Great Beginnings
Spring 2016
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IN MIMI’S VOICE

Spring is in the air and in the steps of our children. So much about them has changed since last September: they have made great strides in independence and autonomy, in academic and social skills. They have learned to complete ever more challenging work, observe and discuss the world around them, express their feelings, navigate social interactions, and so much more. I am deeply grateful to our teachers for the incredible talent, expertise and commitment they bring to helping each of our students develop a lasting foundation to support a lifetime of learning.

Teachers are center stage in this issue of Great Beginnings, as they should be. Fifteen teachers, representing seven classrooms, give us a sense of what kids are really doing when they are out of the classroom: in the gym, on the roof, walking in the neighborhood, or in the park. Sure, they are getting exercise. They are also learning how to be safe outside. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg, as this series of articles makes clear …

Last spring, I wrote an article for this magazine called Celebrating Differences. I noted that, “For more than 53 years we have taken great pride in our ‘multi’ diversity: economic, ethnic, and cultural. We’ve lived it, but we have never actively celebrated it.”

That article was an invitation to our faculty and families (since it is they, first and foremost, who are the children’s role models and guides) to help me think creatively about how we can use the wonderful diversity of our community to learn more from one another about the world that we share. And, going deeper, how do we help children develop a strong sense of their personal identities, while simultaneously learning to embrace and respect the differences and rights of others?

In Social Justice Education and WSMS: Helping Teachers Support a Culture of Equity, Giuliana de Grazia, head teacher in 3W am/pm, explains why it is critical for teachers, especially in a community as diverse as WSMS, to better understand themselves and the spoken and unspoken perspectives that they bring. She describes how a group of faculty, under her guidance, is doing just that.

I am deeply grateful for what parents and faculty have done and are doing to help us innovatively address and benefit from our diversity, and I am excited by the progress we have already made. Of course, there is more to do and I’ll be sure to keep you posted.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to Five WSMS Families. This issue presents a profile of five current families who enrolled a first child at WSMS—and then, after some time away, chose to come back to WSMS with another child. Family stories are one of my favorite features in this magazine. They reflect different facets of who we are, as well as the strong values that we share.

Happy reading,

Mimi Basso
Head of School
OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM AT WSMS...
WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON?

INTRODUCTION BY MIMI BASSO

When you see a class of WSMS children outside of their classroom—taking a walk in the neighborhood, walking, playing or exploring nature in the park, on the stairs going up to the gym or the roof, or playing in the gym or on the roof—what do you think?

These kids:
1. listen to and follow directions
2. are exuberant and curious
3. converse readily with classmates and teachers
4. love to sing—and know lots of songs
5. play creatively
6. treat classmates kindly

The answer is: all of the above!

Our talented teachers are masterful at making the very difficult look easy, but don’t let appearances fool you. When you see these WSMS kids out of their classroom, you can make a sure bet that a lot of planning, repetition and expertise have been in play. It’s a little like Malcolm Gladwell’s concept of 10,000 hours leading to mastery. From the day they begin their education at WSMS, children are helped to become independent learners, and kind, peaceful, respectful human beings. They are encouraged to follow their interests and positively navigate relationships with other children—and to do this on their own. “On their own?” you say. “But they are only babes—they range in age from 2 to 6! How can they be doing these things on their own?”

Brain research continues to confirm what Maria Montessori knew more than a century ago. What happens early in a child’s education matters for a lifetime. The brain is forming connections at an exponential pace before the age of six. Montessori called this the “absorbent period,” and indeed children are sponges when it comes to learning the immutable truths of a successful life. Things like self-confidence, getting along with others, willingness to take risks, and resilience and persistence in the face of challenge, are learned best early on. WSMS teachers are dedicated to making sure this happens.

These articles will give you a glimpse of what’s going on when WSMS kids are out of the classroom. Yes, they look to be having tons of fun. But another sure bet is that there is a lot of learning going on, beyond the gross motor development that is the most basic reason for outside the classroom activities.

The faculty members who contributed to this feature represent a broad spectrum of experience: some are master teachers with decades of classroom know-how (one has been at WSMS for 35 years) and some are only in their second year. I am very proud of the results. The approaches they take are individual, and that’s a very good thing. Because on a deeper level, WSMS teachers are imbued with the strong culture and best practices that have been developed and passed down through generations of teachers. They are joined in the mission of making every day matter for every child.

Spoiler alert: teachers share some of their secrets for working with children! Take note, parents, and be prepared to copy.
OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM AT WSMS...WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON?

LEAVING THE CLASSROOM

OUT THE CLASSROOM DOOR
First things first! Some important classroom transition strategies need to be implemented before you can get a group of twenty-plus good-humored, cooperative, all senses open and receptive, three-to-six-year-old WSMS students out the door—all at once. Children need to be mentally and physically prepared in order to make the most of an upcoming activity.

There are many creative strategies that teachers employ to signal to children that they need to put away their work, or placehold it for their return. Some teachers use a song as the signal to get ready to go outside or upstairs to the gym or the roof: ‘We’re at the door, we’re at the door, we’re ready to begin. We’re at the door, we’re at the door, we’re going to the gym.’

Some use a music box to indicate five minutes to finish up your work, and a xylophone tone to announce that it’s time to go. Other teachers may start a sing-along that accomplishes the same thing: ‘We’re standing in the line. Our arms are by our side. Our eyes are looking straight ahead. We’re ready to go. Voices are off...’

