

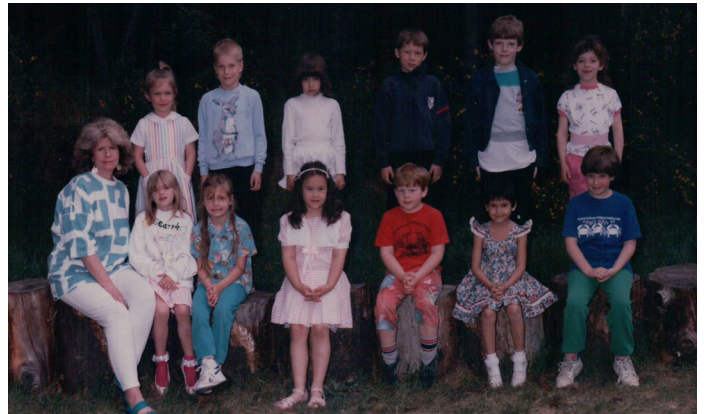


The Little School Alumni Newsletter

Alum Faculty Highlight: Deirdre Reedy

by Sarah Gallien (TLS alumna, current parent
and Alumni Association Board member)

I was pleased to find long-time Little School teacher Deirdre Reedy was still living "in the same old house, an old Craftsman, in the University District," sorting through stacks of the New Yorker and palling around with our former TLS librarian Nancy Palmer.



Deirdre's class picture from 1988-1989

"I just had my 84th birthday in May." Deirdre noted, "and a group of former TLS colleagues – Mari Brockhaus, Joyce Teshima and Nancy, came to my house and brought a cake. They had told the bakery to write "Happy Cake!" on it and when we opened the box it turned out they'd written "Happy Cane!" instead. Which was, of course, great. Appropriate. It just struck us so funny. I'm not using one yet, but I'm getting close."

Deirdre was my teacher when I was six, over thirty years ago. She had, I think, an outsized influence on how I approach education and learning. So much so, that when I saw her at the 60th Anniversary Auction I ran up to her, my arms wide, and shouted, "You taught me to read!" something she points out, is not entirely accurate. "I don't think I taught you to read; you picked it up on your own." She's right, of course. It probably would have been more accurate to say, "You were instrumental in my journey as a reader and a writer." But it feels true.

She was initially hesitant to participate in this project, not being one for the spotlight. But I sent her some questions and asked if we could chat over the phone. Graciously, she obliged. We ended up talking for almost an hour. I could have done it all day. This interview was condensed for clarity.

Sarah: For those who haven't had the pleasure, provide us with a little background. Which years were you at The Little School? What grades, or years of age, did you teach?

Deirdre: I was at The Little School from 1978-2009, but the last few years were as a library assistant. I stopped teaching in June of 2002 and stayed on working in the library. When I was a classroom teacher, I mostly had 5- and 6-year-olds. Once in a while 4s and 5s, but mostly 5s and 6s.

Sarah: What led you to teaching? To The Little School?

Deirdre: Part of it was thinking back on my own childhood, on my own school experiences. Most were good, but there were some not-so-good, and I think that was part of it. My daughter went to the Duke University



Preschool (we were living in North Carolina at the time), and it had a philosophy similar to The Little School – I didn’t know that then, but I realized it later. I volunteered there for about three years and was pretty comfortable in the company of kids. I also picked up a lot of childhood development information, so that got me curious. When I came back to Seattle, I got a job teaching at the Jewish Community Center Preschool on Mercer Island and learned about The Little School’s teaching credential program through Pacific Oaks College. I applied, was accepted, and met Pat Sterne, who ran the program at the time. She was an inspiration and a mentor and became a good friend. As a teaching intern, I got familiar with the inviting Little School campus, so that was in my mind. After receiving my teaching certificate, I volunteered as a substitute at the Bush School, had a bit of time at the Virginia Mason Employees Daycare, and then accepted a job at Happy Medium School in the University Unitarian Church in Seattle (where Little School had first started). Then I heard about an opening at TLS, so I went out and interviewed with Eleanor. There wasn’t a hiring committee at that time as far as I know, and she hired me right away for the coming fall, with a class of five-year-olds.



Home visits to students’ homes? That terrified me, in the beginning, but my first year there I had a funny experience. I drove out to Woodinville into this forest, which probably isn’t even there anymore, to a family who lived in houses on stilts. They had two or three little houses and I was to meet them in one that they used as a living room. I had to climb up this ladder ... I mean it was just such a contrast to the more traditional homes I’d been to previously. But that family, they were so dear. They invited me in and gave me tea, and I sat in this little chair (my memory is everything was tiny). They sat in front of me on the floor (mom, dad, and two kids) and grinned at me as if I was the best thing that had ever happened to them. I was so touched I started to cry because I’d been so nervous! And they were so welcoming. Anyway, being in this storybook house, right out of Beatrix Potter, I’ll always remember it. That put me at ease for the remainder of my home visits. It influenced my comfort level.

