Twenty Years Young — Laurel Hall School
By Jeanette Ostroff, Special Education Teacher

Sometimes life’s paths take us on unexpected journeys. Recently while riding through the mountains and lakes of the Adirondacks on vacation, being quite relaxed, I found my thoughts drifting to the upcoming start of the new school year. In a state of bliss among the trees and water, my wandering thoughts lead me to the realization that my school, Laurel Hall, had possibly reached a milestone. I believed it to be twenty years since it first began. This realization caused a flood of memories to overtake me.

As if it was yesterday, I recalled those early days of Laurel Hall School. We were a hybrid that evolved from the Child and Adolescent Inpatient Program. We once provided an educational setting for the young patients during their stay in the hospital as we worked alongside the nursing department staff. In the early 1990’s, challenges in the mental health field brought changes. An enterprising director, Karen Nelson, faced those challenges head on, and with her vision and fortitude Laurel Hall School was born. The foundation of the program was to provide an educational setting in an environment of therapeutic support. Our small family of staff all worked towards one goal - do whatever was needed to help the students improve their behavior so they could then experience academic success. The backbone of this process was an earned point level system that focused on reinforcing positive behaviors. This concept continues to be the thread that holds the Laurel Hall program together.

The first year brought one classroom of students from Washington County. Within the next two years we had classrooms for each level – elementary, middle, and high school. These classrooms were staffed with teachers and behavior specialists as well as supporting staff that included therapists and a nurse. Additionally, we had services provided by an art therapist and a substance abuse counselor. Our initial library included a few hundred books of which most were donated. In later years we saw our resources grow to six-thousand items. I remembered being in awe of all that we had available to us at that point while pondering how did we do with so much less in the earlier years. We saw similar availability with computers and other electronic materials. I do recall that we all felt very excited when we were able to support the purchase of our first computer lab. With the help of the ever present efforts of staff and lots of creative thinking, our meager start lead to what has turned out to be a phenomenal success.
Some of my favorite memories include the camaraderie between staff as we worked together in planning and delivering fun activities for the students. We made conscious efforts to provide experiences that the students may not have otherwise been exposed. While to many of us making cookies from a recipe may not seem all that extraordinary, I remember being surprised at how many students had never done this and how much fun they had doing it. Of course we made these cookies as a way to demonstrate math skills...well ... ok, sometimes it was just for fun! Other memorable activities included – making foods from different countries that the kids had researched as a social studies project, creating popsicle stick boats that we raced in the brook as a science event, yearly field day events, Christmas caroling throughout the campus buildings, making favors for the dining hall trays at holidays, and each year we would help the students make presents that they would give to their family members for Christmas. I found it very touching to see the enthusiasm put forth by the students when provided with this opportunity to give to others. Over the years one thing became clear, Laurel Hall School staff were willing to, and often, did go beyond the basic daily expectations of their jobs. Staff took their job to heart by giving their time beyond the work day, making donations that ranged from clothing to pots and pans, and pooling together whatever resources were necessary to deliver what would result in a positive memory for the students.

It was with great dedication and notable care that Laurel Hall expanded further into the community. Laurel Hall staff carried the fundamentals of the program into the area public schools working as a support system to the students in their home schools. Additionally, Laurel Hall had classrooms within the public system, which allowed for a more intensive effort to maintain and support the students as they reintegrated back into the mainstream classrooms. Laurel Hall staff were ambassadors that not only demonstrated the ideals of the program, but also the values of Brook Lane as a whole.

As the years progressed, many staff would come and go while a steadfast core of highly dedicated and ever enthusiastic group would remain, many of whom were there from the beginning. Changes reached all levels as Kate Byers became director of the Laurel Hall program. While it may seem expected that new leadership would bring change, Kate recognized that it was unnecessary to reinvent the wheel. The practices of the program had proven to be successful, and Kate accepted the stewardship of the fundamental ideals that Karen had established from the start.

The old saying that “you can’t keep a good thing down,” could be applied to the ever present growth of this program. The year 2008 brought a broader reach out to the surrounding communities as Laurel Hall School opened a second program in Frederick County, which almost immediately drew in students from Montgomery County as well. I was fortunate to, once again, be a part of a new venture. While the Frederick school began with more resources and a few more students than the original school opening, the same core program ideals and staff investment have propelled this second school to similar success as experienced by the original program. In the past six and a half years, Laurel Hall in Frederick has grown to overtake the entire building that we once shared with two other businesses. Again, we have demonstrated our ability to provide a unique option of a therapeutic and academic support system for those students who have had difficulty experiencing success in the public school system.
It seems hard to believe that twenty years has passed since it all began. The old adage that “time flies when you’re having fun,” doesn’t quite provide for an accurate representation of how I feel. Seeing a child experience success for the first time and watching their confidence grow as they discover that they are capable of managing not only the academics, but also their own behaviors is more than fun. A passion for what we do takes over and this passion creates a drive within that pushes us to do more, so there is an assurance that this process of success never ends. For me this passion had propelled me to go to college for the first time ten years ago. I took on this ambitious venture because I wanted to officially do what I loved being a part of all of these years and that was to teach these students. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with many genuinely wonderful people that share a similar passion for this program. Additionally, I cannot think of anything more fulfilling than witnessing the transformation of students and understanding that they need us to be passionate for their sake. While my time on this path has reached twenty-eight years, my journey is far from being over as I don’t know if I could ever get my fill of all that the Laurel Hall School program brings into my life. One thing is certain – when caring people provide sincere services and support, everyone wins. That sounds like a recipe for another twenty years!

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