



# Park Children's Day School

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## *Spring 2021 Newsletter*





# Letter from Betsy



The announcement that our beloved Ruth Tepper will retire after 41 years of teaching music at Park Children's Day School has caused me to reflect upon the powerful influence music has in our lives, beginning in early childhood. I often find myself singing songs I learned more than seven decades ago, and I remember every word! What is it about music that has such an amazing effect on our brain function—and why is it such an important part of an early childhood experience?

In his seminal 1983 book, "Frames of Mind," Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner argued that there were more intelligences than the traditional I.Q., and musical intelligence was important for how it facilitated the way the brain and the body work together. Music affects all learning and creative thought. CAT scans have shown that music activates different parts of the brain: one part processes the words while another part processes the music, so that children learning music are using various areas of the brain simultaneously.

Did you learn your ABCs by singing them? Many of our teachers use singing throughout the day for transitions. Our children's songs have plenty of hand and body motions that accompany them, (such as, "Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes"), which help develop their motor skills. A song also seems to capture a child's attention and make a task more palatable. Teachers (and parents) use the "Clean Up" song and are delighted when the child actually helps clean up. During a transition at school, a child will flick the lights and sing the "Five more minutes left to play" song.

The positive impact of music on language development is probably the most researched. There are so many more skills that music has been shown to influence—emotional development, discipline, imagination, curiosity, and focus, among others. Music strengthens these skills, which impact a child's success on so many areas of school and life.





Considering the many benefits of music only serves to underscore how incredibly lucky the PCDS community has been to have Ruth Pepper leading our children's musical discovery. Growing up in Brooklyn, her parents listened to music all the time—especially from folk musicians such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. With greater exposure to music education, Ms. Pepper's love of music blossomed, and she was drawn to the community of musicians and music educators.

Ms. Pepper recently shared, "I really am so fortunate. I don't know how many people leave a place of work more in love with it than when they started. This year, especially, with all of its challenges, has just deepened my appreciation of all of the parents and the staff and teachers at PCDS."

While acknowledging the many developmental benefits of learning music, Ms. Pepper said, "I find such joy in music for music's sake—as a way of expressing the spirit, as a way of learning about one's culture, passing down culture, sometimes even changing culture; as a mode for creativity, the way it can and does integrate the body, all of the senses, the mind and the soul."

She added, "That said, there really is no contradiction between music for the sake of music, and music as an element of curriculum that strengthens academics. Music compels us because it engages all of our faculties, emotionally priming the brain to absorb and accommodate new knowledge. It is a powerful teaching tool."

Asked what kept teaching fresh after so many years, Ms. Pepper said, "Children's humor often surprises me—the jokes they make up, the questions and discussion they instigate about lyrics and song. They have a keen sense of poetry when it comes to song lyrics—they don't always make sense because they have to rhyme, but children accept that. And when a song really takes off with a group, and even the quietest child sings, and they are really enjoying each other's singing—seeing that is a very privileged part of my work, and I'll miss it."

Parents, take note for your playlists: Ms. Pepper counts Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Elizabeth Mitchell, Dan Zanes, Ella Jenkins, Laurie Berkner, The Wiggles, The Allards, Taj Mahal, Suni Paz, and, of course, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, among her favorite recordings of music for children.

Think of how many thousands of our students Ms. Pepper has given the gift of music and its extraordinary benefits. Her loyalty and support have been remarkable. She has shared her talent with our children and teachers, and we are deeply grateful.

For all you have done for us Ms. Pepper, we say an enormous THANK YOU!

**BETSY NEWELL**  
DIRECTOR





# *A Miracle Year: Keeping PCDS Open in a Pandemic*

By **ANDREA RETZKY**

Forty years ago, at a hockey rink in Lake Placid, Al Michaels exclaimed, “Do you believe in miracles? Yes!” as the world watched the U.S. hockey team defeat the Soviets in the 1980 Winter Olympics. The accomplishments of Park Children’s Day School over this past COVID year are perhaps no less miraculous. In this case, the teammates are the families, the school leadership, the children, and most of all, the extraordinarily dedicated teachers and staff, who with their creativity, commitment, and sheer force of will, created a safe environment for learning that still adhered to PCDS’s guiding principles of play-based learning.

After the outbreak of the pandemic and the abrupt closing of school in March 2020, emotions ranged from fearful to wary to heartbroken. In September, when classes resumed under very different circumstances, with masks, daily temperature checks, and a verbal commitment to COVID-safe behavior, parents half-joked that if we were lucky, classes might continue until Halloween, or maybe Thanksgiving. Not for lack of faith, but after the shock of the past six months, many in the PCDS community did not think we could be so bold as to expect a full school year to follow.

