

## **GROWING BY GRADES**

### **MANDELL EXPANDS TO MEET ELEMENTARY NEEDS**

**By Jenny Fisher**

October 16, 2008

#### **New and Noteworthy Private Elementary School**

This fall, nearly 70 years after The Mandell School opened its doors to pre-schoolers, the West 94th Street school took in its first class of elementary students. Known as one of the city's "Baby Ivies," the Mandell School has been led by three generations of the same family since Romanian immigrant Max Mandell founded it in 1939.

"My hope is to provide a home first of all for families where they don't feel like they have to jump on board with the competitive insanity of New York," said Mandell's granddaughter Gabriella Rowe, who became head of the school in May 2008. "But more than anything, our hope is to provide a school where children can figure out who they are and who they want to be. Much of that process we've only started in our preschool years, but there's only so far we can carry it."

In response to the huge demand for spots in private elementary schools in New York City, The Mandell School will add another grade level each year until the school has toddlers through 8th graders. Students in preschool at Mandell are guaranteed a place in the elementary school, although Rowe said she would still help preschool students get into other private schools if they didn't want to stay. Children who did not attend preschool at Mandell are welcome to apply and in fact make up the majority of the kindergarten class this year.

Rowe said her grandfather believed that "If you give a child safety and security and love and academic stimulation, they're capable of anything." Mandell was famous for standing outside the school nearly every morning until he died in 1999 to give children a hug on their way in.

The school's philosophy is founded on "Good Citizenship," which means encouraging children to cooperate and compromise in the classroom and ensuring that everyone fully participates in classroom activities.

In the elementary school, Rowe explained, the emphasis on being a good citizen will continue with a community service program. Every class from kindergarten to 8th grade will design and implement its own project. This year's kindergarteners will help water and maintain the trees on 96th Street between Columbus and Amsterdam avenues and will create artwork to decorate the tree guards.

"It is absolutely fundamental to who we are that our children leave us with a sense of empowerment and a concrete notion of how to go out there and make the world a better place," Rowe said.

Elementary school students will also take music, drama, fine arts, gym and wellness classes, according to Rowe, and they will start learning American Sign Language in kindergarten. The school chose to start with sign language—rather than auditory language—because it's visual and kinesthetic, so it fits kindergarteners' developmental stage. But learning sign language also teaches the basic skills that children need to learn any other language.

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In 1st grade, children will be able to choose between French and Spanish, and in 5th grade everyone will take Mandarin.

Rowe grew up living above The Mandell School, as her mother did, and went to the school herself. She spent her evenings sweeping floors and helping clean up, and her summers painting walls and substitute teaching.

Rowe worked as a management consultant and an investment banker for 12 years before she realized she wasn't satisfied with her job the way her mother and grandfather had been. And when she had kids herself, she wanted to be able to spend more time with them. Finally, when her grandfather became sick in 1999, Rowe decided to come back to the school. She became director nine years ago.

At first, Rowe said, she thought her focus as head of the school would be in putting her business expertise to use. But, "I realized very quickly where the real substance and the real joy was—in the teaching and in supporting parents."