

Beloved King's Reign Remembered

Rebecca King recently reflected on her 22-year career at Winchester Thurston School. An integral and influential member of the WT community, King spent 11 years as Kindergarten teacher and another 11 as Director of Admission. This year she retired, but her influence continues to be felt at WT.

Rebecca King came to Pittsburgh and Winchester Thurston School from Amherst, Massachusetts in 1986 in a leap of faith, a bold move to break free of her comfort zone and “forward the action.”

Leap of Faith

“I signed my contract through a veil of tears, saying, what am I *doing?*” she laughs today, recalling that she’d also considered relocating to Cambridge, California, or Europe. But a friend – whom she would eventually marry – talked her into sending resumes to schools in Pittsburgh, too. “There was one point when we saw a sign on the turnpike that said Pittsburgh – West Virginia - Ohio – Erie, something like that, and I thought, where am I moving? But I loved it from the day we were here, and here I am 22 years later. Who would have thought?”

“I was impressed that WT put its faith and trust in me, and in my educational expertise and instincts, to bring me to Pittsburgh, and that engaged me in such a way that I knew I could serve a new population, a new school, a new community. So it’s really WT’s trust in me that propelled me into taking a leap of faith. I was very much interested in living my life like that, and (WT’s trust) contributed to my feeling encouraged enough to leave everything I knew and do something that was not in the plan.”

The notion that moving to Pittsburgh could seem emboldening may be surprising, given that some of King’s earlier efforts to “get brave” included:

- Journeying cross-country to California with a friend, working en route with shrimpers on the Florida Keys, sleeping in crash pads, and finally – after their van “blew up” –living for a time in the still-wild west town of Telluride, Colorado;
- Traveling one-way to Europe a few years later, knowing “no one and nothing” – a sojourn that spontaneously resulted in a two-year stay in Amsterdam, based on intuition and fueled by determination, where she taught at schools including the International School of Amsterdam and Dutch Language Institute;
- After missing the last bus out of town, navigating on foot – alone and with broken glasses – three miles of pitch-black, hilly sheep pastures on the island of Mykonos, Greece, to reach her pension.

That each of these acts ultimately resulted in tremendous growth personally and professionally speaks to the power of daring, destiny and King herself. “I think the only way we achieve our true potential is by keeping the faith and swinging out when you might not have the evidence that it’s all right. I have to believe either that it’s fate, or that

whatever comes your way, you create the magic, you *make* it be the right thing,” she reflects.

Names on a Stoop

King came to WT – then still an all-girls school – after 15 years at the Amherst Day School at Amherst College, first as teacher, then as director. “I feel like it was only yesterday,” she remembers. “It was summer. The sun was going down, and I was sitting on the stoop of my apartment in Bloomfield, looking at the list of my students’ names, thinking, who are these little people? What am I going to do for them? And I was looking at the names, trying to imagine the children behind them. And then it took 30 seconds for me to fall in love with the whole thing when I met them!

“One of the things that was so appealing to me about Winchester was that I was permitted to create what I thought was best,” she continues. “There was a trust that was implicit early on. I was able to try out what I thought was most appropriate practice in education. That seed is sown through WT’s culture, and teachers are really given the chance to put themselves into this culture. There’s a piece of your soul in each classroom, which is not present everywhere.”

Not Missing A Cue

Much of what King poured into her classroom, and her students, was inspired by what she missed from her own kindergarten experience. “I reflected on my own self, and my own experience as a girl in a co-ed setting in an independent school in Philadelphia, and things that hadn’t been tended to, or had been missed, because I was a girl, and I felt a little bit of loneliness that I felt in kindergarten. I did not want that to happen to any of the girls in my charge. So I began to be profoundly aware of what it means not to miss somebody. Not to miss a child, not to miss a cue. Not to respond only to the squeaky wheel. How do I respond to the girl who’s being a good girl in the corner, not making a fuss – how do I reach her, too? We had a lot of opportunity to do a lot of professional development and reflect on how to understand and reach each person. We do a lot of that work now at WT, but even then it was something that was extremely important to the school, to the culture.”

