Where are some of the most intriguing ideas born?

At New York City dinner parties, of course. That was certainly the case in March 1963, when Susanna and Boker Doyle hosted a gathering at their apartment on West 78th Street.

West Side Montessori School Founders (left to right): Boker Doyle, Larry Huntington, Olivia Huntington, Susanna Doyle, Gil Burke, Marian Lapsley (Schwarz) Cross, and first WSMS teacher Elizabeth Hopkins (Fritz Schwarz was not able to attend).
The guests included Gil and Sally Burke, Larry and Olivia Huntington, Fritz and Marian Schwarz, and Joe and Bay Wasserman. All were friends with young children living on the Upper West Side; all had been drawn to the neighborhood (which at that time was considered a “frontier”) for its economically, racially, culturally, and intellectually diverse community. They shared a desire to give their children outstanding early educational experiences, but found limited nearby options for their preschoolers. The relatively unexciting prospects on the East Side didn’t seem worth a daily trek across the park with three-year-olds in tow.

Over home-cooked beef bourguignon and lots of wine, the Doyles excitedly told the group about a Montessori school they had seen during a recent visit to Hudson, Ohio. Inspired by Maria Montessori’s teaching methods and bound by a common sense of purpose—as well as a strong dose of 1960s idealism—the group decided that evening to become partners in a project they called the West Side Montessori School (soon to be known as “WSMS”). Fifty years and more than 4,000 students later, our school is considered one of the foremost early childhood institutions in the city and state.

These founding families were deservedly celebrated at the school’s 50th Anniversary event at Pier 60 on February 2, 2013. But just as impressive as their roles in founding WSMS are their other noteworthy professional accomplishments and contributions to the fabric of New York City.
Founding WSMS was just one early step for these ten admirable individuals in a lifetime of accomplishment.

The Doyles

Parents of Katherine and Nancy (Victoria and Jessica would soon follow), the Doyles shared responsibility with the other four couples for starting the school and getting it up and running. Their most important first step was recruiting Elisabeth Hopkins, an experienced Montessori teacher and the sister-in-law of the friends in Hudson, Ohio. She identified needed materials, organized the curriculum, and welcomed the first class in September of 1963. It was only because of Elisabeth’s experience and calm professionalism that WSMS was able to be successful from the start.

Susanna became the de facto administrative head of school for its first ten years, working with Elisabeth to hire new Montessori-trained teachers and gradually enlarge the number of students while at the same time managing to move the school from a community center to a Jewish temple to an Episcopal church.

The City agreed to place neighborhood children in a publicly funded day care program within the school. The student population was thus able to grow and diversify, and the doors could be kept open for longer hours, which benefitted many parents. Under the leadership of Penelope Pi-Sunyer, the successor administrator, and with crucial help from parents, board members, and foundations, the school was able to buy its own building on 92nd Street. Over time, WSMS became a stable and respected institution with a strong faculty, involved board members, and a promising future.

Susanna left WSMS to work, first for Citizens’ Committee for Children as an education policy analyst, then for Advocates for Children of New York in the same role. In both places she focused on dropout issues, attendance (or lack of same), school suspensions, and the like, all while raising four daughters. She wrote speeches and papers for other civic organizations, and eventually for the Chancellor of the Board of Education in the mid-1980s. While having fun working as an intern for investigative reporter Wayne Barrett at the Village Voice in the 1990s, she was able to write some pieces on a freelance basis. At the same time, she served on a number of boards, including Berkshire Farm Center and St. Luke’s–Roosevelt Hospital.

In the early years of WSMS, the abilities of Susanna’s husband were well utilized in multiple ways. Boker supported the growth of the school and served on the board while pursuing a successful career in finance. Ultimately, he retired as president of Fiduciary Trust Company International. As the intensity of his responsibilities at WSMS eased, he too found himself pulled to dedicate his energies and intelligence to worthy causes. Currently a trustee of the Frick Collection, the Taconic Foundation, and the Hudson River Foundation, and an honorary trustee of the American Museum of Natural History, Boker has served on many nonprofits supporting the arts, the environment, and the community.
The Burkes

Gil Burke and Sarah (Sally) Cooke married in 1956 and moved to New York after Gil’s graduation from Harvard Law School in 1960. In 1963, as friends of the Doyleys and parents of Molly, about to turn four, and two-year-old Dana (Nat would be born that September), they were instrumental in bringing their enthusiasm, energy, and skills to the founding and early operation of WSMS.