But it did, offering the children, and the entire PCDS community, a safe place to learn, a needed return to normalcy and structure, and an opportunity for learning and growth. What did it take to pull it off?

“I always see the glass half-full,” said PCDS Director Betsy Newell. “Once I saw the teachers’ commitment, I knew we could do it. The most remarkable thing was how the teachers just rose to the occasion in the most unbelievable way, from setting up the outdoor classroom to taking equipment to Central Park in a wagon, to confronting all kinds of unexpected situations and logistics. There were so many new things to deal with, all during a very scary time, and the teachers’ motivation was just amazing. The credit for our success goes entirely to them.”

March 2020 may seem like a lifetime ago, but parents and teachers alike remember it all too clearly. “We were just thrown into Zoom,” said Rhonda White, PCDS Education Director. “Our teachers were so creative, but it was difficult to replicate school without supplies—no books, no crayons, nothing that could interest a child. We were challenged by the technology—many teachers did not have strong Wi-Fi or up-to-date laptops. And of course, we know that Zoom is not the way that preschoolers are meant to learn.”

Parents were, of course, frustrated. Children come to school—to PCDS—to connect, to learn, and to look at what others are doing. Now children were isolated in their homes, families and teachers were frightened, and many were not even in their usual living spaces.

“But we did what we could—our teachers went on Zoom to recreate as much of their class life as they could with the restrictions they had,” Mrs. White added. She would watch the sessions and share key learnings with other teachers, so everyone could improve.

Looking ahead to September, the primary goal was not to be caught off guard. School supplies were ordered with an expectation that Zoom school might happen again, with enough materials for teachers to take home and prepare boxes for each child. PCDS staff and teachers were hard at work all summer. Every teacher learned to become Zoom-proficient, taking turns scheduling and hosting Zoom sessions and learning new strategies for teaching in that setting. They also practiced teaching different topics over Zoom, learning what

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***- PCDS Director Betsy Newell***

## *"One of the bigger surprises of the year was the creation of Outdoor Learning under a tent on West 76<sup>th</sup> Street."*



translated best to the platform and what did not.

"You could spend hours upon hours just trying to plan one Zoom session—the preparation is enormous," said Mrs. White. "Also, because our classroom teachers need to assess each child and make sure everyone is participating and learning, we always need at least one teacher taking notes and another teaching. I don't think people realize what goes into it—it's not as simple as it looks. Many of our teachers spent that first stimulus check on new laptops and upgrading their Wi-Fi."

The first challenge for any preschool of a "normal" school year is often getting young children accustomed to separating from parents and caregivers; because of the pandemic, PCDS did much of the separation in Central Park. After so many months at home, school administrators and teachers were concerned about how it would go, but the children were so glad to be back at school that they seemed relieved, and separation went incredibly well. Perhaps the children had to rely

on the teachers more because they were outside, and thus bonded with them more quickly, or perhaps the familiarity of the park also aided the process. In addition, the children were already so used to wearing masks that it wasn't a struggle to keep them on, even for the youngest children in school.

Returning to the building in September also required compliance with an extensive new set of protocols for ensuring a safe environment. The NYC Department of Health has a host of evolving rules for cleaning and disinfecting, for drop-off and pick-up, for how much space is required at snack time, for the classroom environment, and much more, all requiring practice, paperwork, and time. Because the existing HVAC system in the school was not sufficient, PCDS moved several classes into the sanctuary of the Fourth Universalist Society, the church from which the school leases its space. Over the summer of 2021, a new HVAC will be installed at PCDS, enabling everyone to be back in their usual classrooms.

The proximity of PCDS to Central Park has always been a lovely benefit—now it has become a true blessing. Initially there were tremendous logistics to sort through: what do you need to take to the park; how do you get materials to and from the park intact (from water and disinfectant, to dramatic play necessities, to calendars and charts); how many teachers do you need to accompany the children and manage the supplies? Teachers began with backpacks, then got wagons, then more wagons and shopping carts. PCDS secured a learning permit in the park as well, but determined that the space was too far from the school to make for a reasonable routine.

One of the bigger surprises of the year was the creation of Outdoor Learning under a tent on West 76<sup>th</sup> Street. For that, Mrs. White gives credit to Adam Carlson for his enthusiasm and drive, and to the teachers and staff for putting in significant extra hours to make that work, setting up and breaking down a safe, dedicated space despite daily challenges from neighbors and the city's Department of Transportation.