Sarah: Yeah, you know that’s interesting. I’ve been on both ends I mean – as a parent and a kid.

Deirdre: Being nervous, too!

Sarah: Yes! But I can’t imagine going to students’ houses! I mean, I would be petrified.

Deirdre: No, it was a chance to make a good connection with the child. But if the parents had concerns, it was sometimes more like a job interview. At the same time, I recognized how parents were nervous, too, that the teacher was coming. It works both ways. But that was one of the best home visits I ever had. I’m wondering if those little houses are still there.



Sarah: And that was Eleanor who instituted those – the home visits. Tell me more. What was she like?

Deirdre: Eleanor's presence and demeanor tended to be reserved, but her vision of what mattered for children was warm and compassionate. She always observed each classroom twice a year and handed teachers her elegantly hand-written comments. She never failed to support and encourage me as a teacher or to express an appreciation of my efforts. I respected and admired her; I valued her guidance, and her feelings about children. She really had it down, what's important for kids. I think she really knew.

Sarah: What would you say is most important in teaching young children?

Deirdre: Remembering that everything in a child's learning doesn't have to be conceived, introduced and directed by an adult. Because you can come to trust children's own innate curiosity and then give them time to explore on their own or with other children every day. And trusting yourself to step back, and observe, and to listen, because if you do that, you can be enlightened by what you see. Also, what I came to realize is that children are great teachers. When I think of today especially (and it was also true back then), there's so much pressure for children to fast track and "succeed." And that puts teachers under pressure too. You feel like you have to fill these kids up with as much as you can. But (and I'm thinking mainly of young kids, but it's probably true for older ones too), I think that the stepping back ... it can be hard to do but if you can remember to do it – to me it's the real, basic component of being with children, of being in their company.



Sarah: Any moments with students stand out?

Deirdre: One that stands out involved a pair of five-year-olds, a boy and a girl. They were good friends and told me they wanted to get married. But what they really wanted to do was plan a wedding, and they proceeded to do so – earnestly and seriously. More and more children joined in the effort until it seemed the whole class was busy writing invitations, making decorations and planning refreshments. Everyone was industrious, focused and organized. I was there to assist when they needed me but for the most part I just sat back and enjoyed their creativity. I can imagine people looking in on it – I mean, people off the street saying, "Well, they're just playing," but they weren't – they were learning so much.

Another one I recall was a six-year-old who was enthralled with the movie *Beauty and the Beast*. He wanted to act it out and have other people join him. He had such an easy-going manner – he wasn't overbearing – and he was so interested. His enthusiasm got other people participating, and I just remember that little face getting so excited as he organized everybody and their parts. It was charming! I was there, loving it and enjoying it, but it was their show.



A couple of quotes that I remember are priceless. We went on a field trip to Bear Creek to watch the salmon spawn and it was a beautiful day. There were tons of fish swimming and one of my six-year-olds came up to me, tugged my sleeve and said, in a quietly confidential way, “Deirdre, this is very realistic.” It was such a wonderfully apt description of his astonishment.

Another favorite quote happened at group time. I had put a puppet on my hand and the puppet is talking. Kids that age, they know it’s you, but they also believe it’s the puppet, and one little girl, a lively dearie, wanted to say something. I kept having the puppet say, “No ... you need to wait,” and

she got so impatient she came up, grabbed my puppet hand, and said, “Be quiet! I wanna talk to the big girl with glasses!” It cracked me up.

Sarah: Tell me about field trips!

Deirdre: One that comes to mind was a trip to the Seattle Children’s Theatre to see a Winnie-the-Pooh play. There was a mom in the class who felt most comfortable being with her child on field trips, so she often volunteered to drive. This time, for some reason, she was unable to join us. I reassured her that she didn’t have to worry, that everything would be fine, that nothing would happen. And we went ... and it turned out to be the day of the Nisqually earthquake.

Sarah: Oh, no!

Deirdre: Yes. And so we were sitting watching the performance, and it was a boisterous time in the play and we were on bleacher seats, and everything started shaking. I thought it was part of the play, until they said, “Everybody out. Everybody out.” Neither the children nor I registered instantly that it was an earthquake. Well, by the time we got back to school [laughs] and drove into the turnaround, the mother I had left calm in the morning was standing waiting on the curb, not relaxed. Mother Nature had made a liar out of me! After I’d reassured her so much!

Sarah: So, speaking of the arts, this year, for the Art Festival, kids decorated these wood, laser-cut salmon and hung them on a fence they ribboned with recycled denim (like a river) – beautiful. And besides linking to current study, it reminded me both of the earliest TLS Art Shows, when art was displayed on the yard fence for family and neighbors, and the fish-prints I did at the Art Festival as a kid in the late-80s/early-90s. You had your own part in those ...



Deirdre: I've always loved children's art. I see it as their personal expression, giving their perspective on how things look. When children are free to use materials in their own way, the results are so original and varied. Pat Sterne was in charge of organizing the Art Festival display of children's art for decades. Before she retired, she appointed me to carry on the task. Pat was a hard act to follow, but I had wonderful assistance from both faculty and staff and an abundant supply of wonderful artistic creations by children. I always looked forward to the Art Festival as a joyous springtime event, a tradition The Little School should be proud of and never abandon.

