



A Lifelong Journey Through Education

Sally Maxwell's superhero cape would say "Stay Curious," and the Marvel Comics fan would probably love to visit all the buildings on the MICDS campus by swinging through the air like her beloved webslinger, Spiderman. The new Assistant Head of School for Teaching and Learning's favorite place to be is in a classroom, either as a student or as a teacher, and how she got there is an interesting story that goes well beyond the two-dimensional panels of a comic book.

Maxwell comes by her love of education honestly; her mother was a primary school teacher and Maxwell literally grew up in her classroom, even when she didn't attend that school. "I went to a magnet school and our calendars didn't line up," Maxwell explains. "After I got out of school, I would sit in the back of her classroom and help out by grading spelling tests, laminating things, and doing other small tasks." She appreciated being at her own school, where teachers pushed her to challenge herself and work hard, and she enjoyed being in Mrs. Maxwell's Happy Apples first grade classroom. Even throughout college, she returned home on breaks and went to work with her mother. "A classroom is just a place where I feel yummy, and I felt that even as a student," she said.



When she first transferred to the gifted program at a magnet school 45 minutes away from home, her world exploded. Her new school was filled with people from outside of her small Florida community. She remembers being excited that she had a teacher from New York City. Home was a quiet place, full of books and devoid of a

television, with a typewriter that she used to craft her English papers. School offered an opportunity to meet people from all over, including a group of students more diverse than what she had been used to. "I met people from geographically different places and kids with swimming pools and ponies," she said, "And I was researching India and other countries. I felt like I met the whole world there."

For a self-described dreamy, bookish kid, school—any school—automatically felt comfortable. "It's the place where my priorities were centered," she explains. She credits the magnet school program with encouraging her to be a nerd and to discover her strengths and passions. "I loved school from the first day of school." She learned quickly that she loved teaching, too. Her first job was as an art teacher at the age of 13. "Who on earth hands a classroom of kids to a 13-year-old?" she laughed. "I went into the supply closet and they locked me in. This was before cell phones, so I was trapped. About an hour later—or it could have been five minutes—one of them let me out. I learned and after that, the key was always in my pocket. I really loved teaching."

School feels endless and infinite, open and measurable, in all the best possible ways to Maxwell. "I like the seasonality of schools. It's a journey you get to do over," she said. Students keep learning and growing, receiving very clear feedback about their progress. Maxwell wistfully confessed that she wishes she still received a report card. She has been a student or a teacher every year of her life, she said, except for one. And even then, she wasn't that far away from the world of education. The first year after she earned her undergraduate degree, she worked for a textbook publishing company. After that, she leaped right back into the school environment.

"Schools are about hope for the future. When you think about William Eliot Greenleaf's mother giving \$1,000 so the students would have the day off, that's about hope. Hope is imagination." She quotes the Dalai Lama who said that each individual is a marvelous opportunity and believes that parents and teachers get new chances with students all the time. At the same time, students give us opportunities for hope. "If I need a break, I vacation at school by assigning myself to a field trip," Maxwell said. "Or I go visit a kindergarten classroom. I get to marinate and be with children and be reminded, 'This is why I do this.'"



>> continued on page 28



>> continued from page 27

"It's humbling to be in a school," she continued. "Who doesn't want to be in the hope business?" She sees that hope mirrored in St. Louis, which factored into her decision to move her family here. "It's a place of deep history and, yes, of some mistakes that people are trying to change. Can we unmake the mistakes of the past?" St. Louis is perpetually in the hope business, she said, and she's excited to understand and learn about her new community off campus.

On campus, she appreciates that MICDS is student-centered. "It's a big facility but the student is the center of the campus," she said. "There's a lot of interest in improvement and change and being the shining school on the hill. There's a lot that it is and a lot that it could be, and I find that exciting." Maxwell is exploring the role of MICDS in the

ecology of its surroundings and its relationship to other schools. She seeks a community with other educators, both in and outside of MICDS, and has already enjoyed getting to know her colleagues and their families. "It's an open and welcoming community that isn't afraid to explore change. It's stable and fluid at the same time."

Although her administrative role means she's not in a direct teacher position, we'll probably find Maxwell in MICDS classrooms more often than not. Her face

lights up when she talks about working with students and what she observes. "My favorite moment is the 'aha' moment that kids have, or when they get their game face, or when you can watch them think." Most children don't guard their expressions, and she enjoys watching them figure out their world, make sense of it, flip it around, and do what they want with their interpretations. She loves to sneak into empty classrooms and study student notes, deciphering how they look at what they're learning and translating new information for themselves.

The challenge, she realizes, involves helping students overcome the increasing complexity of the world.

The more complex our environment, the more we tend to specialize to succeed. She wonders how we help children move through this world when it's big and there's so much we can't see. How do we help them find their place in the world when so much is invisible? "The world is vast and unknowable and not transparent and hard to describe, so what's our job?" she asks. She contemplates how a school prepares a child for their likely outcome without consigning them to it, and she strives to fully give children themselves. Is she discouraged by the enormity of this task? "I like my job because it's hard. If it wasn't hard, it would be boring fast," she said.

Thankfully, she is working with an outstanding team of educators at MICDS who

also eagerly tackle these challenges. "There's an earnestness to the faculty that I really enjoy," she said. "There's a strength but it's not tough. And this community is thoughtful." She is excited to study the interplay between our teachers and our students, much as she studies the Marvel universe of comic book superheroes. Maxwell views Spiderman as a metaphor for being a teenager. "Teens are newly thinking about the world but their perspectives aren't appreciated often. There's this dichotomous energy of 'I can do anything' and 'I can't do anything.' It's such a teen thing to go in a lab and bungle around and break something. There's a constant stumbling to Spiderman that I enjoy. He's eternally changed, learning how to use his powers and the limits to his powers. He's always a disruption. Teens are like this; they're not obedient children, and they aren't yet functional adults. You always forgive him because he's well-intentioned and so sweet."

Her love for students, for teaching and learning, for building relationships, and for finding ways to continuously improve, leaps off the page in bold strokes and vibrant colors. In the MICDS universe, we're excited to have Sally Maxwell and her power of curiosity join our team of teaching superheroes.



"MY FAVORITE MOMENT IS THE 'AHA' MOMENT THAT KIDS HAVE, OR WHEN THEY GET THEIR GAME FACE, OR WHEN YOU CAN WATCH THEM THINK."