“Overall, Outdoor Learning was an incredible tool for us,” added Mrs. White. “That said, some children can play in mud and be happy, and some children really need blocks and the dramatic play corner. We had to figure out how much we had to bring for a given class to help a child understand that they can do dramatic play in any environment. Some children may be managing but are really glad to get access to the classroom, and our teachers worked to be available to all of these learning styles and needs.”

“When we got back to school, our teachers were so grateful to see the happiness in the children. Whatever we couldn’t do or had to do, they were still coming in and making friends and singing songs, and just being happy! The children just accepted what was different, and that

meant so much to the teachers,” Mrs. White said.

Throughout it all, the PCDS parent community has remained fully engaged. The Parents Association and various teams of volunteer parents moved many school traditions online, from holding class cocktail parties on Zoom, to shifting the beloved biannual clothing and toy sale to used clothing site ThreadUp. Other events, including the annual benefit, teacher appreciation efforts, and the annual book fair are described in detail in this newsletter.

“Our families also really worked to make this happen,” added Mrs. Newell. “The parents’ commitment and support and behavior supported all of our safety protocols—the whole system that we created. And that’s what allowed us to stay open.”





# *In Their Own Words:* *PCDS Teachers on the Pandemic Year*

We asked PCDS lead teachers for each class to share their experiences from this past year—from the biggest challenges they faced, to the surprise pleasures, to what they missed most, to what they hope to continue in the future. Here are their wonderful, insightful, and heartfelt insights.

## Christianna Long, Two Day Toddlers



The biggest challenge of the pandemic was having to set up an entire school day of activities on a tarp in the park. With the youngest group in school, I was unsure how we would be able to have the children keep their masks on all morning and was genuinely surprised how quickly it became second nature to them. They tell us when their mask isn't on correctly! "Uh oh, Mrs. Long! My mask!" I miss seeing the children's smiles and facial expressions. It also bothers me that they can't see their teachers smiling at them!





# Margaret Keenan, **Three Day** Toddlers

The biggest challenge has been wearing masks, but surprisingly, the children have adapted so well. It's amazing how well the children have done during this transition. They are truly resilient. The surprise pleasure of this school year has been the park—we love our time at the park. I hope that we can continue teaching at the park more often. I do miss welcoming the families into the classroom. The best story I have was when one of our toddlers said, “We have to wash our hands so we don't go on Zoom.”





# Jackie Vasconez, Threes

The biggest challenge in adapting teaching to the restrictions of Covid-19 was planning and preparing a virtual curriculum for three-year-olds, in the event that we needed to change to online teaching. Trying to create a virtual curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for young children has been extremely difficult. Creating a program that allows the children to stay focused, interested, and interacting with the group required me to spend a great deal of time and effort. On average it required six to eight hours of preparation, in order to deliver a 45-minute virtual session including activities and materials.

The transition for the children was much easier than we had anticipated. Starting school outside in Central Park made separation very smooth. The surprise pleasure of this school year has been attending school physically. All of the Covid-19 protocols put in place at school have worked, and parents have been able to follow through and have kept school Covid-19 free.

What I miss most this year is not being able to see the children's facial expressions. In a preschool setting, facial expressions are so important, especially at the beginning of the year when we are getting to know each other. A simple smile can bring so much comfort and reassurance, and the children had to learn to trust their teachers and each other without it.

We have so many good stories. In one instance, during story time, when the teacher read: "Who's that at the door? Your friends are here, Corduroy!" A child commented, "No, no! No visitors allowed with Covid!"





# Christine Barber, Threes

Personally, the biggest challenge adapting to the restrictions was having to create a classroom space in the church sanctuary. We had to be very flexible in re-imagining such things as walls, cubbies, and where to hang artwork and charts.

The children have been absolute rock stars! Children are so resilient. They just want to see their friends and teachers every day.

The best part of the school year has been Outdoor Learning on 76th Street and in Central Park. What do I miss the most? The children's smiles and walls. I would love to continue Outdoor Learning in Central Park.





# Mildred Hammond, Threes

The biggest challenge has been not seeing the children's facial expressions except during snack time when their masks are lowered. They grow so quickly and express so much through their expressions as they ponder new information shared, experience different sensory materials and express various feelings such as excitement, fear, sadness and happiness.

The children have been very resilient. The surprise pleasure of this school year is how meaningful being together and sharing moments together such as chats, laughter, empathy and elbow hugs has been. I miss being able to share a hug or high five with others. I would like

to continue to help the children share, take delight and learn from the smallest activities that each child observes, participates in, or contributes in helping someone else.

