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The Joy of Learning Begins Early at Kimberton Waldorf School

By April O'Day

When was the last time you baked bread? If you were a Preschool child at Kimberton Waldorf School, you would quickly respond: *Last Wednesday!*

Weekly bread day is exemplary of the independent private school’s mission to teach students, from Preschool through 12th grade, to be creative and critical thinkers and unfold their unique capacities to meet the world with confidence. “This education can begin as early as infancy, with parents who seek an intentional, holistic, and pro-

gressive education for their child and community for their family,” said Ona Wetherall, Rosebud Cottage Pre-Kindergarten lead teacher and co-administrator. “In a home away from home setting, the two-, three-, and four-year-olds feel secure, and learn in a cooperative social environment that nourishes their senses, builds self-esteem, and lays a foundation for a lifetime of learning and success. The children participate in their day together, following a rhythm they can expect and rely on, spending lots of time outside every day, and flowing naturally from child-led activities of play and

teacher-led activities like circle, story, and eating. They help make their snacks and lunch, fold laundry, and help sweep with little brooms and dustpans. This stage is the beginning of their journey to become self-directed, conscious, and compassionate human beings.”

The Joy of Learning Begins

Wetherall, who has been at Kimberton Waldorf School since 2014, greets every day with enthusiasm to teach very young children. “My job is wonderfully dynamic,” she declared. “Children are continuously



portunity to be challenged, learn, and grow from their unique developmental stage in a diverse and enriching social environment. We align creative developmental activities with emerging cognitive, emotional, and physical stages of growth. Because our students are so engaged with their learning environment, children's natural ability to be joyful is able to shine through, and we are supporting a foundation for a lifetime of joy in learning and work."

The unique, responsibility-building Waldorf teaching method is introduced in Preschool. It is acclaimed and appreciated by parents. They observe their children evolving into self-confident human beings with self-esteem, secure in who they are as individuals.

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growing, developing, and changing; socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively, and it is an honor and privilege to be a part of the process. Being genuine and bringing who I am to the children is not only a gift, but essential to my work's success because children know and learn from what is real. I also love working with and supporting parents in a holistic and engaged school community and getting to work with and support wonderful colleagues as we continuously work to have our education be innovative and meeting our students in the very best way. Most of all," she summed up, "I deeply appreciate the responsibility I have to bring my very best self as a model for imitation to the young students in my care, knowing I'm sharing in laying the foundation for the rest of their lives."

The Preschool presents a family-like environment where children begin their relationship-based education. "The little ones learn from the big ones," noted Wetherall. "The big ones help take care of the little ones. They spend two years in Pre-Kindergarten and two years in Kindergarten. The first year, they are the followers. The second year, they become the leaders. This is an example of how our pedagogy is designed to meet the children in a developmentally appropriate way, offering our students the op-



discover how it got that way. Instead of stating, *This is how it works*, we say, *Let's figure out why it works this way by truly going through the process ... actually doing it.*" This experiential, hands-on, cooperative learning is not only engaging and fun, it supports students to become critical, innovative thinkers."

Educating the Whole Child

To ensure students evolve into independent thinkers and experience the joy of learning from Preschool through high school graduation, Kimberton Waldorf School educates the whole child: head, heart, and hands. A well-balanced curriculum of academics, arts, and practical experiences engages students intellectually, emotionally, and physically. A Preschool tot is as comfortable making bread as a high school student is solving quadratic equations. Whether preparing their own snack, writing a research paper, acting in a play, performing a piano sonata, or growing organic food, they develop confidence in themselves as thinkers and creative doers. Their education fully prepares them to make, design, collaborate, and to think for themselves.

"To meet these goals, we strive to be current, innovative, and relevant," insisted Wetherall. "We focus not only on academics, but social and emotional wellbeing, too. Kimberton Waldorf students learn to be smart in their hearts. We help them find their places in the world. In Preschool, we foster a sense of wonder and imagination that sets the foundation for their entire school journey."

As a parent of three Kimberton Waldorf students, Wetherall sees the value of its education, philosophy, and strong value system. "My children are getting to know themselves from so many perspectives," she remarked. "Additionally, they are very empathetic to their classmates and the people around them, even if something is challenging. As I parent, I really value and appreciate the kind, fair, and benevolent people they are becoming."

In closing, Wetherall spoke about Kimberton Waldorf School's 1st through 12th grade programing. "Our academics are exceptionally vigorous, and our subject classes are inwoven with and support academics, meet students developmentally, and teaching the children beautiful and practical skills. Children learn to knit, sing, play instruments, grow food, care for animals, and be stewards to the land. There are sub-



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ject classes in woodworking, blacksmithing, gardening, music, movement, language, and games. Our sports program is wonderful, and I love that my daughter is getting to play an awesome and rigorous season of basketball, in a beautiful gym with a caring and devoted coach. Our high school exchange program with other Waldorf schools throughout the world, through our foreign language curriculum, is really a highlight for me. Students learn two languages starting in 1st grade. In 7th grade, they select one to focus on for the next six years. Both of my older children chose German, and they are participating in exchange programs. My son went to Germany last year, and next year my daughter will have the same opportunity, and we currently have a German exchange student living with our family. I believe our exchange program is so valuable for our students and families and an important part of educating the whole child.”

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them to experience life and their environment. Their education allows them to develop a love of learning and the exhilaration of discovery. As early as age 2, they feel confident in their abilities.

Kimberton Waldorf School is located on 425 acres of fertile Chester County farmland. Students value the earth and understand what it takes to grow healthful organic food from sowing to harvesting. If you are expectant parents or have a toddler, Kimberton Waldorf School offers a Parent-Child class to help strengthen parenting skills and create a healthy and joyful home. The class encourages mindful parenting and imaginative play. “Parents make bread with their little ones, often learn a new craft, gain parenting insights, get a taste of our school and pedagogy, and most importantly, spend quality time with their child in a social and nurturing environment,” clarified Wetherall.

(Writer’s aside: Attend a Parent-Child class, and if someone asks when you last baked bread, you can reply, just last week.) CCL

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