Gil’s professional focus on international transactions did not distract him from using his legal abilities to ensure the successful launch of WSMS. He was the school’s first treasurer. In addition, in those early years he obtained a grant from the Astor Foundation to allow the school to start a day care program, an important adjunct to the school that reflected its focus on serving families from a broad range of backgrounds.

Sal was the school’s first admissions director. She also brought her love of music to the school and made it part of school life. After WSMS, she worked as the admissions director, a teacher, and then as assistant to the head at the Town School in New York City. After Town, she turned her life in a new direction, enrolling at Hunter College to receive her master’s in Social Work. While there she met Alisa Del Tufo, and so began a friendship that would lead to a lifelong commitment to Sanctuary for Families, a resource for victims of domestic violence. The following years were spent pursuing grants, engaging friends and contacts as potential fundraisers, recruiting volunteers, and building Sanctuary’s social services from the ground up. In the early 1990s they acquired a large crumbling building in the Bronx from the city for a dollar. Although Sally died in 2006, her legacy endures: that formerly abandoned structure now shelters 56 women and children each night in a safe, comfortable environment, named the Sarah Burke House in her honor.

Formerly a partner of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke, where he was co-managing partner for 12 years, Gil is now a trustee of Boscobel Restoration and the Hudson Highlands Land Trust, both located in Garrison, New York. He also serves on the boards of the Open Space Institute and Catskill Mountainkeeper, and is a member of the President’s Council of Sanctuary for Families. He is now married to Sarah Bayne, an educator who is director of educational design at Avenues, a new school in New York City. The couple lives in Garrison, New York.
The Huntingtons

Like the Burkes, the Huntingtons were already parents (of Christopher and Stewart, with Matthew due in December) on that fateful March night in 1963. A professional colleague of Boker Doyle’s, Larry was well suited to complement his friend in providing managerial and financial guidance to the growing school. Larry spent more than 40 years at Fiduciary Trust, retiring as Chairman in 2000. Like Boker, he has served on and chaired multiple boards, including those of Woods Hole Research Center, St. Luke’s–Roosevelt Hospital, Beth Israel Medical Center, and the South Street Seaport Museum. He is former Chairman of New York Law School and the New York City Citizens Budget Commission, and has served as a member of the New York State City Commission on Integrity in Government. In his spare time Larry has been a mountain climber (two attempts on Everest in addition to other mountaineering conquests), and he continues to be a competitive sailor in a boat he designed himself.

Olivia worked with Susanna in the day-to-day operations of the school in the early years of WSMS. She received an MSW from Columbia and later a master’s in Divinity from Union Theological Seminary. She was ordained by the United Church of Christ at Riverside Church in 1991. She has been employed as a social worker and has practiced her ministry on a freelance basis, conducting marriages and baptisms, and filling in for colleagues from time to time. She is currently a social work consultant.

The Schwarzes

Back in 1963 the Schwarz family was also keenly interested in finding the right first school for three-year-old Eric and new baby Adair (Eliza would be born in 1966). Fritz and Marian had recently returned from two years in Nigeria, where Marian taught native Ibo women at a teachers’ training college and Fritz played a major role in helping the Northern Nigeria state government revise its legal system to conform with the federal constitution of the newly independent country of Nigeria. On their return, settled on the Upper West Side, Fritz joined Cravath, Swaine & Moore as a litigator, while Marian pursued a master’s in Education. Their talents and interests, especially in support of cross-cultural education, were put to good use in creating the West Side Montessori School we know today.