Our class loves to do obstacle courses and will ask for more turns each time because it is different each time and so fun. One day, during Outdoor Learning, another class had been outside before our class and some paint was on one of the cars that had not moved for the full space for our tents. One child asked if he, too, could paint—not on our easel outside, but rather add to the paint on the car!





# Dawn Nguyen, Virtual Threes

The biggest challenge has been preparing and planning for a remote year. We organized “Zoom Kits” to make sure everyone had access to the same materials and tools. Daily and weekly e-mails are sent out to make sure the children are prepared for the school day.

The children have adjusted very well to the distance learning schedule and program. We look forward to seeing each other on Zoom. The children, families, and teachers have formed an amazing bond. We have surprisingly built a strong connection and friendship, even virtually. We miss seeing the children in person. We miss watching the children interact and play together. We also miss the hugs!





## Sarah Calverley, Fours

In the beginning, I was worried that the children wouldn't be able to engage with each other as much socially as they typically do in the Fours, but even with having to reduce the number of children in certain areas, they have still been able to engage in rich imaginative play and work on the skill of collaboration which is so important to their development.

The surprise pleasure has definitely been spending so much more time in Central Park. It was almost magical to watch with the children the transformation from summer to fall and then to winter and now to the beginning of spring. We saw their excitement in the natural world develop even more as they were telling us their observations of the changes. We have always pointed out the birds; many of the children now know

their names and will point them out to us when they see them. We feel that these shared experiences outside have helped them bond even more as a class. The children named each of the areas we frequently visit, and the experiences have helped to foster our group identity.

We've had so many amazing days in the park which have involved both the beauty of nature and some "only in NY" moments. One day in the fall, we walked through the Ramble to see the waterfall and then over Bow Bridge, which the children call "the fancy bridge," to the Bethesda Fountain. We heard a guitar player and walked over to listen to him. When he saw us, he immediately started playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." He continued with children's songs, and we sat and enjoyed our snack while listening.





# Dani Zweibon, Fours

Our class spent most of the first few months of school almost entirely in Central Park, staying indoors only when it rained. Ms. Fields and I knew being outside with as much open air as possible was the safest option for the children and for us, and while it was an exciting opportunity for us to flex our creative muscles, it definitely took some trial and error. How could we conduct a full school day in a field in Central Park? What materials could we realistically carry with us in two backpacks and a wagon? How can we keep toys, playdough, and art materials separate so as to keep any germs self-contained? What about when the children have to use the bathroom? What about snack and water? We learned from each trip to the park, and by the middle of October, Ms. Fields and I were a well-oiled machine, pulling a wagon full of toys and art supplies in one hand, holding childrens' hands in the other, setting up two tarps in a quiet field in The Ramble near a bathroom, holding a full meeting, free choice, and snack all outside!

The children have been remarkably resilient all year long. Between wearing masks, constant hand washing and sanitizing, and various indoor and outdoor classroom locations, we have asked the children to be flexible and go with the flow, and they have exceeded our expectations. They were patient as we ironed out the kinks in our routines and embraced our new learning environments wholeheartedly. It's also been so wonderful how the children have retained such joy, positivity, and hope throughout such a difficult and different time.

After months of lockdown, it felt so good to be around people, both my fellow teachers and the children. I'll never take the community of teachers, parents, and children in this school for granted again. I do miss opportunities for the children to share more—from a communal tray of snack that gets passed around, to the sand table, where the children have to learn to share the space, toys and sand with one another. After this year, I will continue to take advantage of our proximity to Central Park.





# Serena McEvoy, Fives

The biggest challenge in adapting teaching at PCDS to the restrictions of Covid-19 was having to adjust the schedule to accommodate extra steps in the routine, such as frequent hand washing, changing shoes, and sanitizing areas between uses. However, it did not take long for these steps to become part of our normal daily routine. Needing to limit the number of children in certain areas of the room was another necessary adjustment.

The children are resilient and the adjustment to school and our new routines was smooth. The surprise pleasure of this school year has been enjoying the park every day and exploring new areas of Central Park. We often walk around the lake and the Fives counted 32 red ice ladders this winter. Of course, we miss seeing their smiling faces and also seeing the parents and caregivers in the building. We hope to continue going to the park every day for play and adventure walks!







# Remade Book Fair Creates New Traditions

By **MARTHA DABAGIAN DRISCOLL**

Recreating the beloved PCDS Book Fair within the safety limitations of the pandemic sparked tremendous creativity, creating new traditions that may continue even when things are back to “normal.”

