

History of the Academy In Manayunk: Adoption of The Lab School Approach

by Pat Roberts and Nancy Blair

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Meeting Sally L. Smith

We (Pat Roberts and Nancy Blair) will never forget the first time that we saw Sally Smith. There was no missing her in the crowded 30th Street Station as she emerged from the Amtrak tracks below. Sally was covered in colorful scarves and had a large set of dice dangling from her ears. It was hard to fully comprehend this vision, but one thing was clear... this was going to be fun!

It was not until her death and having seen the children engage with her when she would visit the Academy In Manayunk that we realized her colorful persona was truly by design. It was a signal to the students that this school is different from all of the rest and that teachers, and yes the Head of School, were there to engage every child in the process of active learning through doing.

Well, we have never painted our nails with polka dots but we do think of Sally as we reach out to children at the Academy In Manayunk every day and make those “fun” connections. The faculty and staff have created a school that focuses on the individual child and celebrates the unique talents and interests that each brings to the learning community. It is based on the vision that Sally L. Smith created over 40 years ago. She was truly the epitome of “a woman ahead of her time.” What the research is now

outlining in the field of learning disabilities, Sally Smith put into practice beginning in 1967.

Who We Are?

The success of The Lab School of Washington has been attributed to many things, including Sally L. Smith herself. But at the core of what drove the success of the program was the passion of a mother whose child learned differently.

That is the story of the Academy In Manayunk. It is not possible to start a school without this passion. In fact, starting a school in the year 2006 makes no sense at all if you think about it logically. But if you measure the passion of dedicated parents, grandparents and friends who have seen the pain of raising a child who is bright but whose self-esteem is challenged each day because of learning disabilities, you understand who we are.

The passionate team behind the Academy In Manayunk never intended to start a school. We were eight mothers of children with learning disabilities when we began discussing the ways to bring research-based best practices to our children's then-current school in the Philadelphia region. We had read about Sally Smith on the Schwab Learning website and one of the parents had direct knowledge of Sally's work. Ultimately our mission was to connect with The Lab School of Washington to bring professional development to the teachers who were requesting more information. The year was 2002.

Why the Lab School of Washington Model?

We were searching for an educational model that had it all for our children. We dreamed of a program that would not only help our children learn to read and to improve

their math and writing skills, but we dreamed of looking into our children's eyes and watching the love of learning and passion for knowledge begin to grow. We knew if we could "hook" our children through multi-sensory, full-immersion, arts-based learning, our children could thrive. That was the promise of The Lab School of Washington model and its commitment to the research-based programs beginning to emerge as a result of the 2000 Reading Panel Report. As they say, timing is everything, and timing was not on our side in these early years. We were unable to connect with Sally in those early years.

But an opportunity presented itself in 2004 that ultimately was the connecting point with our passionate team of parents and Sally. We were working for the Institute for Educational Excellence and Entrepreneurship (3E Institute) at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania and it was time to nominate an entrepreneurial educator to receive the President's Educator 500 Award in the spring of 2004. We could think of no better nominee than Sally L. Smith.

That spring, we met Sally L. Smith for the first time as she emerged from the Amtrak station. Sally's acceptance speech at the Union League that year in front of an audience of 400 educators and business leaders brought awareness about her program and a unique understanding of the challenge of children with learning disabilities in a real and personal way. Thus began a friendship with Sally that has lasted beyond her death.

We began to take professional development courses at The Lab School of Washington and were inspired by the knowledge and commitment of the faculty presenting the workshops. We were invited to tour the classrooms and the Academic Clubs where students were active participants in learning and where teachers were clearly enjoying their jobs. This joy was transmitted to each and every student. "Parents worry

that their children are having too much fun,” Sally would say. But the rigor of the academics being taught was evident at each stop along the tour. Second graders would talk about ancient Egypt and canopic jars. It was clear that they were learning far more than we had ever been exposed to in our educational careers at that age.