Still others begin the transition by having the children sit on the steps, ready to be called to the line by the host of the day or the teacher according to specific criteria. For example: ‘If you are wearing red, please come to the line; and so on. In 4Eam, the host stands with the teacher, while the teacher calls children to the line, one by one. The message: accept with kindness the hand you are holding. This strategy also gives teachers a chance to pair up children to maximize the benefits for each child and the classroom community: younger children with older, social with shy, etc.

Just before exiting the door, some teachers ask children to do a body check: hands at your sides, eyes front, quiet voices. Safety procedures are reviewed: if you bump into someone, check in to see if they are all right; let a teacher know; and, even if you weren’t the bumper, show your kindness and check in with the child who was bumped.

No matter which transition strategy is being used (and WSMS teachers have dozens of them), its purpose is always the same: to create an environment where children can be successful. Going up or down the stairs with more than twenty children may seem simple, but there is a lot going on individually. The children are developing the physical skills of climbing stairs; keeping up with their classmates (without tripping); holding onto the handrail; keeping their eyes focused on the person in front; listening and understanding verbal and visual directions. In addition, they are practicing all-important social skills: being a kind partner; conversing in a quiet tone; being spontaneous in hallway conversation; using “quiet voices” out of respect for the children in the classrooms they pass on the way up.
IN THE GYM AND ON THE ROOF

UP THE STAIRS TO ANOTHER PLACE TO LEARN

The trip up the stairs goes fairly quickly, because the children are excited about their destination. They enter the gym in an orderly fashion and quickly prepare for fun by taking off shoes and socks. Being barefoot provides additional sensory stimulation for developing large motor skills and a sense of your body in space. They tuck their socks into their shoes and line them up neatly against the wall. Grace and courtesy prevail; if asked, older children will gladly help younger ones manage shoes and socks or the fasteners on their outerwear. Once the class is ready for play, the host of the day reviews the protocol: How many children can be on the loft/jumping tube/bike/climbing bars/jungle gym, etc. Then the host of the day demonstrates the chosen direction for running (clockwise or counterclockwise) while classmates cheer, and he or she calls all children to play: by the color they are wearing, by age, by first letter of first name, and so on. (Entry to the roof is equally organized, though shoes stay on there.)

WORK IT ON OUT

At this point children are free to play in this large and inviting space. Their exuberance is unleashed; most children break into a run, making individual and group beelines to the rockers, to the loft, to the jumping tube, to the scooters. Or they run laps around the space. Or they head to the play equipment and ask, “Who wants to build a brick house and play the Three Little Pigs with me?” You might imagine mayhem, but no: children manage themselves remarkably well, while their teachers carefully watch, ready to guide or intervene if necessary. “Sometimes, I might suggest that two or more children play together,” says Cailyn De Blie, teacher in 2E, “if I want to foster new or stronger relationships. But for the most part, as Maria Montessori would say, ‘the children are working as if I did not exist,’ which is the best possible learning situation for them.”

The clarity and consistency of the ground rules for safe and kind behavior, which are set forth at the beginning of the school year and reinforced in myriad ways throughout every day, enable this wonderful freedom. Gretchen Amberg, head teacher in 2E, explains: “Children are able to support each other’s safety and navigate inevitable glitches in social interactions, for the most part, on their own. If child falls or is bumped, other children will check in to make sure he is okay.” (If the child is not okay, they know to involve a teacher immediately.) Usually kindness from a peer does the trick, and before you know it, the bumped or fallen child is quickly back in the game. Kindness works in navigating situations where there is some conflict or disappointment, too. For example, if two children want to be the “big sister” or play with the same piece of equipment, the first thing they do is have a conversation. “I feel sad that I can’t be the ‘big sister’ too,” says the disappointed child. The child who has the “big sister” role might say, “You can be the ‘big sister’ next, or let’s be twin ‘big sisters.’”

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“The remarkable thing about this,” remarks Gretchen, “is how often the children can work it out on their own.”

WHAT THEY’RE PLAYING…
WHAT THEY’RE LEARNING…

Children use the gym and roof equipment in multiple ways. Each element of our state-of-the-art equipment set up is designed to help build children’s strength and agility and inspire their imagination—all within clear guidelines for safety. The loft becomes a lighthouse, a space station, a super hero base, a treetop in the jungle. The rockers become boats, baby cribs, and islands in the ocean. The variously-sized foam blocks and mats are used to build houses and bridges and castles and more. Maiko Ishii, teacher in 4E, points out: “The children are stretching their muscles in very positive ways when they lift and pull the mats and the foam blocks to create their structures. It’s wonderful to watch them build, destroy what they’ve built, and then build again, each time figuring out which combinations of blocks and mats will help them realize their vision.”

Children create and play mixed-age group games in what educational theorists call “mature play.” They (1) take on roles, (2) define and agree to a set of rules, and (3) follow those rules. Good practice for life, for sure. The children play a variety of games, and they creatively intersect them, defying gender stereotyping. Separate games will spontaneously merge at the suggestion of one or two children: the Super Heroes will save the Family from the fire. Or the Komodo Dragons will eat the snakes that are attacking the baby lizards. They are certainly having fun; they are running and jumping and using their bodies to build muscle strength throughout the 45-minute period. They are using language to define rules and to navigate relationships successfully. They are taking information that they have learned in a class—for example, about mammals like cheetahs, lions and tigers—and applying it to a game. They are solving problems: what's the best way to save the babies, cross the bridge, build the fort?