The book fair was completely reimagined and redesigned as a weeklong series of virtual and outdoor events. Co-chairs Adrienne Israel, Preeti Salvi, and Lucille Tung Wong focused on creating opportunities for the PCDS community to come together both virtually and in person while raising record funds for the school through sales of books alongside PCDS teacher artwork, raffle tickets, and specialty merchandise.

The weeklong celebration kicked off on Sunday, February 28th with the launch of the beautiful website [www.pcdsbookfair.com](http://www.pcdsbookfair.com), which showcased an extraordinary selection of books selected by PCDS teachers and administrators. Artwork created by beloved PCDS teachers Justin LaRocca Hansen and Adam Carlson was also available, with the demand nearly outstripping supply.

On Monday, March 1st, Lara Stein, a literacy expert and founder of PLEASED Learning, led an informative discussion for PCDS parents via Zoom. Ms. Stein, a

former PCDS parent, detailed strategies for making the most of time spent reading with children to help boost comprehension and independent thinking.

Three book readings held via Zoom in the afternoons anchored the weeklong series of events. Mr. Carlson and Mr. Hansen led two readings, along with another hosted by Lucy Gunderson, founder of Storyglory Kids, a book subscription service that curates book bundles to borrow or buy.

Mr. Carlson also presented a special book fair edition of his popular “Art with Adam” series on Zoom. Inspired by one of his favorite books, Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax*, he led the children in a delightful exercise creating “Truffula” trees using plastic forks, paints, crayons, pom poms, and tissue paper.

On Tuesday and Friday mornings, the PCDS community gathered—masked, of course—in tents outside the school for coffee and a chance to look at many of the book fair offerings, including artwork. It was the first in-person gathering in over a year, offering a welcoming occasion to greet fellow parents, PCDS staff, and teachers, grab a coffee, and enjoy the delicious cookies handmade and packaged by Ms. Tung Wong.







The weeklong series of events culminated with a live performance by Laurie Berkner on Saturday, March 6th. Ms. Berkner, the beloved children’s musician, entertained the PCDS community with an exclusive Zoom performance. Ms. Berkner sang some of her most recognized songs and read from her book *We are the Dinosaurs*—creating an incredible finale for a very special week. The Josephite family were the lucky winners of the book fair raffle, enabling them to enjoy one-on-one time with Ms. Berkner after the group performance. Alexander Josephite even got to jam on his guitar with Ms. Berkner!

The book fair was a smashing success by all accounts, with record-breaking revenues of more than \$24,000, with nearly \$5,000 going directly to PCDS.

The credit for this incredible series of events belongs to the “Masters of PCDS’s Virtual Literary

Universe”: the talented co-chair trio Adrienne Israel, Preeti Salvi, and Lucille Tung Wong. Their teamwork and collective energy, creativity, and dedication knew no bounds, and the future of the event programming at PCDS is forever improved because of their contributions.

Many thanks to the parents who volunteered their time throughout the week with the tent setup, presales, and balloon distribution, including Ishmeen Badesha, Kate Blount, Hema Chetlani, Elaine Cong, Tess Crompton, Cecilia Hong, Munira Musadek, Andy Plaisted, Jean Risolo, and Nina Strauss. Additional thanks to Brendan Driscoll, Ryan Israel, Yosuke Nishibayashi, Sidhartha Singh, and Tony Wong for their support and providing a literal hand with the heavy lifting! And special thanks to Martha Dabagian Driscoll, Monica Nishibayashi, and Claire Flynn for managing the data and testing the website.



YOU ARE OUR  
HEROES AND  
HEROINES

## *A New Approach to Teacher Appreciation*

The role of school in our children's lives has become so much more essential this year—not only for education but also in providing companionship, community, and a sense of normalcy.

Lucille Tung Wong and Livia Cheung took on the roles of Teacher Appreciation co-chairs because of how moved they were by the teachers' efforts to go above and beyond for all the children, and a desire to convey the gratitude of the entire PCDS parent community to the teachers and staff.

Because of the pandemic, the co-chairs needed to evolve the longstanding tradition of hosting a teacher appreciation luncheon at the end of each semester, with families bringing in food and pitching in to set up. The teacher appreciation team coordinated with the PCDS Parents Association to send lunch to staff and teachers throughout the first semester. In late October, teachers and staff were celebrated with a catered, made-to-order breakfast, featuring an omelet station set up outside the main entrance of the school.

With the help of many amazing PCDS parents and their children, the walkway leading to the two school entrances was chalked with messages showing the community's enormous appreciation. Volunteers included Kathryn Bach, Ishmeen Badesha, Elaine Cong, Indrani Deb, Stephanie Guilliard-Paulson, and Preeti Salvi.

