000; Annabel started at WSMS in 2002. Even at the age of three Annabel had the poise and self-confidence to interact on a peer basis with adults, and the Montessori classroom—where the teachers are on the floor, face-to-face with the children, mirroring their responses, gently giving feedback, respecting their interests and enthusiasms—was a fertile environment for her. Annabel
loved “being respected as a capable person with good ideas,” such as her approach to making lemonade or her creative self-portrait and poem, which hung outside 3W. Like her brother, she has enduring friendships from WSMS, with Frannie Trousdale and Jesse Morris.

Even before starting at WSMS, Annabel had loved doing puzzles. Noticing the complicated puzzles in Annabel’s first classroom, Jane inquired about simpler ones—only to discover her three-year-old’s intuitive ability to identify the patterns of the cuts and pictures and make the connections. Today, as a sixth grader at Trinity, Annabel uses the challenge of a complex puzzle to “chill out.” Like her brother, she is also an accomplished singer. Her roots as a performer date back to her days at WSMS, where she thrilled her teachers and classmates on her final day of school in 2004 with a heartfelt rendition of “Leaving on a Jet Plane.”

Two years after Annabel moved on to Trinity, Charlotte started at WSMS. The youngest Berney child loved making snacks and getting a turn at being Leader of the Day. She thrived in the classroom’s open-ended, unstructured approach, filling her days writing ideas on scraps of paper—and dreading rest time! Writing continues to be Charlotte’s favorite subject at Trinity, where she is now in second grade. She can often be heard lecturing her older siblings on writing techniques such as “Show it, don’t say it” (implying through description rather than stating outright) and “Said is dead” (eschewing the use of the word “said” in favor of alternative word choices). Asked what she wants to be when she grows up, Charlotte replies that she wants to be a fashion designer...and she looks forward to creating outfits for her mannequin from the racks at Secondhand Sue!

With all those years in and out of WSMS, Jane and Phil have seen a lot of changes in the school and watched their relationship with the school evolve. Like many WSMS parents with careers on hold, Jane immediately felt welcomed into the WSMS community and quickly found a home for her talents. Among other volunteer commitments, she edited the school’s newsletter and served on the Board of Trustees. Busy today working on a documentary focused on her sister’s experience with metastatic breast cancer (in collaboration with filmmaker and fellow WSMS parent Ricki Stern), Jane also finds time to coordinate Trinity’s Lower School parent tour guides and to serve as a sixth-grade class rep, while Phil has been involved in increasing participation in Trinity’s Annual Fund.

And, like their children, Jane and Phil still enjoy spending time with the great friends they made at WSMS—in the classrooms, on the Auction committees, and during shifts at the Spring Fair. The Pollock-Bernesys are one of the many families that embody a vital part of WSMS’s mission statement: “Here, children are nurtured [and] families find friendship and support.” The lasting effects of this nurturing, and the longevity of these friendships, are a testament to the school’s commitment to that mission.
In the corporate world, the human resources (HR) department plays a critical role in shaping a business. By identifying and hiring promising individuals, then nurturing their development in the company through its various programs, employee benefits, and professional development opportunities, the HR division helps to ensure a company’s success. These days, Nissa Booker, mother of WSMS alumna Dalyn and incoming student Aiden, is discovering that the skills and interests that make someone a good HR professional transfer readily to the classroom.
Nissa has been a student in WSMS-TEP, our Montessori teacher education program, since last summer. At the same time she works full-time for AOL, recruiting personnel for their new PATCH initiative (creating localized news programming); parents her two children; volunteers enthusiastically at WSMS and at Dalyn's current school; and even manages to grab the occasional dinner and a movie with her husband, Courtney.

The daughter of a military officer, Nissa and her family lived in five places before settling in Fort Washington, Maryland, where Nissa finished high school. After graduating from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, she worked for ABC News in Washington, D.C., then transferred to a position in their New York bureau, where she eventually transitioned to the Talent Recruitment department. She says she was surprised to discover that many of the “best and the brightest”—graduates of prestigious colleges and universities—lacked skills essential for success: basic academic skills like writing, but also psycho-emotional skills such as creativity, collaboration, and the ability to be flexible and to problem solve.

When Dalyn began at WSMS, Nissa felt a “pull” to the Montessori culture. She watched her daughter develop “critical thinking” and learned how even a very young child can “make and execute a plan,” and how the teacher is trained to “meet the child” instead of imposing a plan on the child. Nissa praises Melissa Vallo, who was then the head teacher in 2W, for identifying a receptive language issue that, left untreated, could have affected Dalyn's future academic accomplishments. This attention to Dalyn and her learning patterns was a pivotal factor that steered Nissa closer to making the decision to switch careers.