Julianne Butterfield, teacher in 3E, points out: “The energy and camaraderie during gym is amazing. Children use their imaginations to create wonderful games, typically without any help from teachers. Watching them play, I can observe their language development and see what inspires them. Often children who are shy in using language in the classroom are much more verbal in this environment. By observing their spontaneous language, I’m better able to support them in the classroom.” Erica Clarke, who teaches in 3E with Julianne, goes further: “The energy and intense social interaction that take place in the gym and on the roof often help a child who might be subdued in class feel more confident and take a stronger place in group. Remarkably, these shining moments that occur spontaneously during play usually stick, and we can see the new sense of confidence displayed in the classroom.”

“Children need to move, no matter what,” says Rebecca Estomago, a teacher in 4W. “Our gym and roof are marvelous environments that help children form relationships and be creative with the equipment.” Donna Longdon, head teacher in 4W, adds: “Gym and roof play enables children to take more risks, to challenge their bodies in a safe environment designed just for them. One child who has avoided using the monkey bars came to me and said he wanted to ‘persevere on this’ (he just learned the word in the After Lunch Bunch), and asked for my help. He was able to climb up by following my verbal cues: put your right arm on the vertical bar, pull your self up, etc. He did it himself and rewarded me with a great big confident smile. If I had lifted him up to the bars, his sense of accomplishment would have been diminished.”

Our gym and our rooftop are exceptional play spaces for our children, but as Beata Owczarzak, teacher in 4Eam/pm, reminds us: “If we didn’t reinforce the rule: you can’t say, you can’t play, our gym and roof might be state-of-the-art spaces, but not be nearly as wonderful for children.”

The children don’t realize it, but their gym and rooftop play is integral to all they learn at WSMS: language, problem solving, spatial relationships, personal relationships, motor skill development, and so much more.
GOING OUTSIDE WITH OUR MULTI-AGE CLASSES
In anticipation of a trip outdoors, 4Eam co-head teachers Robyn Mernick and Chelsea Petrozzo make sure that children know the agenda in advance. Are we going out on an exploratory mission to find leaves, to look for stones? Is it part of a cloud study? Is it a neighborhood architecture survey? Is it just a quick walk around the block for exercise?

The 4Eam class took a recent foray into the park to observe the changes that had taken place in the daffodils and other flowering bulbs since their last visit a week earlier. Children were reminded of park protocol: don’t take growing things or live worms; we must be good to our environment.

On the walk over, the children were enthralled, talking about the flowers, the clouds and the birds’ nests with teachers and each other. Gathering by a perennial garden where many blooms were evident, Robyn handed each child a personalized handmade journal to use in capturing his or her impressions. Children were very focused, making drawings and using their words to express what they were seeing. Binoculars were handed out, too. Children took turns sharing them with surprisingly little teacher intervention.

On the way back, the children found their partners, had “eyes” on the teacher leading the group and the person in front of them, and followed the rules of street safety that are talked about, modeled by teachers, and implemented often and in many ways every day: stay to the right, hold hands with your partner, and keep your place in line. They conversed using quiet voices. When they reached the two flights of stairs leading out of Riverside Park, they moved effortlessly and without being told to the right bannister. When they reached the light at Riverside Drive and 91st Street, Robyn pointed to the street signs and read them out loud. The light was red. Children spontaneously sang this song (one that is often used when outside the classrooms):

Twinkle, twinkle, little light
Shining on the corner, shining bright
Red means stop
Yellow means slow
When it turns green
Then you go.

A SAMPLING OF PARK ACTIVITIES FOR THREE-TO-SIX-YEAR-OLDS
Most of the time our three-to-six-year-old classes avoid the traditional park playgrounds. Chelsea explains: “I grew up in Manhattan; my parents’ go-to outdoor activity for me was the playground, then home. We never went further into the park. I only realized much later the immense opportunities for exploring nature that existed in city parks, and I’m so grateful to be able to provide this to my students.”

Here are just a few examples of what 4Eam children have done this year:
• Collected leaves in the fall and categorized them by color and shape, learning the names and the nature of the trees upon which they grow.
• Conducted a stick bundling ceremony: Each child finds a stick and brings it to the

ON THE STREET AND IN THE PARK
teachers. Once all the sticks are collected, teachers demonstrate the strength of the individual sticks, showing that they are bendable or in some instances breakable. Teachers then bundle the sticks together to show the children the increased strength of a bundle. To emphasize the parallel sense of community, children are taught the song: *The more we stick together, together, together. The more we stick together, the happier we’ll be.*

- Identified and mapped primary, secondary and tertiary colors, and also identified the many shades of green that could be found in the park, using our color box materials.

**THE INCREDIBLE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY**

Joan Shisler, WSMS Nature Specialist and teacher for 35 years, details some of the reasons why outside play is so good for children on so many levels: “They have the chance to get a little messy. They can be exposed to the bacteria that we need to be healthy. Instead of just using their eyes to play a video game, they are using ALL of their senses to learn. By inventing games and playing those games with a group of children, they are gaining a sense of control, the ability to express themselves and to play well with others. And, finally, playing outdoors is where children burn the most calories.”