If you ask people touched by Sally about what stands out in their minds about her, they will most likely say, if she believed in you, she would set very high expectations for you and there was no backing away from those goals once they were set. And that is how the Academy In Manayunk was launched. Our timing was now right. The Lab School of Washington Board of Trustees had voted to disseminate the model and Sally believed that we could do it.

And so it was that eight mothers (an architect, two attorneys, a computer/website designer, a fund-raiser, a reading tutor and Wilson instructor, two college faculty, an educator and accountant), along with a passionate grandfather who believed in the cause and was willing to assemble a Board of Trustees and funding for the school, launched the Academy In Manayunk in November, 2005 after receiving Sally’s blessing. The formal agreement was signed in February, 2006.

What Happened?

We chuckle when we read this question. What did happen? We built a business plan for the Academy In Manayunk, in conjunction with The Lab School of Washington for our Philadelphia based Lab School that conservatively had us growing to 50 students over three years. We have 94 children as this article is being written with over six more applicants for January in the wings. Imagine, Sally, possibly 100 children in year three, nearly twice our estimated projections!

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We believe that Sally Smith's early vision was to have the Academy In Manayunk come under the formal corporate structure of The Lab School of Washington and Baltimore Lab. Due to the amount of fund-raising required to launch the school, the lay leadership behind the launch believed that it was imperative that this new entity be incorporated in Pennsylvania and have its own governing body in order to attract the type of dollars needed for the launch. So ultimately, the arrangement became one of a licensing agreement between The Lab School and the Academy In Manayunk, which was incorporated in February, 2006.

There was one bone of contention with Sally from the beginning. She really wanted us to be called The Philadelphia Lab School but the name was not legally available. We were named by Marvin Demchick, our wonderful grandfather who became our first Chairman of the Board of Trustees. The Academy In Manayunk, or AIM as we are often called, fit us well. Sally finally mastered saying "Manayunk" in her last video produced in November 2007. We still tear up when we hear her say our school name.

What Did the Adoption Process Entail?

We are still honored when we think of Sally Smith's unwavering belief in us. It truly was an "adoption" of Sally's baby, her nationally validated, Blue-Ribbon-School baby.

The licensing agreement clearly outlined each area that was available for use from board protocols, to admissions guidelines to marketing materials to curriculum outlines and materials. Each area outlined those documents that were to be licensed with the ability to customize them for use at the Academy In Manayunk. This licensing agreement gave us the entire framework of putting a school in operation and enabled us

to reach an agreement in February, 2006, receive approval from the Pennsylvania Department of Education in June, 2006, and open our doors to students in September of that same 2006.

But let's be clear: paperwork and applications and licensing agreements do not launch a school; talented people do. Once again, our timing was incredible. We were able to not only begin with a talented team of founding mothers and one grandfather, but we were able to begin with several of Sally's personally trained teachers.

Sally was the Director of the Special Education: Learning Disabilities program in the Education Department at American University, and over her lifetime she trained hundreds of graduate students receiving their Masters Degrees in Special Education. Two of her students, one of whom Sally had hired as a teacher after graduation, were part of our starting faculty. This direct knowledge transfer greatly facilitated our launch. With an incredibly passionate Education Director, Kris McGuirk (and yes, a mother of a child with learning disabilities), we were well on our way to a successful first year.

And we had Sally. Sally came up to see us many times that first year. Now remember, we had nothing but an old parochial school building that we had painted lavender and cranberry red because Sally picked the colors herself. We had no children in the building, we had no classrooms for prospective children to visit, and we had no faculty in the building when we held our first Open House. But we had the curriculum, the 40-year model of The Lab School of Washington, and the efficacy study data to back the statement that the model works. And we had the strength of the track record of 92% of the Lab School children going onto college; this was the brass ring that many parents of children with learning disabilities want.

We were lucky to have had Sally in that first year, but Sally Smith's strength was as a leader and mentor. She had personally trained a faculty and staff with tenures ranging from 35 years to newly recruited teachers from her Masters' program at American University. It is the access to this incredibly talented team that continued our unprecedented growth in the second and third year under the leadership of the Interim Director of The Lab School of Washington, Sally Seawright, and the gifted team of educators that provides the in-service training to our team including the important Academic Club Methodology, and integrated services training in Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, and Psychological Services.

