

# *Erica and Mark's Group*

## *6<sup>th</sup> Grade, 2009*

**Head Teacher-** Erica Nelson

**Assistant Teacher-** Mark Palacio

### **Overview**

Miquon's class of 2009 was a delightful group of young, strong, athletic, humorous and incredibly creative students. Their interests varied from soccer to dance, architecture to fashion design, historical fiction to science fiction enthusiasts, dog lovers to enthusiasts of snakes. Though interests varied greatly, the group was a unanimously hard working, kind and charming.

Our class was comprised of eleven 6th graders. The group had 4 boys and 7 girls. I had the pleasure of working with 7 of the students in my vertical 5/6<sup>th</sup> grade class during the 2007-08 school years when they were in fifth grade. Many students had been at The Miquon School since kindergarten or nursery; three children came to Miquon in second and third grade.

From the beginning we set up the three pillars which would define our classroom: Kindness, Truth and Respect. These tenets were our guide posts to honoring ourselves, respecting differences in others and speaking with truth and integrity. The children quickly saw that these ideals replaced the need for many specific rules, yet simultaneously raised the standards. Each was responsive to the challenge and was quick to uphold each three ideals. This young group of people cherished justice and wove that goal into our interpersonal connections. I found their insights refreshing, inspiring and articulate. I am honored to have worked with each child throughout this year.

### **Community**

Building a healthy community was a fundamental goal throughout the year. There was an emphasis above all to ensure that all children felt safe, treasured and valued in our classroom. The curriculum was designed to be challenging to make the children realize their potential academically and to fulfill their creative ambitions. I worked to foster the ideal that children must be known and understood by taking time always to listen, assist and encourage. Respect was an integral part of everything we did and our program took the time to fully address any unkind/disrespectful action between students. We encouraged students to share issues with us and to trust that we would always help them reach a resolution.

Mark and I have worked as a team to model the utmost respect and support of one another with good humor, effective communication and excellent planning together. As teachers we are two people who jointly have had the best interest of the class as top priority. We welcomed parents to join our class whenever they were available. We welcomed all visitors wholeheartedly, thus modeling to the students the acceptance we expect them to impart on one another.

### **Balance**

Balance in the life of an adolescent is a critical concept. We addressed issues of balance around social connections to peers, extra-curricular activities or interests, homework and the potential stress of students. We encouraged children to share their home life with us and were fair and understanding about times when the family schedule made completion of all homework impossible. A careful balance was maintained between home and school and family time was honored. Part of maintaining a healthy balance at any age is effective communication and forethought about obligations. We worked hard to acknowledge children's stress when there seemed to be too many demands on their time and made adjustments accordingly.

As middle school friendships are so vital to the development of adolescents, we looked to find ways to keep their relationships healthy and balanced. We gave the kids an opportunity to develop trusting relationships with teachers in hopes that this would open more avenues for sharing and conversation. When issues arose between the children, we listened carefully and guided children toward resolution.

We were committed to balancing academic time with social, physical, creative, dramatic and free time with the intension of providing a balanced blend of activities. Through these varied venues, we found opportunities for all children to feel successful in each area of the curriculum. We created assignments which spoke to these varied aspects. We felt this was the best way to foster the development of the whole child, increase confidence and maintain balance.

### Homework

Homework was used to reinforce skills from class, explore creative ventures, enjoy quality literature in a quiet space which calls to a child's imagination, and to make connections between areas of curriculum. Homework was not assigned on weekends or holidays. Children need down time and time when they know all their responsibilities have been met. When children begin to associate homework with success and completion, they are empowered. Homework was generally assigned Monday – Thursday.

We spent significant time in the beginning of the year teaching the children how to effectively write down their assignments, stay organized and how to track the progress of their assignments. Parents became involved if a child needed support, otherwise children were rewarded with their independence. Children were encouraged to review their completed, returned work with their parents. In this way the child is the expert and demonstrated mastery of an assignment to their parent. As the interaction is designed to be solely positive, the hope is that it will encourage more discussion of their academic pursuits and encourage academic self reliance.

The children in our class, like the cross section of any group of children, had different areas of strength and variable academic paces. Therefore, the expectation was that all children will invest an hour of time into their homework on Monday-Thursday. Children were not asked to do more, or work ahead, but if they wished, they could. Children discussed their progress on assignments with Erica during our Morning Routine and support and understanding were extended to difficulties or frustrations with work. Generally however, this group of students was incredibly responsible, creative, efficient, and resourceful. They also had supportive families who came to their aid, when needed.