“We’re trying to create global citizens who care for their environment,” says Robyn Mernick. “Yet we tend to put the cart before the horse by rushing to teach young children about recycling, and melting ice caps. I feel we must first help them to fall in love with the incredible beauty that is around them. Children love to explore the tiniest things. By helping them examine basic and easily accessible things like leaves, earth, worms, sticks and clouds, there is so much to learn and so much to love.”
As Twos Program Coordinator, Karen Deinzer marvels: “It’s amazing how many things two year olds are capable of mastering. Our program gives children the opportunity to discover things on their own, and the responsibility to do things for themselves.” Getting them out the door, and making sure that they are ready to be engaged and benefit from the activity, requires an intense level of preparation. “We follow a morning routine that helps children to predict what’s coming next. This is crucial to their readiness,” explains Maria Rosado, head teacher in 1W. “We have a work session; group time; nap; diapering; and then we’re ready to go outside.”

Neeta Arbeiter, head teacher in the Garden, describes the process: “The children put on their sweaters, jackets and coats, and then their reflective vests. Early in the year they may ask for help from another child or the teacher. As the year rolls on, they get better and faster at doing this all by themselves.”

While children are putting on their coats and safety vests, those who are ready will listen to a book being read or sing songs. As soon as all the children are dressed, the teacher gets out the “loop” that connects them to one another, and then they review the safety protocol.

By taking these youngest students out almost every day—weather permitting—we are helping them to learn many things: (1) how to walk on a city street; (2) the words to describe what they are seeing: the lions on a front stoop, the Joan of Arc statue in Riverside Park; (3) to observe and talk about the weather, the clouds, the sky, the trees, and to notice the changes that take are taking place with the changing of the seasons; (4) songs about what they are seeing: for example, that wonderful standard, The Wheels On the Bus.

Once outside, children learn to keep up the pace, stomp their feet, take marching steps and clap hands. They also converse among themselves and with teachers about what they are seeing: owls; a balloon; all the things that are red, green, yellow, or blue.

“While walking, children often talk about what they do when they are not in school,” says Kassi Baxter, teacher in 1W. “One child might tell her partner or one of her teachers about ‘going to the Hippo Park with Daddy and my sister;’ another will remark that ‘Grandma takes me to her house on a bus.’ They ask teachers how they get to school, and they talk about their own journey to school.”

Another discussion involves the different kinds of work that are being done by the people that they see on the street: taxi drivers, mail deliverers, construction workers, police officers, cherry picker operators, and more.

“Some of the best times,” says Kassi, “are when the children share an experience that leads to more discussion back in the classroom. For example, one day it was so windy crossing the street as we were returning to school, that the children just cracked up with laughter. Back in the classroom, the kids were totally involved in a discussion about the wind: where does it come from, what makes it so strong, and how wind is helpful to us.”

“When we get back to school,” Neeta remarks, “the process of building independence continues: children take off their vests and outerwear and place them into their own cubbies, wash their hands, and get ready for lunch.”

The two-year-olds, as a group, aren’t quite ready for the more structured park activities that the three-to-six-year-olds enjoy, but they are similarly inquisitive and insightful, and benefit in many of the ways Joan describes. Most importantly, with every trip they are developing independence, opening their eyes to new observations, becoming global citizens and getting plenty of fresh air.

Many thanks to the teachers who so kindly contributed their experience and expertise to this article: Neeta Arbeiter, G; Kassi Baxter, 1W; Karen Deinzer, G and 1W; Maria Rosado, 1W; Gretchen Amberg and Cailyn DeBie, 2E; Joan Shisler, 2E and 2W LAP; Nature Specialist; Julianne Butterfield and Erica Clarke, 3E; Robyn Mernick, Chelsea Petrozzo, Maiko Ishii, 4Eam; Beata Owczarzak, 4Eam/pm; Donna Longdon and Rebecca Estomago, 4W.
SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity] is an organization developed in 1987 by Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style. It was founded at Wellesley College, and today it is the largest nationwide professional development project led by peers.

The SEED website outlines their work: “The National SEED Project℠ is a peer-led professional development program that creates conversational communities to drive personal, organizational, and societal change toward greater equity and diversity. We do this by training individuals to facilitate ongoing seminars within their own institutions and communities. SEED leaders design their seminars to include personal reflection and testimony, listening to others’ voices, and learning experientially and collectively. Through this methodology, SEED equips us to connect our lives to one another and to society at large by acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege.”

SEED helps teachers become authorities on themselves and create a respectful community for each other, and furthermore, SEED helps teachers become more aware of their work in classrooms, with colleagues, and with families.

http://nationalseedproject.org

SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION and WSMS
HELPING TEACHERS SUPPORT A CULTURE OF EQUITY

By Giuliana de Grazia, Head Teacher 3Wam/pm

When I first toured WSMS, I learned that economic, cultural and ethnic diversity had been part of the DNA of this school since its founding. I discovered that WSMS was one of the first NYC independent early childhood schools to define diversity as an essential part of its mission and had created a financial aid program to address equity of access more than 50 years ago. I came to learn that WSMS was also a community that is continually reflecting on its practice and growing through professional development, supportive leadership, and a faculty of dedicated, creative, and curious teachers. I soon realized that WSMS was a place in which I could further develop and share my passion for social justice education.

While working on my Masters in Early Childhood and Special Education at Bank Street College of Education, I completed an independent study called “Reflecting Together on Race, Privilege, and Teaching: Why Bank Street Needs Stronger Commitment to Teacher Education in Social Justice.” In my search for programs that successfully prepared teachers for diverse classrooms, I discovered an organization known as SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity]. The work they were doing really impressed me: it was reflective and collaborative, professional and personal. Last year, with Mimi’s support, I was able to attend SEED leadership training, which has allowed me to continue this work for myself and to share it with a trusted, caring, brilliant community of teachers at WSMS.