It wasn’t a task King took lightly – but it was one she loved deeply. “There’s something so precious about the beginnings, about being the teacher of young children. Early childhood is a fragile time, but a very powerful time. Particularly the kindergarten years, because it’s a rite of passage for the entire family, let alone the kindergartner. Parents are enlisting us to help raise their child in new ways, giving to us the gift of trust and faith that we will take good care of their child. And for me, that was something I took very seriously. I thought a lot about who could I be to this child? I’m going to help her step into reading, writing, and deeper mathematical understanding, but it’s more than that. I took the role of being a teacher as a responsibility for the development of the whole child: emotional, social, physical, academic, intellectual and, to some extent, spiritual. It isn’t just teaching somebody to read; it’s teaching him how to be a human being.”

The Petri Dish of Kindergarten

Not surprisingly, many of her fondest memories focus on feelings and emotions. One of the most powerful was Peace Week. “There would be conversations about peacemakers in all the classrooms, culminating in a peace assembly, although in kindergarten we had that conversation year round. We had a peace table in our room with a huge poster of Gandhi looming over it, and children would go there to write, draw or talk about a tussle they were having, and it was amazing how they would use that often and with independence. One little girl, after I went over to help, said, ‘That’s OK, Miss King, we can take care of it.’ You give them the tools and the space to take action. They can figure it out – they want to figure it out. Little children have big thoughts, and they like to talk about them!”

“She taught us about peace and justice and conflict resolution,” says Rasika Teredesai ‘00, kindergartner from 1987-88. “(The peace table was where we went) to go sit with her and anyone we were having a fight with, and resolve our differences, influenced by the ideals of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. I know that this was part of the root of my own passionate interest in peace and justice, which is why I’ve chosen to go into law. When I was in the eighth grade she spoke to us about the civil rights movement and similar work that she had been involved with. Later, she gave me a book with quotes about the importance of freedom, which I still use as inspiration.”

Through it all, King – the 1994 recipient of the Jane L. Scarborough Award for Excellence in Teaching, Winchester Thurston’s highest teaching honor – tried to make every day extraordinary.

“We had a lot of fun. We were goofy. We sang ‘Mellow Yellow’ and Beatles songs, and I’d play guitar and piano.” King smiles at the memories, then chuckles, “Kindergarten is like a petri dish of the entire human experience. That’s what we step into every day!”

Come On In, Boys!

In 1992, Winchester Thurston entered a new era, opening its doors to boys for the first time – creating new challenges and opportunities for everyone, including King.

“For me personally, it wasn’t overly different, because I’d been in a co-ed environment for 20 years. It had been stranger to come to an all-girls setting, so I just reverted in some ways. What I wanted to do was preserve the integrity of the commitment to the girls, and create a commensurate commitment to boys.

“We were really looking at issues of boys in the classroom, and girls, and how they learn,” she continues. “That’s when I realized that as we went co-ed we would raise the bar for boys *and* girls just by studying, reflecting and considering: how do I bring out the quiet one in the corner, how do I manage the one who needs a lot of attention? I believe that when we went co-ed, it was in fact a benefit to the girls, because we were looking even *more* closely.”

Most girls, says King, welcomed their new classmates. “When we were reflecting on going co-ed, I talked to the girls about it, and said, OK, so, what do you think? And one girl said, well, we’ll have more people to play with! Now, it was still going to be the same number, but in her mind, it was, Oh, come on over, come on down, it’ll be more kids to play with! And I thought that was very revealing, very telling: ‘OK, come on in, boys!’”

Some of the first adjustments were practical: “We had to change the physical space and open it up,” reminisces King, laughing. “You’d be standing in line to go to art, and all of a sudden there’d be a karate kick for no apparent reason – it’s like, OK, let’s push these bookcases back!”

Not all problems were as easily remedied. Some families chose not to enroll, or return, because of the change. “We had growing pains,” she admits, “but we never looked back, we never regretted it certainly, and we also loved the idea of being able to have the whole family now, instead of splitting the family up at two different schools.” A silver lining emerged: “Families became even more engaged with our school.”

Though the student body had changed, the brightest moments remained the same. “The ‘A-ha!’ moments when a child would say, ‘I read that word!’” King glows at the memory, carefully pointing out, “I didn’t really teach them to read. We created a setting where reading and writing would unfold. And when those moments happened, it was a thrill. Suddenly, all the strings of letters took on new meaning. I’d go home and I’d say to my husband, ‘We’re weeding and witing today! Oh my goodness, it happened!’ Those magic moments... I never got over the thrill. And, it’s one of the reasons I stayed in early childhood as long as I did, because I wanted to be around for those moments.”