### Morning Routine

Every morning, students came to see me upon coming in the room. I checked in their homework, did attendance/transportation plans and welcomed them warmly. Children shared with me at that point any issue/problem/announcement they had. Upon checking in and doing their job, kids were asked to say hi to all teachers in the building and could enjoy catching up with friends. This time was intentionally left flexible. We used this time to connect with each other, to enjoy a breakfast treat together, to discuss a problem a classmate might need support with or to catch up on work. If confusion arose during their nightly assignment, or if they were unable to complete their assignments, they were offered our help and asked to use morning time (8:40-9AM) to get caught up.

Morning time was the foundation of every day. It created a peacefulness and a higher level of relaxation among the children, knowing they had opportunities for help, conversation or a listening ear before they day got busy. Often we helped children with organizational challenges in this time, lending a hand to help organize a backpack, or encouraging another to make a call home for a forgotten lunch. Even children who were totally prepared and organized for their day had an opportunity to communicate that success. Small group meetings happened in Morning Time too, if an issue surfaced late in the prior day. By the time we all sat down for the review of the day, children seemed relaxed, supported and ready to learn, explore and create.

## Academic Summary

### Overview

The objective of the curriculum was to address each student's academic needs to ensure they grow intellectually, socially and emotionally throughout the year. The small class size and multiple small group times throughout the day provided a unique and wonderful teaching opportunity which was cherished. The hope was that each child feel challenged academically yet feel confident and capable in all areas of the curriculum. Long term projects captured their mastery of skills and the depth of their comprehension. Short term skill practice was paired with long term projects thus varying the duration of assignments and allowing for children's choice within any field of study.

### Progressive Education

Progressive Education Ideals were showcased in many forms in our classroom.

- \* Assignments had options which provided meaning and involved making choices based on student interest within our field of study.

- \* Assessment was done gently, with appreciation for growth versus strict milestones. We spoke at length about the process of reaching an end goal and the benefits of each unique approach.

- \* Respect permeated the room and the children's ideas and opinions were of the utmost importance. We fostered conversation around developing the children's observation, life experiences and their insightful connections to our curriculum.

- \* We worked to create abundant curiosity and rewarded self initiative and personal interests.

- \* We found the opportunity for children to learn from one another and to teach one another. Our class took full advantage of this prospect. We worked diligently to offer different variations of assignments and fields of study to accommodate each learner and to ensure success.

- \* Children with a curiosity that took them in a different direction within our field of study were encouraged to pursue their ideas.

- \* Our assessment of the children's comprehension was seen as a snapshot of a large continuum and not an ending point, but rather as a beginning.

### **Math Overview**

Our curriculum in math wove the concepts of The Miquon School Scope and Sequence into engaging math work which tied into everyday applications. Math was seen as a "real" entity with all our work connecting in some way to its platform. We used various methods to demonstrate a students' understanding of concepts. A large variety of resources were used in our

mathematical studies this year, but our field of study revolved around fractions, decimals, percentages, logic, complex word problems, graphing, proportion and statistics.

Complex word problems were used which necessitated the use of multi-step problem solving, reasoning and computation. All work in this regard was initially broken down into specific steps and carefully labeled. In this way, we were able to focus the majority of our assessment on the process of problem solving, not just the right final answer. Children working through multi-step word problems were rewarded even if the answer was not “right”, as many steps and/or their logic were accurate. I usually modeled the method of how I came up with the answer; however, we discovered that there are often other, also successful methods to approach a problem. We discussed this regularly weighing the advantages of different tactics of approach. Initially we went over these in ½ groups until the kids understood the expectations of proper labeling, written computation, numbered steps and explanation of the solution.

Each aspect of math that we explored tied into a visual, hands-on project. For some children this piece was an imperative element of the comprehension puzzle. However, skill practice and repetition were essential to build a strong base of mathematical comprehension. Children practiced in a National Assessment of Mathematics standards math workbook to accomplish this task on a routine basis. We reviewed their weekly work carefully and required students to make corrections and verbalize their emerging comprehension. Logic problems tied comprehension with computation and were a favorite among many of the students.

All students were acknowledged for asking pointed mathematical questions. We valued persistence and willingness to take risks in math. We created games and projects with a mathematical component to allow students to be successful and empowered. Children demonstrated strong growth throughout the year in all genres of mathematics.