The work we do together at SEED also aligns with the life experience I have had outside of an early childhood classroom. Some experiences have been painful, even excruciating, but they have made me more aware, compassionate, and active in speaking up about injustice. I care deeply about supporting victims of rape and sexual assault, helping adolescents and young women and men to develop positive body image and to overcome eating disorders, de-stigmatizing mental health disorders, and facing the gross reality of the state of our country’s prison system. I’ve come to see how so much of the injustice is interconnected and holds firm in our complicated and busy lives. I also feel strongly that a simple way to learn, heal, and build a healthy community is through finding the space and courage to have hard conversations. I am thrilled that WSMS is proving to be a place for teachers to undertake these conversations, so that we can better understand ourselves, our society, and the teaching practice to which we are all so fully committed.

DO WE REALLY NEED SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SCHOOL?
It may seem that social justice education—or learning about and challenging the injustices in our society that are related to racism, sexism, economic disparity, ableism, sexual identity, etc.—have no place in early child-
hood education, or are unnecessary areas of expertise for early childhood educators. In fact, this work is critical. There is a clear need for teachers to better understand themselves and their perspectives while working in the diverse classrooms we are so lucky inhabit at WSMS.

Current research and Dr. Maria Montessori’s philosophy both point to reasons why we, as a community of adults who care deeply about the early childhood experience of our children, should pay attention to our own behaviors and perspectives.

First, a sampling of research shows:

- Children are not only living in an unequal society, they also develop an awareness of race and ethnicity at a young age, and they make assumptions based on what their society teaches them (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).
- By three years old, children have already developed ingroup preference (Bronson & Merryman, 2009).
- Soto and Swadener note in “Towards Liberatory Early Childhood Theory...” that while “it has taken a whole ‘oppressive village’ to systematically educate young children to internalize racial stereotypes and hatred...at the same time these research projects helped make the case that early childhood education is truly a window of opportunity for equity, social justice, and reconstruction” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 44).
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Second, due to the highly malleable, “absorbent” state of the child during these primary years that Dr. Montessori writes so beautifully about:

- Children are taking in all of the information offered to them by their environment and the people they interact with, especially the teachers and parents they look to for guidance.
- We need to be especially aware of our own biases, preferences, and understandings as we interact with these rapidly developing young people. 
- We need to be well-educated on the importance of having a classroom that reflects everyone within it, that respects the differences in the family and home cultures of our students, and that gives each child a safe place to be known and to celebrate his or her unique identity.

WSMS TEACHERS SEEK EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

How do we create these equitable classrooms and positive relationships with families? We start with ourselves. As I’ve learned through my facilitator training at SEED, this is where we begin: we look into ourselves, our ideas, our practices, and we discuss and explore our perceptions with others, using resources, activities, and a dedication to sensitivity, openness, and honesty. I have the privilege of working with ten colleagues this year who meet with me once a month on Friday afternoons to engage in community building. We have deep very personal discussions related to a story we’ve been told, or a film we’ve seen. We write about our experiences with gender, race, power and then talk some more. We’re both challenged and delighted by what we are learning about each other and ourselves. Mimi is supportive and eager for us to continue and to expand our efforts to include more teachers.

Through SEED, teachers have a real opportunity to grow. Through their growth, this community can become a place that is more aware of its own diversity, and thus better able to celebrate, support, and respect every teacher, every family, and every child. This brings me back to the question of why I do SEED at WSMS.

I do SEED at WSMS because it is a place where we are all growing, children and adults alike. And through that growth, particularly the development of the young child, we bring peace and justice to our society.

Dr Montessori captures our shared vision:

“An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live.” (Education and Peace)

“We then become witnesses to the development of the human soul; the emergence of the New Man, who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mould the future of mankind.” (The Absorbent Mind, 8)

Bibliography
PERSPECTIVES

It is clear from Giul’s heartfelt piece that SEED has had a major impact on her, personally and professionally, and that it inspired her to share that with her colleagues. Several of them offer their thoughts—even using poetry as a venue which echoes Giul’s “lifetime of experience”—confirming the profound value of their ongoing discussions:

The implementation of SEED at West Side has been one of the highlights of my teaching year. By meeting together to discuss hot-button topics such as oppression, power, and privilege, I have come to better understand how personal experiences have shaped the lens through which I look at my world and that of my colleagues. Honestly sharing our own stories in an intimate and trusting setting allowed room for each of our voices to be heard and reflected upon and I felt the connections between every teacher grow. I believe SEED has given us some of the tools we can use to become better-informed, empathic adults for the children in our care.

—Rebecca Estomago

In SEED, we started off with conversations about our backgrounds, and these conversations grew very organically to include our honest personal thoughts, worries, and biases. We discovered the dangers of a single story, and heard worries, and biases. We discovered the dangers of a single story, and heard about the experiences of others and help them to express themselves. We show them a path towards peace and how to care for others. Teaching children how to understand others is an even larger goal. SEED has reminded me of the significance in this, as we work to create peace at a global level.

—Lindsay Cohen

After my first session of SEED, I came away thinking: Why I had never heard of this organization before? We spend a big chunk of our day with our colleagues, and we try to get to know each other by sharing tidbits of information of our daily lives, but we are always careful to never bring, religion, money, race or even politics in our conversations. And that’s true for all work places no matter what profession.