Key Elements of Success

What did Sally Smith believe was the key to our success? Here was her outline as she described it for the agreement:

- Executive Director of AIM with both Education and Business background
- Associate Director and Director of Admissions with knowledge of learning disabilities and the research that drives it
- Funding – The agreement was based on raising \$750,000 within the first six months
- Strong Board of Trustees and Board Leadership
- Facility that would provide our needs for the first 5 years (not quite)
- University partnerships

What did we really do?

The moment we knew that Sally Smith had backed our plan to replicate her model was when she announced from the podium at her November, 2005 Gala that there was a

Lab School that would be launched in Philadelphia. It was a moment of sheer excitement and overwhelming panic. The ride home that evening began with each of us pledging a financial commitment to help launch the Academy In Manayunk.

In essence, the ride home launched our Board of Trustees and confirmed the management team of the school: Pat Roberts as Executive Director, and Nancy Blair as Associate Director and Director of Admissions. A plan for raising the needed \$750,000 estimated seed money was formally outlined, and negotiations to lease the closed parochial school in Manayunk that we had found that past June began in earnest the following day. Incorporation papers were drawn up and our application to the Pennsylvania Department of Education began for licensing as a Private Academic School complete with curriculum and faculty.

What worked?

Simply put, it is the model that works. Early on, we asked Sally to help us answer the lead question that all parents ask when they are searching for schools for their children with learning disabilities, “How are you different from the other schools?” Sally gave us three very distinct answers and we ultimately added a fourth point of differentiation.

Arts-Based Learning Curriculum. From the moment people enter the Academy In Manayunk, the first point of difference is abundantly clear. Visitors are greeted under a large mural depicting the arts-based focus for teaching the academic subjects. The hallways are filled with displays of student work that demonstrate the multi-sensory approach to understanding sophisticated topics and concepts.

Academic Club Methodology™. The depth of the curriculum developed by The Lab School of Washington under the direction of Sally Smith is never more apparent than when one visits the “guild” members of Florence, Italy under the watchful hand of Isabella D’Estes, the first Lady of the Renaissance. As guild members Michelangelo, Galileo, Giotto, and Ghiberti work with their colleagues to lead projects of the time, they gain an increasingly more comprehensive understanding of such complex concepts as hoop stress, fresco design, perspective, social systems, and more.

This is just one of eight clubs designed by Sally Smith including Cave Club, Gods and Goddesses Club, Knights and Ladies Club, Museum Club, Industrialist Club and Democracy Club. Sally was always worried that these clubs would be seen as frivolous. Now the research on successful reading development has a name for it - building background knowledge that is the key to comprehension and vocabulary. The Lab School of Washington efficacy studies bear this out.

Integrated Services Team. As educators, we are all taught the importance the role of language acquisition and reading. We understand the importance of fine and gross motor development as well as the social and emotional well-being of children as it relates to academic success. But truly integrating these disciplines into an educational model is still very unique.

Under the leadership of a team of full-time speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and clinical psychologists, a state-of-the-art diagnostic-prescriptive approach is brought into every classroom at the Academy In Manayunk and supported through the knowledge transfer conveyed to each classroom teacher as well.

Individual therapy is provided in a seamless manner to those students who require this additional assistance.

Again, Sally, you were well ahead of your time. The research is now showing the importance of all of these areas with the work of Louisa Moats, Virginia Berninger, Stephen Graham, Maryanne Wolf, Sally Shaywitz and many other leading researchers.

Wilson Reading Method Partner School. The Academy In Manayunk added a fourth point of difference early in the process by becoming only the seventh Wilson Partner School in the country in 2006 under a lead trainer, Leslie Wallace. Now with the trainer certification of Nancy Blair, the Wilson Partner School designation focuses the faculty of AIM on becoming the most highly trained Wilson Reading teachers in the region.