Before winter break, teachers and staff received personalized gift totes filled with goodies including champagne, RBG "judge-mints," face masks, mugs with hot chocolate, cashmere scarves, lip balm, and personalized face mask lanyards handmade by Elaine Cong.

In a note to staff and teachers, the co-chairs wrote, "Perhaps the best testament to this is the sheer joy we see in our children and when we hear them talk about school as if there is no pandemic." The school year will conclude with an outdoor luncheon for the teachers and staff, with opportunities for the whole PCDS community to volunteer and participate.

















# Virtual Benefit “Zooms” to Success

## *PCDS Community Connects, Celebrates, Supports*

By **ANDREA RETZKY**

During the summer of 2020, it was hard to imagine what school would look like in the year ahead, much less whether and how the annual benefit for PCDS might come together. The co-chairs of the PCDS Parents Association, Maria Jose Welch, Kristen Mleczko, and Salma Khan, along with the school administration, felt strongly that there should still be an event—not only to raise funds but to bring the community together.

By December, after brainstorming sessions with past event co-chairs, it was apparent that any benefit would need to be on Zoom, and that the work needed to begin! It was clear that the event should focus on the wonderful PCDS community and amazing teachers, demonstrating the deep appreciation for the faculty and staff who worked tirelessly over the summer to come up with a plan to open the school in September. Given that many parents are on Zoom all day for work, the challenge was to create a fun and compelling experience that could also compensate, at least in part, for the significant fundraising role of the school’s annual benefit.

The benefit team came together with PA co-chairs Maria and Kristen pulling double duty as benefit co-chairs—a big commitment. The team began to work on securing underwriting, creating a video of the children during their school day, and the beautiful artwork for the evening.

In late January, Laura Pietropinto came on board with an offer to help with the teachers’ video. As a Broadway assistant director and talent manager, Laura had very creative ideas as well as terrific contacts in the entertainment industry. She facilitated a professional production and turned the initial plans of a children’s video and teacher’s video into a full-hour program, complete with 13 separate short videos, including an alumni “Then and Now” update, four interview segments with PCDS teachers, two toasts from Betsy Newell, and a “Top Ten Reasons Why We Love PCDS” reel.

Through these videos, the benefit co-chairs wanted

PCDS parents to get a glimpse into the lives of their children each day in the classroom—something everyone has missed seeing this year. It was truly a “Breath of Fresh Air” to see how normal the children’s days have been. The classrooms are still colorful, the hallways still full of artwork, and the children have thrived being back in their routines.

The co-chairs and their team also sought to honor and show appreciation for PCDS teachers and staff, showcasing their immense dedication to the school, the children, and the whole community. The clever “Pass the Sanitizer” video, filmed by Rhonda White and featuring the incredible number of years that teachers and staff have dedicated to PCDS—583!—brought levity while highlighting their incredible work during this difficult year. Betsy Newell’s original Pandemic Poem gave a wry but honest account of the enormous effort it takes to keep the school open every day.

For all watching, it was a great reminder of how the teachers and staff have worked tirelessly, whether coming in early to set up outdoor classrooms, creating entire Zoom curricula in case of a class or school closure, and constantly washing, washing, washing—to keep school open all year. The night concluded with a moving, emotional video tribute to the teachers, featuring two guest performers from Broadway’s *Wicked*, Jennafer Newberry and Tony nominee Lilli Cooper.

Because PCDS already had a relationship with professional auctioneer Bobby D., he was engaged to “emcee” the Zoom benefit and encourage giving throughout the hour-long program.

The response to the entire event was tremendous. The PCDS community truly connected with each other, with enthusiastic greetings, expressions of appreciation, and funny comments about children staying up too late peppering the chat feed throughout the evening. Parents and alumni showed tremendous support. Building upon robust tickets sales and sponsorship from local restaurant





The Smith, donations for the evening totaled nearly \$200,000. The final number is expected to rise when matching gifts from donor employers are also tallied.

Enormous gratitude goes to benefit co-chairs, Kristen Mleczo, Laura Pietropinto, and Maria Welch; the volunteers who created the children's video, Martha Dabagian, Katherine Lee, and Monica Nishibayashi; and the underwriting team of Kathryn Bach, Indrani Deb, Jean Risolo, and Caitlin Snow, with web site design by Elaine Cong, and Claire Farley Flynn as treasurer. Their hard work established a gold standard for a creative approach to school fundraising during a pandemic, creating a true sense of community and shared gratitude for the wonderful teachers and staff of PCDS.