What SEED offers us here at WSMS is the opportunity to really see each other. We learn to celebrate the diversity that each of us brings to this institution. Having a safe haven—to talk, to discuss and identify biases and prejudices in the outside world—makes us reflect on our own, intentional or not. Teachers attending these meetings become more self-aware and consciously seek to avoid biases, both in themselves and in the children they shape and mold throughout the year.

—Divya Narang

Togetherness watch The Color of Fear, a documentary about eight men brought together to discuss race in America. We saw that being able to understand the pain of another person’s experience can inspire change from within. Also, when a person is able to share an experience, the voicing offers relief and it can break down barriers. I learned that we cannot stomp out voices and we have to make sure people are listening well to the “uncomfortable” issues. While these social problems are big and challenging, they have everything to do with our culture and how we are raised and, therefore, these discussions do translate to teaching in early childhood classrooms. We want to show children the experiences of others and help them to express themselves. We show them a path towards peace and how to care for others. Teaching children how to understand others is an even larger goal. SEED has reminded me of the significance in this, as we work to create peace at a global level.

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—Divya Narang

Girl

Wake up, roll out of bed—forward, backward it doesn’t matter.
Nourish yourself—eggs with cheese melted in? Please, Dad.

Clothing doesn’t have to match—orange, pink, polkadot...
I like red and black, pink is ugly except for when I paint my nails that sparkly fuchsia. Bitten nails.

This is the game of Life. Roll the dice. Move your car. Here is where you get married! Pick a little pink person, or a little blue…to join you on this journey of life.

Or don’t get married at all.

Wow, you’re zooming right along, having a baby already? Adopt a girl! Adopt a boy!
Enjoy dolls, help mom sew satin dresses for Barbie. Roll with the Hess trucks along the living room rug, beyond to the kitchen linoleum.


Basketball and creek jumping in the woods behind the middle school.
Daydreaming about crushes— that boy Connor made my knees weak. I saw him at Old Navy.

Help Dad with the laundry, Mom with the garden. I don’t want to put my hands in the dirt right now. Time for bed. Sheep follow one another off the edge of a cliff. Don’t be a sheep, my parents said.

Be Anything

But.

—Elisa Rosoff
FIRST ANNUAL WSMS ALUMNI COCKTAIL PARTY…

come back to the beginning

Wednesday, April 20, 2016

An enthusiastic group of some 80 parents of alumni celebrated their first ever official gathering on a balmy April evening. Early arrivals were greeted warmly by Mimi, and directed up the stairs to what many remembered as a fairly unremarkable gym. Peeking in at the cheerful classrooms along the way, they experienced nostalgia—cylinder blocks, the pink tower, the brown stairs—and surprise: dishwashers?!

Round the last corner was the biggest surprise: a mundane play space had been transformed into an aesthetic multi-purpose room. And now it showed yet another adaptation as a great place for a party.

Enjoying wine, beer, and amazing appetizers catered by multi-talented receptionist Amy Stoney, parents from multiple generations re-connected with old (in time, not age!) friends from the past, reminisced about their children’s experiences 5, 10, even 30 years before, and caught up on their accomplishments and adventures since then. Mimi welcomed the gathering with warmth and enthusiasm, and briefly described so much that has happened in her tenure, including the greening of the classrooms and the adoption of the Twos Program. She reminded parents to check out the Library on their way out—back in the day it was a scruffy place to grab a cup of coffee and house Second Hand Sue prior to the Spring Fair! Another highlight was the presence of familiar faces from the faculty and administration, including Joan Shisler, Windy Wellington, the Mack sisters, Barbara Grant, and (of course) Judy Lyons, herself the parent of two alumni and back for her second term as Director of Admissions. Special thanks to parent/former Board member, Nikki Chase-Levin, who oversaw the evening in her role as Events Coordinator.

On the way out, parents waxed nostalgic over the past and expressed their gratitude for this wonderful opportunity to stay connected to the place they happily call a “great beginning” for their children.
FIVE WSMS FAMILIES: DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES… one deeply shared commitment

If you ask a WSMS family about their geographic background, chances are you’ll be taken on a globetrotting journey. WSMS families do indeed reflect New York City’s continuing power to attract people from far and wide, as this series of WSMS Family Stories clearly demonstrates. They hail from as far away as the former Soviet Union—via Israel, England and Southern California; from Mexico and the Dominican Republic; from rural and suburban Kentucky; and from Michigan. We have one parent who lived on many Department of Defense bases in Europe…and only one homegrown New Yorker among the ten.

And, while they reflect the diversity of our global universe, these five families are joined in their commitment to make sure that their children are given a solid beginning education. Each of these families chose WSMS, not only for darling child number one, but also the second time around—and one family made WSMS their choice the third time around, too. Let’s hear their stories:

JENNIFER AND JEFFREY BROWN
Jennifer, currently a fulltime mom, and Jeffrey, a computer programmer in the finance industry, met at MIT. Jennifer had seen a lot of the world in her younger days. Her dad was in the U.S. Armed Forces; her elementary years were spent in Germany. Jeffrey grew up in Lansing, Michigan. They were both hooked on learning, and MIT was a perfect place for them. “It wasn’t uncool to be a serious student; everyone was working really hard,” says Jennifer.

