

## Report from the Southwest

Imagine Ashwood with palm trees. Jasmine blossoms and White Calla Lilies greet your nose as you approach the Main Office. Balmy temperatures mean that doors and windows can be left wide open all day.

Actually, this scene is not very different from how Ashwood will be in another month or two (with the exception, of course, of the local flora). But when I visited the Waldorf School of San Diego in February, my eyes were shocked at the brilliant blossoms and bright green leaves that I encountered.

I had gone to California for other reasons, but had decided that if I could fit in a visit to a Waldorf school while I was out there, all the better. I was intrigued by the idea of seeing how a whole different group of people on the opposite side of the country are implementing the same goal that we are here: providing a quality Waldorf education for children in our area. Isn't it cool to think that there are more than 700 Waldorf schools worldwide that are doing the same thing? Of course, every institution has its share of unique blessings and challenges. I was curious to see what kinds of problems or solutions this southern California school was working with.

My guide was a lovely woman named Sandy whose job, as Admissions Director, is the San Diego equivalent of Maureen Egan's. I had arrived at snack time (10:30 a.m.). Even though this school, like Ashwood, encourages visitors to come to scheduled "Walk Through the Grades" and other events, Sandy made a special exception for me due to my schedule. (She was also banking on my 7 years experience as a parent at Ashwood to provide her with an easy visitor.)

So Sandy and I wandered the halls peeking into classrooms and other facilities while the children ate their snacks. The "buzz" among the teachers that morning was: "Should we send the children outside for recess?" Surprised that this was even a question, I asked why. "Because it's raining outside!" I was told. I agreed that--yes--there was a light drizzle coming down. "This is our first precipitation in 50 days," someone told me. I could not resist boasting that at Ashwood the kids go outside to play even in sub-zero howling blizzards. Granted, my words were a slight exaggeration. But I am pleased to report that the children did go outside to play that morning: several with umbrellas, a few with raincoats, and many (the rain had pretty much stopped by this time) with no rain gear at all.

The Waldorf School of San Diego (WSSD) is located in a suburban neighborhood of one-story stucco homes, in an area of softly rolling hills. The school will be celebrating its 25th anniversary this summer. A public elementary school is right across the street. (I could tell which school to walk toward by the rainbow-colored utility shed on the Waldorf side.) The campus occupies approximately two house lots, and the school is working to purchase an adjacent empty lot because they need more space.

Unlike Ashwood, where classrooms are located in separate buildings, most of the classrooms at the WSSD are located within one building. The school looks small from the outside, but it is deceptive. Due to the hillside location, the building is able to accommodate two Kindergarten classrooms on the floor below the main entrance. They

also have--gasp!--an impressive auditorium, which they use not only for special performances but also for weekly assemblies and strings classes. The building houses two stories of elementary-grade classrooms above that lower Kindergarten level. An additional "wing" of classrooms is accessed via a short outdoor walkway.

Despite the school's small suburban location, parking is not a problem. There is a parking lot in front of the building that is adequate for staff, teachers, and visitors. All playground areas are located on the back side of the building. When the school needs "overflow" parking for special events, they open up a gate to part of the upper-grades' playground, which is paved. This plan means that most of the time, children and cars do not mix. (I did not get to see how a.m. drop-off and p.m. pick-up work.)

The kindergarten classes (there are a total of three) have their own playground area overlooking the valley. This space is a sandy area with a few standard playground structures and a picnic table. I missed the wild woods of Rosewood! At least they have some very large bamboo plants growing just outside one Kindergarten classroom. Apparently the bamboo is the focus of much of the childrens' speculation and stories due to the loud rustling sounds it makes in the wind. There is also one other outdoor play yard, that belongs exclusively to their Parent-Child programs ("Parent-Infant" and "Parent-Tot", also known as "Morning Glory"). It is a small, quiet, grassy space with a caged rabbit.