### **Language Arts Overview**

Our Language Arts field of study addressed many aspects of the discipline. We addressed reading comprehension through both fiction and non-fiction and employed varied length works in both venues. We encouraged growth of vocabulary for each child through instruction in how to infer meaning of difficult words in context, identifying root words, studying prefixes and suffixes and inquiry. We played games with new words in groups of teams to bring vocabulary to life and thus be more likely to be remembered.

Kids read many fictional novels through the year. Children were encouraged to become passionate, avid readers. The literature chosen were largely Caldecott Award winning pieces of literature. Many also held a historical fiction component which enriched our social studies program and was tied in accordingly.

We discussed each assignment thoroughly in small groups and drew inferences from meanings, “between the lines”. Children had choices of activities to demonstrate comprehension of their reading assignments, but some questions remained for all to address.

Each literature group unit throughout the year was presented in an energetic and excited format to spread the joy and enthusiasm which should surround renowned, honored children’s fiction. This year we offered the following books in small literature groups:

[Literature Group Selections 2008-2009](#)

[Maniac Magee](#)

[Getting Near to Baby](#)

[Dragonwings](#)

[The Cay](#)

[The Year of Impossible Goodbyes](#)

[When my Name was Keoko](#)

[Free Historical Fiction Selection](#)

[Free Reading Choices](#)

[Miracles on Maple Hill](#)

[Tangerine](#)

[Snow Treasure](#)

[Journey to America](#)

[Across Five Aprils](#)

[My Brother Sam is Dead](#)

[Kira Kira](#)

[Flipped](#)

Using non-fiction, we practiced note-taking, summarizing and outlining as we read about US History. Writing assignments which contained historical concepts were categorized in students' history notebooks so their world knowledge was cumulative, organized in chronological order and their written skill visibly improved as the year and their skills progressed.

We broadened our Language Arts program through mechanics, grammar, spelling (phonics and rules), author study, comparison of style, persuasive writing, essay format writing and the study of poetry. Each student selected their favorite piece of poetry and worked this year on memorizing the poem, giving attention to how they interpreted the poem and therefore how they felt the poem should be read. All children were videotaped reciting their poems and we later watched the playback to celebrate their success, learn from this public speaking opportunity and enjoy the poems selected. Several children even recited their poems during our school wide Poetry Slam Assembly.

Within our study of spelling we used a weekly dictation system. We focused attention on the top 800 most commonly used words among this age group. Many of those words were homophones and therefore required knowledge of application as well as spelling. To address those subtleties, we had a weekly five sentence dictation. Each sentence wove 6-10 of the words from our list into context. The sentences tended to be silly compilations of usually paired words, so they provided some humor among the spelling lesson. The dictation was corrected and students created strategies for trying to remember the correct spelling for the retest on Fridays. Initially we taught techniques of acronyms, sounding out, syllable – reading, sky writing, etc to encourage students to find a method that was comfortable and effective for each of them. Students had all their dictations entries in notebooks and were encouraged to utilize their notebooks with their writing.

Additionally, children worked extensively on essay writing throughout the school year. We examined various formats of essay writing and discussed methods of organization and planning prior to writing. Students were taught to identify a central question, organize thoughts into several paragraphs and logically lead to a conclusion. The result of our efforts has yielded very talented pointed writers who are able to defend an idea clearly and sequentially in writing. We also discussed the editing process all year and the importance of review, expansion and revision in creating quality writing. Word processing was utilized all year and each child practiced typing to become more efficient on the computer.

### **Class Play**

This year we had an amazing opportunity to work with People's Light and Theater Company through a drama grant. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade worked closely with the theater teacher for several weeks of creation, planning and practicing the evolving play. People's Light and

Theater encouraged the students to contribute to the structure of the play and to add creative touches to the formation of the show. For several weeks, the children answered a central question “What kind of society would we create if we were in a position to recreate our environment?” The children offered insights and their priorities regarding society. As the play evolved, students met with the other classes in the school. Our oldest students taught their younger schoolmates portions of the play which allowed for a whole school performance where all the children had ownership. The play was performed in the Moore Building in May to the delight of all the students and many parents.

### **Social Studies Overview**

Social Studies was a central component of all our work throughout the year. Through academic layering we incorporated social studies into mathematics and language arts to broaden intellectual connections and enhance meaning and application. Almost all of our technical, non-fiction writing assignments revolved around our year round studies of North American history. All historical assignments were organized into their specific centuries in the students’ history notebook binders. In this way, historical sequence was visible simply by review of their own work. We could then explore cause, effect and consequence of history. Mathematics was woven throughout this field of study as well through graphing, statistical analysis and in the calculation of linear distance.