Under the watchful eye of Barbara Wilson who Nancy had met in 2006, and the incredible team at Wilson Language, the Academy In Manayunk has remained dedicated to insuring that all teachers become Wilson certified and explore advanced topics in other research-based strategies. Through this designation, we have added three Foundations trainers as well. To date, over 500 teachers have participated in Wilson training programs through the Academy, impacting hundreds of students in the Greater Philadelphia region.

What did not work or more aptly, “Lessons Learned”

This is really more a matter of “if we knew then what we know now” issue rather than what did not work. As we have said, Sally Smith was an amazing leader and inspirational mentor. She was also very smart. If you want someone to follow your dream, you are careful about what and when you share the inside realities of running a

school. We have learned a lot. But we equate it to being parents; we would not trade it for the world!

So under the category of lessons learned, we share the following thoughts: Because we surrounded ourselves with entrepreneurial educators with “can do” attitudes, this opportunity has been do-able and rewarding. In the case of the Academy In Manayunk, we were not replicating the model of The Lab School of Washington in an already existing school. We were starting a school from scratch! Thankfully, the management team was led by a seasoned entrepreneur and a passionate researcher who teamed up to gather a group of creative, innovative and passionate teachers and staff.

Be sure to have the right people on the bus and the right people in the right seats on the bus. Be a good listener and always make time to appreciate the accomplishments of the team. Management team members must be able to take the “R” or responsibility to run with initiatives under a distributed management model.

Surround yourself with a dedicated Board of Trustees and lay leadership. Their guidance, wisdom, connections and professional input helped launched the Academy In Manayunk. As you review the bios of each of these Trustees and advisors on our website at www.aimpa.org, you will note a wonderful mix of business, educational, and professional experience. We are fortunate to have such a talented board. Their focus is clear - better educational opportunities for all children with learning disabilities. They represent the true spirit of the saying, “It is amazing what can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit.” This is truly a collaborative effort and should be a model for all boards.

Never believe that you have mastered all knowledge and that you know all there is to learn. We have been fortunate to be able to work with the best consultants and experts in the country including Barbara Wilson, Nancy Hennessy, Maryanne Wolf, Pat Bassett, and many others. There has never been a better time to be in the field of education and learning disabilities. We are entering the age of blending the science and art of learning. There is such incredible promise in education for all children.

But starting a school, especially one with such high standards and requirements, is not for the faint of heart. It takes long hours, always setting the bar high, and ultimately never taking your eye off the ball. In some ways, we believe that Sally picked us because she knew that as parents of learning disabled daughters that we would never settle for anything less than what was humanly possible to achieve for the students. That is how Sally guided The Lab School - with a careful hand but an eye to the vision of exceptional opportunities for all students. We believe we have done that at AIM.

Next Steps for the Academy In Manayunk

The Lab School of Washington has always been more than a model school for children with learning disabilities. It is hard to account for all of the services at The Lab School, but some of the highlights include an Adult School for the teaching of reading, a Tutoring Center that boasts over 100 tutors serving hundreds of non-Lab students, and a partnership with American University that provides internships for master level educators in special education and learning disabilities.

It should come as no surprise then that The Academy In Manayunk has begun to lay the foundation for the AIM Institute for Learning and Research. AIM holds three licenses with the state of Pennsylvania including its Private Academic School license in

learning disabilities, a Tutoring Center license for grades 1-12 and an Educational Testing and Remedial Center (ETR) in both Reading and Psychology. We believe that the children who attend the Academy In Manayunk are the lucky ones. Thus the dual focused mission of AIM extended the focus to the dissemination of best practices and professional development so that area teachers could be aided in helping more students in the region.

University partnerships have been developed and expanded in the areas of student teaching placements, speech and language and occupational therapy internships, and research initiatives with both Temple and Thomas Jefferson University. On-line graduate programs are being developed with St. Joseph's University. It is these university partnerships that hold the key for developing future best practices and the professionals who will implement them.