As Sandy and I wandered the campus I peppered her with questions about enrollment, curriculum, fundraising, and the organizational structure that holds the school together. Periodically we'd stop to chat with people we met along the way. I enjoyed being able to correctly identify the fourth grade by comparing the size of those students to my own child (although several looked a bit taller). It turned out to be a combined 4/5 grade. Combined classes are something that they, too, have from time to time, as needed. Last year they graduated a 7/8 class. This year their 6th grade has 26 students, most of whom have come right up through the grades at this school. The WSSD likes to start each 1st grade class with 25-30 students, if possible. Although the 1st and 6th grades are considered full this year, the grades in between are slightly smaller.

Like Ashwood students, students at the WSSD study a foreign language starting in the 1st grade. Until recently, this has been Spanish. Now they have switched to French (with the exception of the 6th grade, that studies both). I asked why they switched to French when they are less than 30 miles from the Mexican border? The reply was that they were having a hard time finding Spanish teachers! Waldorf-trained Spanish teachers, in particular. Apparently the non-Waldorf-trained Spanish teachers they'd had had not worked out very well, and so when they were able to hire a Waldorf-trained French teacher, they decided to make the switch. This reminded me of how lucky Ashwood is to have Madame McFarland, who from her first day here has brought her own special magic to French classes at Ashwood.

The topic of cultural diversity also revealed some surprises to me. I was told that the WSSD has a hard time attracting people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, despite the fact that San Diego is a large city. One reason, I was told, is that some such families are recent arrivals in the country, and therefore more focused on getting settled in a new city

with jobs and homes. Another reason is reportedly that families with non-Caucasian children seek to have their children grow up not as minorities within their classrooms, but as members of larger cultural groups within a diverse city.

Even the family-oriented neighborhood in which the WSSD is located provides very few (2-3) enrollees. I was told that this is because it is a low-income neighborhood, and the school's financial assistance program does not have enough funds to give out scholarships for 100 percent of a child's tuition. Many people at the WSSD commute long distances from surrounding neighborhoods; some drive for as much as an hour, but most drive 15-20 minutes. The school actively fundraises, and gives out as much financial assistance as it can, but more is always needed.

It was the woman who runs the school store (called "Snake and Lily") that revealed to me their most successful fundraising project. The woman's name is Rain (yes, like our own Rain Desjardins--mother of Zia in grade 4) and she is paid to keep the store running four days a week during school hours. (Apparently the income from the store helps pay for her position.) But no, the store itself is not the big fundraising project. The project itself is represented by a wall-hanging that I happened notice in the store. I asked Rain about the wall-hanging. I did not really understand her explanation of how the fundraising project works, but I did make sure to ask her to write down the name of it for me so that I can pass it along to Kathy Fletcher here in Ashwood's Community Development office--who will be better able than me to determine if it would work here at Ashwood.

I also collected information on how the WSSD accommodates the needs of parents whose work-day is longer than the school day. The school offers care for all students (pre-K through grade 8) until 5:00 p.m. A separate staff of adults (not the regular teachers) run both the "extended day" (1-3 p.m.) and "after-care" (3-5 p.m.) programs. Kindergarten goes from 8:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. Grades 1 & 2 go from 8:30 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. Grades 3-8 go from 8:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Like at Ashwood, grade school students are released at 1:00 on Thursdays.

I have a lot more notes and hand-outs from my visit to the WSSD, which I will make available to anyone interested. But I want to share this overview with all of you, in hopes that ongoing dialogues with other Waldorf schools will prove beneficial both ways. Perhaps some of you may be inspired to visit other Waldorf schools when you travel; and to report back to Ashwood afterward. (A full listing of Waldorf schools in North America is on the back of *Renewal* magazine.) I came away from my visit very appreciative of what the WSSD is doing, and also very grateful for what we have here at Ashwood.

Before I left the WSSD I gave Sandy a bottle of Maine maple syrup as a thank-you for her time and generosity. I wish it had been some of Ashwood's amazing syrup harvest from last spring, but my family has eaten up all of our share!

-- Mariana Tupper, mother of Lily, grade 4