

Reaching the ‘Head, Heart and Hands’ of Children

Off the Cuff with the Waldorf School’s Amy Marks

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PHOTO COURTESY OF AMY MARKS

Students learn to drum at Waldorf School

According to Rudolf Steiner, who founded the Waldorf movement in Europe a century ago, “When what we introduce into the children's world of ideas and feelings is in line with the direction of the developmental forces of a given stage of life, we strengthen the entire developing person in a way that remains a source of strength throughout that person’s life.” Amy Marks has been a teacher with

Milwaukee's Tamarack Waldorf School for 20 years. She's an 8th grade teacher, but practices a loop method, meaning she has had the same students from Kindergarten through 8th grade, giving students stability and familiarity. Off the Cuff asked her about the Waldorf concept of educating children.

Describe the Waldorf program.

Often you will hear the phrase, "head, heart and hands" in connection with Waldorf. If I had to pick a motto that would be my choice because we try to incorporate doing, thinking and feeling into all of our lessons and even into our whole day. Students, when at school, spend a good amount of time outdoors experiencing nature, the seasons and playing together. During our lessons we move, paint, draw, sing, play music, perform plays, and play social games.

Additionally, students have handwork and wood work class, foreign languages, and during this virtual learning period we have added extra support for our students with cyber civics and mindfulness class.

We believe that parents are the child's first teachers, you will see parents in the hallways of a Waldorf school. They will be dropping off children, volunteering for field trips, helping with festivals, serving on committees; we work as a team to hold the children in love and safety. I think that is why distance learning has gone as well as it has for Tamarack. The parents and teachers are accustomed to working together. We are in communication and though the teachers plan the curriculum and lead the schoolwork, parents are engaged and making it happen in the home. More than ever, we are indebted to the parents for their support and dedication.

***You teach 8th grade. How many grades are taught at the school?
What do you mean by "looping" grades?***

Tamarack is a pre-K-grade 8 school. Teachers take their class at grade one and teach the same group until they graduate and move on to high school. The relationships that are built between teacher and student and students within their social group are abiding and offer great stability. Especially during uncertain times, like a pandemic for example, the trauma is lessened by continuing education with familiar instructors and long abiding classmates.

What are examples of how you teach various subjects?

Distance learning has required that we make major adjustments to our teaching practices. I am particularly proud that we only require the students to be online for an average of one hour a day. We have pre-recorded lessons for the students to watch or listen to, we have typed out carefully crafted lesson plans which incorporate artistic activities to synthesize the learning. For example, this week my students are writing a short story and last week they wrote a biography paper about a luminary, a person who has lit the way out of darkness for human beings everywhere. When studying geometry, the students will be creating models of the geometric shapes and drawing them as well and will study how geometric patterns are found in nature.

What has been most rewarding for you?

During these [20] years my rewards have been many. Recently a student from my first class at Tamarack toured the school looking for a kindergarten for her daughter. I didn't know that she was coming and when I saw her face at my classroom door, I was so filled with pride for what a wonderful human she is and what a joy it was to see her, her husband and daughter. To see the full great circles in life connecting is widely rewarding. Teaching itself is an honorable occupation. It's humbling and joyful, I'm blessed to be a teacher.

How does this school differ or compare to mainstream schools?

We teach through the arts meaning in every lesson there will be some combination of poetry, song, creative writing, imagery, reading, and more. Our

lessons are not formed by Common Core requirements or “teaching to the test.” We follow a set curriculum that allows for individual interpretation and approach. There are rubrics if set goals and content we need to cover each year but the delivery of the curriculum leaves room for creativity and building on the student’s interests and needs. We assess our students by their writing and reading abilities and quiz students on their math work. Teachers also take note of personal growth and social capacities. Students create a main lesson book each block of study which is an artistic project which includes writing on the subject, illustrations and independent work. This physical evidence of lessons can later provide a portfolio to demonstrate student’s engagement and achievement.

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