“Teachers like Miss King are what make WT, WT,” says Elspeth Powell ’08, a Kindergartner from 1994 to 1995. “The encouraging and warm and loving spirit in a teacher like Miss King makes kids want to come to school. Even when she was not my teacher she was still interested in my well-being. I’m grateful to have been her student because her spirit of generosity and loving encouragement has stayed with me.”

Farewell to Kindergarten

Eventually, 11 years of bending over and pouring juice into tiny cups, tying shoelaces, and zipping little jackets left King no choice but to leave the classroom.

“I had a herniated disc at one point, and the physical therapist actually said, oh, you may need to think about changing careers,” says King. So when the position of Director of Lower and Middle School Admission opened up, she accepted – a move that solved her physical issues and allowed her to remain at the school she’d come to consider home.

“It was overwhelming to think about, how do I represent this huge experience beyond kindergarten? I had to learn more about how the Middle and Upper Schools operate, and about the nitty-gritty aspects like testing, but the instincts were always there, and they are what got me through. The instincts of what’s good for a child – when there’s a

possibility for a child to really grow from our experience at Winchester, and times painfully when we thought maybe the child wasn't ready for this experience. That was my biggest challenge when, as an early childhood educator, I am so used to everything being pure possibility.

“All Kids Deserve This”

“I believed in the school so much because of having watched my experience unfold as a teacher that it was then really fun to represent an admission process. What (WT's faculty and administration) does is very powerful. We've deepened our commitment to and our understanding of having each child who comes to us learn as best they can, and take them as far as they can go. Now, we've done research behind it, but it's always been there. I saw signs of it early on. It wasn't identified, it didn't have a name, but certainly the multi-intelligence work that we've done and gone beyond, now, was something that was in the air early on at WT. We've always done that kind of work in early childhood education, where we've appealed to a variety of senses, and worked with the kids' strengths. It was a framing of something that was embedded in our culture (and) as it started to take shape with its name, I was actually quite excited, because it was almost a validation of what we had been doing intuitively.

“The Responsive Classroom program also extends this commitment more fully and makes it real, as does initiatives like *City as Our Campus*, the internships, the way that we're kind of spreading the kids out into the community so they can take what they know and apply it in new ways, and also individualize their learning in that way. And when you look at the challenge and enrichment program, that's honing in even more specifically on getting at what else can this child do, and the transitional program that helps kids maneuver, or navigate around, maybe a learning issue, asking, how can they find their strengths? Building on strengths, and addressing challenges, is, I believe, the way a school should operate and be organized. We're doing research and understanding the strategies, and that to me is huge. I mean, why would you not choose a school that is paying attention in that way?

“I wish it could be the public model,” she says, earnestly. “I think all kids deserve this.”

Leap of Faith...redux

Two years ago, King made an announcement that took many in the WT community by surprise: she wouldn't be returning the following year. “I went in to Gary and said, ‘I can't sign my contract for the next year – there, I can't believe I said it after 20-plus years!’” she recounts, even now, in a slightly breathless rush. It was, to put it mildly, a difficult decision (“There were times when I'd wander through those halls – you can ask the custodians – at nine or ten o'clock at night, just as I did at Amherst – as admission director, maybe shutting off lights that may have been forgotten, maybe stepping into a class and seeing what was going on. It was home”) but King had come to realize that “life was hurtling by,” and she wanted to slow down. So, squaring her shoulders and drawing on her history of self-induced bravery, she made another leap of faith, this time into an unscripted future.

“I want to be intentional about the next thing. I’d like to see where else I might be needed. I want to be a better friend and neighbor, and what that means is a different kind of serving people. I’m interested in working with a vulnerable population – inner city kids, the frail elderly. There’s an equivalent way of being with young folks and old folks; I’m enthralled with sitting in a kindergarten class, a first grade class – I just love it. And I love playing bingo with the old folks, too.

“It’s been a great 22 years,” she says, thoughtfully. “I did feel like I left WT in the best shape ever. More than anything, it just felt really good, and for me as an educator, it was important for me to believe in what I was doing. It’s an authentic place; it’s a place with vision for your children. Maybe I can create something like that elsewhere.”

For many, and certainly for Rebecca King, she and Winchester Thurston School are inextricably linked. As she authors the next chapter of her life, she is conscious of carrying WT forward, while leaving part of herself behind. “I’m most proud that through WT’s faith and trust in me, I grew in confidence personally and professionally. I tried to bring to children, every time I worked, what I know to be important and true in life, and hopefully it made a difference to them. I hope my students will remember me as kind, loving, and as someone who taught them how to take care of themselves and each other.”