*"The benefit team came together with PA co-chairs Maria and Kristen pulling double duty as benefit co-chairs—a big commitment."*



# Spirit Day 2021





# Snow Day 2021





# Art With Adam!

## *A Profile of Adam Carlson*

Brooklynite Adam Carlson has had a passion for art since he was the same age as the PCDS students he's taught for ten years, working as an assistant teacher. But he's also beloved for the many portraits of PCDS children and families he's made. Adam's fan base has grown with the pandemic launch of "Art with Adam," his free weekly Zoom art class for children.



***When did you first show an interest in art? How was your interest cultivated?***

I grew up in Chicago and Springfield, Illinois, and I first became interested in art when I was three or four years old. My uncle and grandma were both professional artists, so as soon as I could draw, I was given sketchbooks and materials. They really encouraged me. My mom was very hands-on, and she got me into art classes and art camps in the summer. When I was in 8th grade, I got into drawing people and faces; my mom convinced the instructor at community college to let me sit in on a figure drawing class. That was incredible—it made me feel like I was an artist. In high school, I was active in anything creative. I had an art teacher that was also involved with the local theaters, so I would paint backdrops, scene paintings, and murals. I started my own business drawing caricatures at fairs, after prom, 4th of July fairs. I wasn't a particularly good student; if I got in trouble I'd sit in my room and

draw. I got my work into competitions and I won a bunch of awards, including the Scholastic Art Award.

***Where did you study art?***

I went to Illinois State—I had gotten a full tuition scholarship based on my portfolio and art awards. I majored in art and minored in biology. I didn't feel challenged, and I ultimately transferred to the Ringling School of Art and Design in Florida, where I studied illustration. That's where I met [fellow PCDS teacher] Justin Hansen! They had a real foundation in traditional media, with four years of painting, figure drawing, etc. After graduating, I moved to New York City. I did a lot of random jobs that led to some intense work in web design for the music industry—it was really stressful. I left that but needed something to supplement my income to make it as a painter. At that time Justin was teaching science at PCDS. As I had work experience in childcare and education, I interviewed with Rhonda White. She saw something she liked, and here we are now.

***What kind of art do you focus on?***

In my personal work I am big on figure and still life, landscapes, and a lot of portraiture. I'm really into traditional oil painting, influenced by the Dutch Masters and the golden age of illustrators like Norman Rockwell, Dean Cornwell, and J. C. Leyendecker, and magazine editorial art that used traditional media to tell a story.

***What gave you the idea to start Art with Adam? Can you describe what it's become?***

It's been quite a journey and an expanding experiment. Before the pandemic I was teaching private art lessons to children. Then the pandemic hit, and I realized, I can do this online. I can invite friends' kids and PCDS children and try to have something that can bring us joy even though we are stuck at home. In the beginning, the pandemic was so scary; the class was just as much of a resource to keep my own sanity and my relationships with everyone. It evolved into, let's do this and open it up to everyone and we'll have





*"It evolved into, let's do this and we'll have fun and maybe we'll learn something along the way."*

on a screen and still focusing and doing things and taking turns.

*What's the best way to encourage kids with art—and what's the most important thing not to do?*

Art offers a great way for children to express themselves, get out feelings, get out their stories, develop language, math skills, creative thinking, and problem-solving. If a child thinks they've made a mistake in their artwork, it's important not to start over, but to work with that mistake. Ask what it can evolve into, and maybe it will be something even better.

When you talk to a child about their artwork, ask them about it rather than telling them you love it. That's nice to hear, but it's even better to ask questions, for example, "I see you drew these lines," or "Tell me about the colors you used." Also, by only telling them you like it, it builds an expectation to make something that other people love, and that sets them up to fail because art is so subjective. What's good or bad doesn't necessarily hold value.

I am always hesitant to show kids how to draw a particular thing. I'm trying to teach them how to see rather than how to draw, to see what shapes things are made of, rather than, here's how to draw a snowman, a butterfly, etc. Then they get stuck and can't progress into what other ways they might be able to create.

fun, and maybe we'll learn something along the way. People participate from all over, including South Africa, California, Colorado, Virginia, South Carolina, and Alabama.

*What's been the biggest surprise of Art with Adam?*

The biggest surprise is how much the children really follow along and how independent they can be. Parents are often drawing along with them; they are all creating, and I'm always surprised with how much they've done in a 25-minute lesson. It's also really interesting how well they've been able to adapt to the new medium of being



# PCDS Alumni: *Then and Now*

## Maddie Abrams

After PACCDs, Maddie Abrams graduated from Brearley and Duke University; she is starting her final year of medical school in New York City.