When it came time to choosing a school for Nathan (who is now at the Speyer Legacy School), Jennifer says: “We learned about the Montessori approach and we were intrigued. The focus on self-directed learning and independence seemed perfect for Nathan, who was curious and interested in just about everything.” The Browns went on a mission, touring at a bunch of schools in the city. They were looking for the right energy level and tone. “We shied away from pre-schools that seemed too focused on achievement. We wanted a school where the spark of excitement about learning and discovery would be kept glowing.” They also shied away from the ones that seemed “too quiet”—preferring the joyful exuberance and the huming sense of purposefulness that they found at WSMS.

Once in, the Browns loved what Nathan was experiencing. Donna Longdon and Katherine Fordney provided fantastic support to him on his educational journey. They were also in for a pleasant surprise. As new New Yorkers, inexperienced with the myriad choices for primary schools, the Browns were grateful for Mimi’s guidance in the admissions process. “She helped us better understand who Nathan was, and which schools might be a good fit. She was knowledgeable, candid and supportive of our values. WSMS played no small part in helping connect us to another great school that is aiming to keep the spark of learning alive.”

When their second child Hannah (who will join her brother at Speyer in the fall) was ready for pre-school, “there was no question about where to apply. In fact we didn’t even apply anywhere else! What’s interesting,” continues Jennifer, “is that Nathan and Hannah are in some ways different children, and yet, the WSMS approach, because it is centered on the individual child, is perfect for them both.”

CRISTINA MELENDEZ AND YDANIS RODRIGUEZ
Born and bred in the Bronx, Cristina was the first in her family to attend college. Graduating with a BA from Cornell University, she initially thought of becoming a medical doctor or a lawyer. Her focus was on helping people of color, and because of an amazing teacher, she decided to join Teach for America. Eight years later she had earned her Masters in Education from Teachers College Columbia University. She has held a range of positions with New York City’s Department of Education, and is now back in the Bronx, charged with transforming one of the city’s lowest performing school districts.

Ydanis immigrated to New York from the Dominican Republic when he was 18. While working to support himself, he earned his BS in Political Science from the City College of New York. He has been on the City Council since 2009, representing the 10th District in Manhattan (Inwood, Marble Hill and Washington Heights). Ydanis focuses on education, community health, affordable housing, job creation, immigration reform, and other issues relevant to his constituency. He was the first City Council member to take paternity leave when he welcomed the birth of his second daughter, Ysla, in 2013, and he has been a strong advocate for family leave ever since.

Their first child Yarisa (now nine, and a student at Fieldston) came to WSMS at three. They fell in love with WSMS—for its warmth, for its respect for the individual child, for its joyful approach to serious learning, and for its diverse and welcoming community. Cristina explains: “Yarisa blossomed in Donna’s class. She learned to be caring, empathetic and committed to her work—characteristics that are still true of her today. Mimi helped us understand Yarisa’s strengths, and was an invaluable guide in helping us find the right ongoing school for her.”

Coming back to WSMS with their second child “felt like coming home,” says Cristina. “There have been many improvements, including the Twos Program which we were thrilled about, but thankfully nothing fundamental has changed. It is still the same: inclusive, diverse, focused on developing the gifts of each individual child, and the comfortable community that we know and love. It’s like a great family, really.” Their younger daughter, Ysla, is a student in 1W. Cristina often jokes that “there are more teachers in that class than kids.” But she is very grateful for the incredible racial and cultural mix of teachers and students that Ysla has the opportunity to get to know, and for the gentle, caring way that these two-year-olds are being guided at the start of their educational journey. And, although Cristina never felt any lack of cultural acceptance at WSMS, she thinks that the Spanish-speaking group, Café Caliente, and the eleven-month option
Paulina and Felipe met as children in Mexico. They reconnected when Paulina was transferred by her employer, a bank, to New York in 1998 after getting a graduate degree at the London School of Economics. Paulina continued her banking career through 2007 and then became a fulltime mom. Felipe is an investment banker.

“We initially learned about the school from my sister-in-law, Julia Hardy, who did her Montessori teacher training at WSMS,” says Paulina. “We also knew about and admired the Montessori approach from our home base in Mexico. After touring several schools on the West Side, we were thrilled to enroll our first son, Lucas, into WSMS.” (Lucas is now eleven and in fifth grade.) Paulina continues: “Our experience at WSMS was incredibly positive—the parent community was welcoming and warm, as were the teachers, Mimi and everyone else. It is a really happy place.”

When it came time to seek a school for Andre (now nine), and then for their youngest, Martin, who was lucky enough to start WSMS in the Twos Program, Paulina and Felipe were only interested in WSMS, and were delighted that the school has a strong sibling acceptance policy. Paulina says, “Teachers are watching each child carefully, and amazingly all of the teachers at WSMS seem to have the same exceptional skills. It’s not just a few of them. In addition, they are well prepared and passionate about what they do. You get the sense that they are always looking to do an even better job than they are already doing, which makes a parent feel that their children are in very good hands.”

**KATHLEEN AND JOHN CANTRELL**

Kathleen and John both grew up in Kentucky—he in a steel refining town in the rural, eastern portion of the state, she in the small town of Georgetown, north of Lexington. They left their home state to pursue graduate studies in music: she at Case Western, and he at Yale. They moved to New York when John was offered the position of choirmaster and organist at St. Michael’s Church at the corner of 99th and Amsterdam (where, coincidentally, WSMS was housed in its early years). Kathleen is a professional vocalist and Braille transcriber. In fact, she is one of only 40 people in the United States who are certified to transcribe music into Braille. She transcribes textbooks and other written material, too.