We began by studying the county of Philadelphia learning about our unique community. We will looked at Pennsylvania and learn about the general different regions of the state, nation and continent. We continually asked ourselves about the geographical consequence of living on the northeastern portion of the US. We considered the implication of our location in all our historical studies, which lead to thorough and logical understanding of Pennsylvania’s past.

Our studies in history began in the 1500s and explored the lives of the North American Native Americans and their initial contacts with Europeans. We studied the 1500s through the end of the Civil War in hopes to create a broad, entry point comprehension of historical knowledge. Children were encouraged to question perspective in history and to challenge from whose perspective a written accounting of history came from. We wove a thorough ethics exploration into all our studies as so many aspects of history appear in review to so completely dishonor large groups of people. Our studies led to very interesting conversations and sparked interest in all the children.

Throughout the year, we wove geography into our studies of American History. We discussed the consequence of geography in the early history of North America.

We studied satellite photography and downloaded pictures from on line sites of Miquon and its campus. Perspective was examined and compared with our view of the same area. We studied the county of Philadelphia learning about our unique community. We looked at Pennsylvania and learned about the general different regions of the state, nation and continent.

### **Curricular Enhancement**

#### **Field Trips**

Examining Revolutionary War medical tools at Valley Forge

Our sixth grade enjoyed many trips this school year. Our small class size allowed for many field trips and we all decided to seize the opportunity.

In October our class accompanied our nursery buddies to a local farm to pick pumpkins, celebrate Fall and appreciate the bounty of harvest time. We also went to Crystal Cave to discover a beautiful underground series of caves. We imagined how exciting this would have been to discover Crystal Cave in the mid 1800s.

In November, we went downtown to The Kimmel Center to enjoy a children's performance of wind instruments. The group captured the joy of music and spoke in a small venue to 100 students, encouraging each of them to pursue music. Also in November, upon our first "no mistakes" Friday Pizza Sale, we celebrated with a much loved trip to Dairy Queen.

In December, after a study of author Charles Dickens, the class traveled to the Keswick Theater to see "A Christmas Carol". Following the show we all headed to my house to enjoy lunch together and to discuss the play.

In January, to follow the Presidential Inauguration thoroughly we all left campus to travel to my house, celebrating the day with lunch and an uninterrupted discussion and observation of the inauguration on television.

In February, upon completion of our history studies of The Revolutionary War, we traveled to Valley Forge, PA and spent the day exploring the Valley Forge National Park. We were able to see first-hand all the landmarks we had talked so much about in class. The rangers taught us about the uniforms and weapons of the period. We all agreed this was a very interesting trip.

In early May, as the timeline of our historical studies progressed, we went to Lancaster, PA to The Landis Valley Museum. Landis Valley Museum is a working farm museum modeling life in the early 1800s in rural Pennsylvania. We took a horse drawn carriage ride through the museum pulled by two stunning draft horses. It was a magical day, filled with each of us imagining life in this era.

In late May the children helped to organize and plan our Spring Overnight. As a class we slowly navigated through a myriad of initial ideas and the kids began to narrow down the possibilities through discussion and intense listening to one another. The objective of the trip was to celebrate all our successes throughout the year, maximize our exposure to many opportunities for learning in Philadelphia and bond more closely as a group. The students and I ultimately decided to have a two night overnight at Miquon with day trips to The Adventure Aquarium, Big Trolley Tour of Philadelphia, the Disney Earth movie, a trip to Geno's Steaks in South Philadelphia and dinner at Bruno's Diner. Our evenings back on campus were filled with playing cards, enjoying good conversations, a late night movie and camaraderie. It was wonderful overnight which brought the group even closer together. It was my pleasure to spend this time with the children.

### **Nursery Buddies**

This year we had the privilege of working closely with our friends in the nursery. The nursery teachers and I worked hard in the beginning of the year to pair our students up with a nursery partner with whom we thought they would relate closely. I am not sure how we managed it, but our pairings worked out wonderfully!