## James Danzinger

James attended Grace Church High School, where he rides his unicycle to school, is president of the Stand Up Comedy Club and numerous other organizations, has a terrific group of friends, and has just been accepted at Williams College.



## Tim and Lizzy Lasusa

Tim is currently living in Stamford, CT and is the assistant squash coach at Yale and plays on the pro doubles tour when he can. After PACCDs he went to Saint David's School, then Poly Prep for high school and St. Lawrence Univ. for college (Class of 2016 Art History major).



After PACCDs, Lizzy went to Convent of the Sacred Heart through 8th grade then transferred to Poly Prep and then followed her brother to St. Lawrence. She graduated Magna Cum Laude, Class of 2019 as a business and communications major. She currently lives in NYC and is a client associate for Rockefeller Capital Management.



## Nina Wainwright Strauss

After PACCDs, Nina graduated from Chapin and, after college, returned to NYC, where she runs her own interior design business. Her son Walker now attends PCDS.





## Manuel and Grace Villar

Manuel attended St. David's after PACCDs and is a freshman at King in Stamford, where he plays JV soccer and varsity lacrosse. Grace attended Marymount after PACCDs and is now in 7th grade at Sacred Heart Greenwich, where she plays soccer, squash, and lacrosse, and has involved her new school in card drives for children at Memorial Sloan Kettering.



## Abigail Solomon

Abigail Solomon attended PACCDs and is now a mom of Jasper, an alumnus of PCDS who attends the Fieldston School, and Becky in Class B2. Abigail, an actor and Tony-nominated Broadway producer, is still close with friends she made at PACCDs.



## Parker and Ashley LaLonde

Parker attended Hunter and then The Dalton School after PACCDs. After graduating from the University of MN, he works as director of finance for a nonprofit, and sings in an a capella group.

Ashley also attended Hunter and The Dalton School after PACCDs. After graduating from Harvard, Ashley is working in consulting and is a professional actor.





## Robert White

Robert White attended PACCDs, PS 6, Wagner Middles School, and the LaGuardia High School of Music, Art and Performing Arts. He attended Morgan State University on a music scholarship and now plays various instruments in gigs throughout NYC. He works for the MTA NYC Transit's paratransit service.



## Richard (Richie) White

After graduating from PACCDs, Richie White attended PS 6, Wagner Middle School, and the LaGuardia High School of Music, Art and Performing Arts, and attended Hampton University on a music scholarship. He has since worked as a personal trainer. His son Landon also attended PCDS.



## Landon White

After attending PCDS, Landon attended The Neighborhood School in Manhattan and upon graduating from 5th grade this spring, will begin at the Charter School of the Arts. He is learning to play the piano and trumpet, following in the footsteps of his family of musicians.



## Roslyn White

Roslyn White began her education at PCCDS, and then attended NYC public schools. Upon graduation from Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music, Art, and the Performing Arts, she got her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in music education at Hampton University. She has been teaching music and serving as the band director for the past seven years at Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing & Visual Arts, as well as in programs around the city.





## The Schlossel Sisters: Caroline, Elisabeth, and Sophia

Caroline Schlossel graduated from Spence in 2020. She is currently on a gap year in Italy studying Italian at the American University in Rome. She will begin college at Georgetown University (School of Foreign Service) Class of '25 in the fall.

Elisabeth Schlossel also graduated from Spence in 2020. She is currently on a gap year in France studying French at the American University in Paris. She will begin college at Dartmouth, Class of '25 in the fall.

Sophia N. Schlossel graduated from Spence in 2014. She is currently working as a digital marketing executive at L'Oreal in New York.



## Maddie and Jake Melnick

Maddie went to Brearley after PACCDS; the family then moved to Westport, CT after Jake “graduated” from PCCDS. Maddie and Jake both went to Duke and now live in NYC. Maddie began her career in investment banking at Morgan Stanley and now works in private equity at Sycamore. Jake works at White & Case LLP and will begin law school this fall at NYU.



## Charlotte and Aidan Ryder

Charlotte Ryder is in the 10th grade at Convent of the Sacred Heart. She is a varsity swimmer and runner and an avid animal lover. Aidan Ryder is in the 7th grade at Saint David’s School. He is a multi-sport athlete with a passion for baseball.







The PCDS community is endlessly grateful to our incredible Parents Association co-chairs, Salma Khan, Kristen Mleczo, and Maria Jose Welch, for such tremendous leadership during this challenging time. Thank you!



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