For their firstborn, Maryn, the Cantrells visited several pre-schools; on the recommendation of a friend, they applied to WSMS. They were struck by the empowerment of the children in the classrooms they visited: children chose what to do; they worked cooperatively with other children; they helped each other. A very active child, Maryn was warmly welcomed into the classroom, and WSMS teachers began the careful, iterative process of getting to know her (as they do with each child) through observation, support, guidance, and discussion. After time a program was put into place to better support Maryn in the classroom. Kathleen recalls the teachers as “incredibly loving, supportive and helpful.” In particular, “Teachers gracefully created a kind and accepting atmosphere in the classroom. If Maryn needed to stand when other children were sitting, a teacher would calmly explain: ‘different people need different things.’” And when it came to finding the right fit for kindergarten, Mimi and Natania Kremer (our child development specialist at the time) provided expert guidance. (Maryn is now ten and attends PS 206.)

When Saoirse, their second daughter, was ready, WSMS was their first choice. Kathleen continues, “Saoirse is a complete opposite to Maryn: she is very driven, makes friends easily and has the ability to be super focused. Happily Robyn Mernick and the teachers in 4E have done an equally remarkable job in supporting her development, as Katherine Fordney and her team did with Maryn.” After discussing her children’s experience, Kathleen went on to add: “On a final note: WSMS parents are a welcoming, diverse, creative and interesting lot. Here’s one example from my work on the admissions committee this year. In just one morning I had two interviews: the first was with an investment banker; the second with a lactation consultant. And I’m not joking!”

**PAULINA ARREDONDO-SANCHEZ AND FELIPE GARCIA-ASCENCIO**

When it came time to look for a beginning school for their first child, Nika (now happily enrolled at Riverdale Country School), Evgenia and Sergey already had an image of the kind of pre-school that they wanted. In Russia, where they were raised, Evgenia explains, “The first school was an extension of home.” In their quest for the right place for Nika, these two professional scientists left almost no school untouched.

They researched and visited 15 schools, all around the city. “We not only wanted a warm-homey environment, we wanted a serious school that was also fun. We wanted to be sure that our daughter would be well prepared for her next steps academically as well as socially.” Evgenia continues: “The minute we walked into WSMS we could see that it was significantly better than any of the other schools we had seen. We saw a structured classroom environment that allowed children the independence to make choices and the freedom to work at their own pace. We saw teachers who provided careful guidance and support.” Given their own educational experience, they understood the importance of helping children develop inner motivation. They had sought opportunities to pursue their own passions, traveling widely to obtain graduate degrees in their respective fields, starting with university in Russia and a stint at the Weitzman Institute in Israel. Evgenia went on to complete her PhD in Material Science at Cambridge University in England, while Sergey completed his PhD in Applied Math at Caltech.

“Our experience at WSMS with Nika exceeded our expectations—and they were high to begin with.” When friends ask Evgenia what’s the difference between day care and WSMS she answers, “It’s huge! Children at WSMS are being guided to learn, to follow their interests!” Their second son, Max, who is now in 2E, is flourishing. In closing Evgenia talked about how much she enjoys her WSMS connection: “The community of families here come from everywhere, but they all place a high value on early education. It is a happy place with a lot of smiles, a lot of positive energy, and a strong sense of purpose.”
THEY GIVE FROM THE ♥ ... and They Give of Their Time Too

Introducing the 2015-2016 Annual Fund Committee:

From left to right: Jing Wang (Aaron 4W, Dillon 1W); Rielly Vlassis (Mira 2W, Rory 1W); Natasha Kazmi (Rumi Hasan 4Eam, Laila Hasan 3Wam); Keryann Benjamin (Sydney 4Eam); Wendy Heilbut (Jackson 4W, Leighton Garden); Caroline Russo (Graydon Visceglia 4W); Yi Zhang (Aaron Wang 4W, Dillon Wang 1W). Not pictured: Myles Amend (Ashley Amend-Thomas ’11).

The Annual Fund Committee is formed of current and alumni parents and has the following objectives:

TO TELL THE COMMUNITY HOW ANNUAL FUND PROCEEDS ARE USED:
• Professional development opportunities for faculty through our Visiting Scholar Program and attendance at professional meetings
• $10,000 of books purchased annually
• See timeline (at right) for other projects supported by the Annual Fund

TO ENCOURAGE EVERY WSMS CURRENT (AND ALUMNI) PARENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE CAUSE:
• As you know, 100% participation by the entire WSMS community is a key goal of the Annual Fund. We have often been asked why that is. The answer is simple: the sum is bigger than the parts. WSMS trustees and faculty are unanimous in their support!
• Our hope is that every family in the WSMS community will “GIVE WHAT YOU CAN, GIVE FROM THE ♥.” Help WSMS continue to provide an exceptional beginning for its current and future students!

TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ANNUAL FUND:
• Is there a minimum contribution amount required for the Annual Fund? (Of course not – anything is welcome!)
• What about my contribution at the WSMS Auction or the Fall Festival last year? Doesn’t that count toward the Annual Fund? (Unfortunately, no. The Auction is held each year to exclusively benefit the school’s Financial Aid program. The Fall Festival is a community-building endeavor—we are proud to call it a friend-raiser and not a fund-raiser—and barely breaks even after costs).
• Answers to other commonly asked questions can be found at wmsnyc.org/giving/annualfund. You may also send a query privately to annualfund@wmsnyc.org.
Very special thanks to the WSMS faculty and the WSMS parent photographers, who provided many of the photos used in this magazine.

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