Beth, Celia, Mark and I all saw this cross-grade partnership as a central part of our programs. The opportunity to work closely with a child of a different age allowed for the older children to consider the growth they have experienced, to thoughtfully plan for the needs of a

younger child, to maintain their own youth through joyful play and to communicate clearly and directly with sensitivity. Additionally, our program allowed for nursery children to be known by the oldest members in our student population, thus allowing everyone to feel connected and honored. Each sixth grader became very close with their partner/partners and a deep bond of admiration was formed between them.

Throughout the year, we met to play, do a cooking project, read stories or do arts and crafts. We sat together for assembly each Friday and that close time was something all the kids looked forward to each week. In fact, the student's commitment to the nursery led to the decision to purchase a new seesaw for their little friends as their end of the year gift to the school.

At the end of the year, each 6<sup>th</sup> grader wrote a story about their buddy, created a hard cover book with hand sewn pages and carefully illustrated pictures. We studied the various formats of literature aimed at early childhood and explored the types of stories which would be age appropriate for our partners. Students examined classic children's literature and found patterns of practice including rhyme, repetition, simple plot lines, alliteration, obvious humor and bold illustrations. Every sixth grader was encouraged to consider these ideas in the creation of their story. Each story contained a personal dedication so the book could serve as our goodbye gift to our dear friends.

### **Mini Courses**

Miquon has a long history of mini courses. The central idea is that children have an opportunity to select courses which speak to their interests. Three times a year, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders have an opportunity to listen to presentations by the teachers about fields of study available for the next session. On occasion, children ask to help lead a mini course. This is always encouraged.

Each mini course is 8 weeks long and met on Fridays for an hour following assembly. Upon listening to Mini Course options students listed their top three choices and every effort was made to honor their preferences.

The fall option was open only to 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders; winter courses were open to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders and older. Spring courses were open to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders and up. The opportunity for children to connect with others in various grade levels opened the possibilities for cross-age experiences, new learning opportunities and broader friendships.

### **Personal Projects**

May was the scene for personal projects. Personal Projects is a free research/learning opportunity for children to explore a topic of interest. Each child began with brainstorming what areas of interest they may wish to explore. Upon deciding on an idea, children defined their goals, and then set a goal for each of the three weeks leading up to the presentations of Personal Projects. We kept these goals and referred to them each week in an effort to quantify progress and to reassess what yet needed to be done.

The Projects were amazing and all the children did fabulous, thorough, creative and interesting projects. All students met or exceeded their goals. Some of the topics they chose are as follows: two children altered a pattern and sewed a dress, one created a scrapbook of her equestrian summer camp, a student photographed her classmates and nursery partners and made an I-Movie, one created a feline fitness program, another designed a duct tape Cyborg suit and

explored the prospect of costume design, one student studied and compared world currencies, another created a scrapbook showcasing her experience helping to raise 7 puppies, one student videotaped his own cooking show about making scrambled eggs, another studied animals from Australia. The kids enjoyed the process and the results!

#### 2009 Personal Project

**Cassie – Created an I-Movie from her own photographs of her classmates, set the movie to music and presented the movie to class**

**Juliana – Altered a pattern and sewed her own graduation dress**

**Wynn – made his own cooking show demonstrating how to make scrambled eggs, had it videotaped and added music and sophisticated graphics**

**Brooke – Altered a pattern, purchased the fabric and sewed her first dress**

**Josh – created a map of Australia and taught a lesson about native animals of Australia**

**Blake – In his interest of prop design, Blake crafted a duct tape cyborg suit**

**Celeste –Created a detailed feline fitness program for her three cats, each with a different objective to help maximize their health.**

**Aaron- Conducted a currency study of world currencies, charted their value compared with the US dollar**

**Anna-Focused on Italian Cooking and made Baked Ziti – shared the recipe with the class and explained the process**

**Hannah-Captured the experience of helping to raise seven puppies last year in a detailed scrapbook.**

**Claudia – Through a scrapbook format, detailed her summer camp experience**

#### Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed my year working with the Class of 2009. I am so grateful to Mark for adding so much interest and energy into each morning together.

I am grateful for the students who brought an unending supply of creativity, knowledge, curiosity and joy to every day. Each held a different, unique gift which I grew to fully appreciate and acknowledge. All of my class parents were wonderful and joined in a partnership to guide and care for the children. I so appreciate their trust with these precious young people.

I am also grateful to all my Miquon colleagues, especially Beth and Celia, Anne, Diane, Tony, Bill, Karen, Julia, Joan, Lynn and Ann. Thank you all for such a wonderful year and I wish the students all the very best in September at their new schools! Don't forget to visit!

Erica