While on leave from Cravath, Fritz served as chief counsel to the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, aka the Church Committee (1975–1976). He was also the Corporation Counsel under New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch (1982–1986). In 1989 he chaired the commission that fundamentally rewrote the New York City Charter. He has chaired the New York City Campaign Finance Board and the boards of the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Vera Institute of Justice, and the Fund for the City of New York. In 2007, he co-authored Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror (The New Press, 2007). He is currently Chief Counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School.

Marian’s post-WSMS years have been full as well. She taught high school in Harlem for seven years when her children were small. Then, seeking to touch as many people as possible, she became a literacy consultant to school systems, prison systems, addiction
programs, and arts-in-education programs—all while pursuing a doctorate in Anthropology and Linguistics at Columbia. Mayor Ed Koch hired Marian as Coordinator of Youth Services and Special Assistant for Education. In this capacity she helped increase the immunization rate of the city's students from 20 percent to the highest in the country; established the Beacon schools, a network of community schools open late into the evening and containing family health clinics; launched after-school programs and education programs in prisons; and created the largest adult literacy program in the country. Later she founded ALMA, the Adult Literacy Media Alliance, which sponsors TV411, an Emmy-winning public television series that teaches literacy and numeracy skills through topics like money management, child rearing, and health; is broadcast nationally; and is now also a website used by teachers and learners all over the country.

In 2005 Marian stepped down from her role as ALMA's executive director and moved with her husband, Larry Cross, to their farm in Katonah, NY. Starting from scratch, they have created Amawalk Farm, the only certified organic farm in Westchester County, renowned for its garlic and salad greens. Education is still part of her DNA: Amawalk Farm is a resource for local families and schools. As Marian says, “The children pick things and ask questions. We yak the entire time. Teaching and learning are constantly happening at the farm.”

The Wassermans

As an architect, Joe Wasserman brought a different—and valuable—perspective to the birth of WSMS. His wife, Elizabeth (better known as Bay), wanted an integrated, non-competitive academic situation for their daughters, Lindsay and Andrea (Marion would be born in 1966)—one in which children from diverse backgrounds could learn to “get along.”

An architect active in community planning and affordable housing (both urban and rural), Joe put his talents to good use in the 1970s, when the New York State Urban Development Corporation tapped him to design buildings for the elderly in Coney Island and housing in Westchester and Rochester. In the 1980s he was a principal in designing and developing affordable housing in urban renewal zones. One of those initiatives produced the Columbus Townhouses, a row of condominiums on West 89th Street that won a citation from the City Club of New York in 1990. Joe moved to the Berkshires in 1991, and continued to work on local projects until his death from cancer in 2004.

Bay Wasserman raised three daughters and led a creative and productive life. In the late 1960s she rediscovered her passion for the violin, practicing up to five hours a day. In the mid-1970s she tutored high school students in English at the Rudolf Steiner School, where her girls were enrolled. For more than a dozen years she volunteered every week as a hospice worker at St. Rose's on the Lower East Side, feeding patients, reading to them, holding their hands, and helping them end their days with her generous attention. In the early ’80s she took up watercolor painting. Her bold sense of color and sensitivity to shapes, combined with a quirky eye for integrating ordinary objects, yielded a treasure trove of over 300 beautiful still lifes and landscapes cherished by her family. Bay wrote imaginative poetry; her quiet but voluminous store of poems includes annual poetic messages sent to a huge list of friends, encouraging them to focus on what is truly important even if it seems mundane. In the mid-’80s Bay took it upon herself to learn Russian and found a kindred culture in the many Russians who helped her learn their language. She made two lengthy trips to St. Petersburg, where she taught English as a second language, reading and writing poetry and plays, and finding creative ways to make a foreign language come alive for her students. And she graciously and enthusiastically crossed the country numerous times to spend time with her five grandsons and one granddaughter. She died in 2011.

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The consensus around the table on that fateful evening in 1963 was to commit to creating a progressive co-educational academic environment on the Upper West Side such as had never existed before. It is abundantly clear that founding WSMS was just one early step for these ten admirable individuals in a lifetime of accomplishment. Fifty years later we salute the lasting spirit and vision of these pioneers with gratitude from thousands of students (and their parents) who have found WSMS “where to begin...”