Nissa discovered the information about WSMS-TEP on the school’s website and casually mentioned it to Mimi during an early consultation; Mimi was very supportive of the inquiry. After spending more time with Dalyn in the classroom and with other WSMS parents as a PA volunteer, Nissa became even more fascinated by the opportunities presented by a career in Montessori education. She came to see teaching small children as a way to foster the very capabilities she sometimes found lacking in the workforce, as well as a chance to use her skills at identifying the talents and interests of individuals and helping them find the best uses for them.

In the summer of 2010, Nissa dove in with eyes open. She took a three-week leave from AOL to participate in the first phase of WSMS-TEP, and over the past year she has spent at least one Sunday each month in a WSMS classroom. She reports that WSMS-TEP offers in-depth training in all areas of Montessori education (e.g., practical life, sensorial, cultural, language, math, etc.), and she decided to take this opportunity. She began her journey of learning and discovery by working with students and teachers and observing the Montessori classroom environment. From there, she was able to discover her strengths and weaknesses and choose the specific areas she wants to focus on.

“I’ve learned that children have ‘sensitive periods’ and that there really are developmentally appropriate times when they will be ready for certain skills and concepts, and by trusting that knowledge I will better prepare my children by allowing them to explore and follow their interests.”

—Nissa Booker
art) as well as practical training (e.g., how to behave like a Montessori teacher, especially in interacting with children and with their parents). The program also focuses on various aspects of child development, on recognizing what is going on, and on creating alternative approaches where necessary or appropriate. Nissa has learned how important it is for a teacher to trust a child to take the lead, and to know how to help the child do so in a developmentally suitable and successful way.

Nissa says she was surprised by how much knowledge, education, training, and experience it takes to be a good Montessori teacher. Beyond the standard academic documents, WSMS faculty are required to earn the American Montessori Society (AMS) Early Childhood Credential. WSMS-TEP offers 300+ hours of academic preparation—as well as assistance in obtaining student teaching positions—to individuals interested in pursuing the credential.

Going to school while working full-time has been a juggling act, but a rewarding one. Nissa says, “The volume of work is huge, but it is gratifying to be learning something that I chose to learn.” Asked if what she has studied at WSMS-TEP has application to her success as a parent, she smiles, then replies, “I’ve learned that children have ‘sensitive periods’ and that there really are developmentally appropriate times when they will be ready for certain skills and concepts, and by trusting that knowledge I will better prepare my children by allowing them to explore and follow their interests.” Although Nissa will be taking a hiatus from WSMS-TEP for the next school year, she looks forward to completing the program down the road. In the meantime, next fall she will be taking Aiden to school for the first time. Whichever hat she’s wearing—that of WSMS parent or of WSMS-TEP student—she will always find tremendous satisfaction in exploring the many ways in which the Montessori approach nurtures great beginnings.

WSMS-TEP’s origins lie in a program designed to help parents become partners in their children’s education, so it is no surprise that it continues to attract parents who, like Nissa, feel drawn to the Montessori methodology and the promise it holds for transforming the ways children learn and interact with each other and with the adults in their lives. Current students include Ema Sato-Warga (mom of Aiden Warga, 2Wpm, and Kai Warga, who will enter in September) and Nandita Sood (mom of Armaan Bidani, 2Wpm).

At WSMS, parents of currently enrolled students aren’t the only ones who have pursued teaching in response to their children’s experiences. Head of School Mimi Basso became a teacher after her oldest son attended a Montessori school, as did Maiko Ishii (currently a student teacher in 3Wam). Many parents of WSMS alums have graduated from WSMS-TEP (or its predecessors, CHAMP and NYU-MTES) and gone on to teach at WSMS and other Montessori schools. They include Mary Ann Gioeli (NYU), Johnn Murray Camp (NYU), Marcia Polanco (CHAMP), Lisa Kohl (NYU), Barbara Reilly (CHAMP), Grace Shavers (CHAMP), Pamela Buchan (WSMS-TEP), Juliana LaBattaglia (WSMS-TEP), and Leandre Sampson (WSMS-TEP). Longtime WSMS staff member Barbara Grant, who graduated from CHAMP, has grandchildren who attended WSMS.
Very special thanks to the WSMS faculty, who provided the majority of photos used in this magazine, and to the WSMS administrative team—a multi-tasking, multi-talented, always collaborative group who has helped in ways too numerous to count.

Editor: Patricia Luciani, School Advancement
Editorial Consultant: Tina Connelly
Copy Editor: Olivia Kim
Creative: Melissa Gacek
Photography: The WSMS Faculty
Class Project Photography: Kimberly Brooks, Portrait Bug
Special Thanks: Kristin Chae Arabadjiev, Nissa Booker, Kimberly Brooks, Barbara Grant, Jane Pollock, Jonathan Toogood, Melissa Vallo

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