

## About New York; Preschoolers, His Fountain Of Youth at 87

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AT 87 years of age, Max Mandell is convinced that standing outside his Upper West Side town house in the cold, rain or snow is good for his health.

Nearly every day since 1941, he just about bounds outside to greet the morning and the children who attend the Mandell School, making him the Cal Ripken Jr. of nursery school directors. He once went so far as to schedule his medical appointments early in the day so that he would be back in front of his school by 8 o'clock.

Last week, he braved the ice and slush on West 94th Street, a broad smile creasing his face as he spotted his young charges waddling towards him, their hooded heads barely peeking above the snowbanks. From a block away, they grinned and waved, finally tumbling into his arms.

"There's my little peanut!" he exclaimed, as he leaned over to look a young girl in the eye. "Come into my arms. I missed you."

Sure, there are pedagogical reasons for his morning ritual. Children, he said, are creatures of habit. If he's consistent with them, they'll be consistent in school. But there's also a personal lesson in the laughter.

When the children smile back, few can match the glow on Mr. Mandell's face. He has discovered the best tonic for any winter woe. For every hug he gives, it's returned 10 times over.

"This is for the satisfaction of my own soul," he said. "If I don't greet my children, I'd be sick for the rest of the day."

A CERTAIN Old World quality dwells inside the school, where 50 students spend their days learning colors, counting and reading. Where else would you find a nursery school where the children look forward to watching opera movies? (O.K., so it's Ravel's "Enfant et les Sortilèges," which is about a tyke with a temper tantrum.)

In one corner, 3-year-old newcomers sit in a circle, playing with blocks as they learn to get along with one another. Downstairs, a kindergarten class engages in show and tell while the computers sit, ready for the latest lesson.

Suddenly, a burst of giggling and foot-stomping rumbles through the narrow building, as the nursery school lets loose with its daily singing and dancing.

Mr. Mandell sat in the quiet of his kitchen, upstairs from the school, as his daughter, the co-director, prepared a quick cup of coffee while her two Cairn terriers yipped and scrambled at her feet. He started the school in 1941, after having run play groups for neighborhood children. Their parents, he said, pleaded with him to open the place.

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His philosophy through the years has been consistent. Rather than let the children play all day, mix some lessons with the play, and before you know it, learning becomes fun.

"If children have a wonderful experience in school, then school begins the moment they fall out of bed," he said.

BARBARA ROWE, his daughter, said they could make more money if they expanded the school day for the nursery school students, but that was beside the point. Children that young, she said, need to spend time at home, too.

"We have ourselves to answer to," she said. "I don't have a board of directors. I have a conscience. If we wanted to be rich, we wouldn't be teachers."

Such values appeal to Debra McEneaney, who sends her youngest son, Ian, to the school. Her older son, Peter, still visits the school, even though most fifth graders would think it's uncool. She said the school was a refreshing break from the competitive private school world in which parents wonder about the Ivy League even before their child is out of the maternity ward.

"They have traditional values and of course they have all that multicultural stuff," she said. "It's a rest in the middle of this city. They're not trying to make sophisticated little New Yorkers out of them. They just want to make them into good, normal kids."

Mr. Mandell's own childhood was good, if not normal. Born in Romania, he almost didn't come to the United States with his brother, until his mother was given an extra ticket. He grew up doted on by aunts and uncles, exploring the docks and parks, moving frequently before his mother settled the family in Brooklyn, where she opened a candy store in Williamsburg.

In those early years, he said, he felt like a fifth wheel, since his brother was his mother's first love. Long before he had a school to stand in front of, he had already learned the most important lesson.

"My mother cared for me, but she loved my brother," he said. "That's why I'll never give up going out and greeting my children. It's not for them. For me. It's for me."