Sarah: This year The Little School opened up the new Rivers Building, which of course expands what we can do with these kinds of community events, but it's also a big change. During the process, I realized that the Cedars Building (the LLC, Library Building) was built while I was at school there. What was that like from a teacher's perspective?

Deirdre: You know before that was built, the teachers and staff ate lunch in the Center Room.

Sarah: Oh my gosh! Yeah, I really didn't know.

Deirdre: We had to take turns setting up tables and then taking them down. They were huge, heavy tables and it was a lot of work. Some of us crowded into the Meadows kitchen to prepare our lunches. One day, after heating up soup, I strolled back in the Center Room where people were sitting. A couple of colleagues jumped up, waving their arms, and for a second I thought, "Oh! They're so glad to see me!" Then I realized they were warning me my scarf was on fire!

Sarah: Oh my gosh – No, it's funny 'cause I couldn't even remember! In my mind the library had just always been there. Like, it's one of those things where ... You know when you're really small, how far you see in front of you... is ...

[laughter]

So, so yeah! So, what— what was it like before that?

Deirdre: The library was in a classroom!

Sarah: Oh!

Deirdre: It was in a Meadows classroom, and it was tiny and cramped. The librarian at the time was an interesting woman, and I got used to the space, but of course the expanse in the new library was terrific. So many more books. And you could take in a lot more children and have them browsing. It was much more comfortable. It also freed up the Center Room, so during lunch-hour times classes could take turns out there with big blocks. or practice plays or do whatever. It also freed up spots for parent conferences. We were tight on space, and it was hard to find a place with any privacy. I remember using the Meadows workroom because I could



shut the door, but it was very claustrophobic. So having places to conference and a large library space, those were good changes.

Sarah: Speaking of books, any you'd recommend to our alumni community?

Deirdre: The two books I read most recently (because I'm interested in film and plays) were biographies of Tom Stoppard and Mike Nichols. I was fascinated by them. It turns out that they actually had a connection with one another – they both had to escape the Nazis as children. It was interesting reading about them, especially, because that experience of being displaced, in childhood, was so significant and affected them for the rest of their lives. I'd recommend those. Although they are about old white men. [laughter]

Sarah: Well then if you're into film, are there movies I should be watching?

Deirdre: Oh of course. With movies, what attracts me and what I've always been interested in, are obscure independent films, foreign films. One that I really loved recently is called Puzzle. It's a very small film about a housewife who gets fascinated with puzzles. She's in a very traditional situation with a husband and two kids, and she goes to a puzzle shop and ends up meeting a wonderful man who's also a puzzle enthusiast, played by the terrific actor Irrfan Khan. It's small and quiet, and I was charmed by it. The movies I like are not grandiose by any means.

Sarah: No that's perfect! Us too.

Deirdre: Another one that I love is called Bright Star, and it's by an Australian director, Jane Campion. The Piano is her most well-known film. But Bright Star is about John Keats, the poet, and his love, Fanny. It's an exquisite movie, one of my favorites. It was particularly touching. I don't know whether it's something that would appeal to you or not, but I would guess it might be?

If you can hear the smile in her voice there, a kind of gentle teasing, it's because she knows I'm a writer.

"I know! Because I looked you up! Because now you can look people up!" Since we talked, we've emailed a bit back and forth and she is a treasure – full of stories and insights like this. She tells me later, "going through my papers last week, I found a note Eleanor once wrote to me about her feelings of timidity in some circumstances," perhaps lending some credence to what she'd once told me about Eleanor's "formality." But what really strikes me is that Deirdre has all those letters, that she takes and keeps notes. "You were already interested in writing, back then. Did you know that?" she asked me. I didn't. "You loved reading to classmates and writing stories. You identified yourself as a writer at 6. Isn't that amazing?" She said she wanted to know all about it, what I've been up to. She is, essentially, what she saw in the face of that child – a highly interested person. A lifelong learner. Someone whose interest gets other people interested.



And so I was pleased to hear, in her retirement that she spends time going to “movies, and plays and concerts and browsing museums.” And that she’s kept in touch with teachers. “I’m friends with Margaret Fitzgerald and Julie Holmgren. I don’t know whether you know them. Margaret was an assistant director for many years, and Julie taught the youngest children. Alice [Hauschka] knows them well. And then Nancy, of course, has been my buddy for ages.” But this, I came to realize, was something I was really waiting to hear. That two of my favorite people, beloved figures of my childhood, Nancy and Deirdre, are friends even now.

“I didn’t do anything last summer, but I’ve had this tradition, since the 70s, of going to this very funky resort on Orcas Island called the North Beach Inn. It’s just like it was from the 1930s, with all these great old cabins ... a feeling of something out of the past. That’s my summer plan. Going back. It’s really a place out of time, you know?”