

From A Parent's Point of View

(Speech delivered by Mary Grefig on 6/7/2007)

When Mark and Lynette asked me if I would say a few words at the graduation from the point of view of a parent, I was surprised and pleased for a number of reasons. Most schools talk a lot about parent involvement especially at the beginning, things like being a room mother or field trip chaperone, later joining the PTA, helping with fund raisers, or organizing a high interest day, that sort of thing. By high school parent involvement tapers off dramatically, if parents are at school and it isn't open house or conferences there's usually a problem, and to invite a parent to speak at graduation would be way too risky, who knows what a parent might say. But Kradwell is different, so here I am, very honored to be the first parent to speak at a Kradwell graduation.

One of the reasons I was so glad to be here this evening is that our son, John, was both an 8th grade and a Kradwell High School graduate. I know from experience that the parent's view of graduation is the back of the students' heads. It is so exciting seeing the graduates march in, but by the time you've identified your graduate he or she has already passed. It is wonderful to see the graduates from the front. I am so happy to see your beautiful faces. You look absolutely fabulous! I am proud of each of you; I know you have worked hard; I know it hasn't always been that easy; you have accomplished something important; I congratulate you.

As a parent I know that there are 2 especially hard days at Kradwell School. One hard day for the adults, regardless of how the students feel about it, is that 1st day of school. As you undoubtedly know, no one comes to Kradwell because things have been going particularly well at one's previous school. That first conversation parents have

with Leslie is full of questions, “What is Kradwell like? This is what my child is like; do you think this school could work for us?” Then there is the meeting with Mark, who is very open and reassuring, and then the tour that gives new meaning to the term “alternative school.” I know that the more my husband, Max, and I talked about what we had seen and heard the more questions we had. Here was a school that was not all about its programs and how it would be just what our child needed. Kradwell was different; the conversation was about my son and how his needs could be met. As parents isn’t this what we want, a school where teachers and staff focus on designing a program to meet the individual and often unique needs of a particular student?

Our experience was that schools develop a “one size fits all” program, and assure parents that once their child gets with the program; so to speak, their problems will be solved. Public schools say they can meet every child’s needs. Kradwell takes a more realistic approach to education. No one at Kradwell promises to solve all your child’s problems; no one at Kradwell is that naïve. No one claims that the Kradwell model will work for every student. What Kradwell does promise is to accept and try to understand each student as an individual, to identify the student’s strengths and work from those strengths using materials that match the student’s learning style and needs. Kradwell promises to work as a team including students, teachers, staff and parents to achieve educational goals. Lynette says, “We meet students where they’re at, and take them where we want them to go.” As you can see looking at our eleven 8th grade graduates and thirty-six high school graduates Kradwell is very successful at taking them where we want them to go.

The first day of school at Kradwell was a hard day for us. Our 8th grader looked so small and so young and so nervous standing on the porch. It seemed like the students were particularly big, tough-looking kids that semester. John was shaking by the time Leslie came breezing in with a big smile and a schedule. She said she'd get someone to show John to his first class. The next thing we knew the students went in and just before John was about to say, "I'm not going." Karen Hurka appeared and somehow her kind and caring way and calm voice convinced my son that everything would be just fine and he was safe with her. The first day of school was a hard day, indeed, but by the end of the day we were convinced that we had found a better way for our son's education.

While individual attention is the overarching principle, several other components provide the structure, and in fact, are hallmarks of the Kradwell experience. Class size is something that school districts discuss, often pointing to studies that show little differences between test scores of students who attend larger classes compared to students who attend smaller classes. As parents we know instinctively that small classes are better for our children. More than anything else, class size of no more than 5 students enables teachers to focus on the individual needs and progress of each student. Large classes, of course, are more economic for schools and work best when students are all on the same page. Small classes allow teachers to really get to know their students. Recently, I was leaving a classroom and heard some commotion outside Mary Klein's room; she was talking to a student about his temper and language. As the student walked away I said, "Well, he's probably doing the best he can." Mary responded at once, "No, he isn't, I know he can do better." The next day I purposely watched that student, and guess what Mary was right on target; this student could and was doing much better.

Parents, isn't this the kind of teacher you want for your children, someone who has the opportunity to really understand what your child can do? As parents we are so close to and love our children so much that it is easy to make allowances and excuses. It was the mom in me saying, "He's doing his best." A really great teacher who works in a setting that enables her to know each student well pushes to help a student to achieve his or her best, and rewards a student who is doing the best he or she can do.

The length of our school day is another element that sets Kradwell School apart from others. Typically our students do better when the school day is 3 hours not 6 or 7. What parent has not heard the woeful lament from their child, "School is too long and too hard?" I know I have heard this from all 5 of our children. Ask our students, as I have, and they will tell you that they really like the shorter day. They find it easier to stay focused when the busy work, lunch, recess, class change time, assembly programs, homerooms, and announcements are eliminated. Knowing that there are only 3 hours to accomplish the work for 6 classes without homework is a tremendous motivator to do what needs to be done. Whoever decided to have 6 30-minute classes of no more than 5 students must have been a genius.

I cannot overlook mentioning how important our building and campus are. Parents could not ask for a better educational setting. How fortunate we are to be a part of Aurora Behavioral Health and to be located on the beautiful grounds in Wauwatosa. This year, thanks to many donors both large and small, we have enjoyed a renovated and newly expanded building and look forward to completing the plans for the outdoor classroom and garden, as well as a natural play area for the younger students. Fund

raising continues and I am confident that goals will be met and the second phase of renovation and expansion will be completed.

Much as we appreciate the character of our building and the calm and peaceful atmosphere of the campus, buildings and grounds do not educate children, teachers do. Parents realize that the most important part of any school is a qualified and experienced faculty and staff, teachers who know how to connect with their students, teachers who students respect. Parents know that teachers make all the difference in their children's education. I took an informal survey and found that this year we offered students more than 400 years of experience in education, 22 bachelor's degrees, 8 master's degrees, many, many courses and credits beyond degrees, and as one teacher put it a boatload of certifications. Our faculty includes a chemical engineer, an MBA, an archeologist, a linguist, and an art therapist. Not bad for 15 classrooms! As I visited each room to ask about experience and credentials I noticed that nearly every teacher had something humorous posted in their room along with pictures, articles, and student's work. Our teachers are smart and interesting people. They demonstrate the balance, good judgment, and sense of humor that is so essential when dealing with such a diverse and challenging student body. This year I enjoyed being the "responsible adult" stationed on the porch during the noon to 12:30 transition between the morning and afternoon sessions. A group of students liked to play card games while waiting for school to start. On one particular day the championship game began at 12:26. I said, "Play fast, we only have 4 minutes." Sure enough at 12:30 on the dot Lynette Leighton appeared at the door, I made a hasty explanation and asked if they couldn't finish the game. Lynette looked around the room and with a smile said, "OK, everyone who's not playing cards go to class." And do you

know, amazingly everyone did, and a minute later the game was over and the card players went to class. Only at Kradwell. Good judgment, balance and a sense of humor.

Our excellent faculty and staff make it easy for parents to be involved in their children's education. Weekly reports, liberal use of the telephone, emails, and conferences keep parents informed and involved. We found that Kradwell sets goals that were practical, concrete, and focused. Folders contain a syllabus or assignment sheet, so students have a clear goal to accomplish each day, for this grading period, and to receive a semester credit. Work is graded daily, when assignments are missing the teachers remind students what needs to be done, and find out why it hasn't been done, they give help, and make modifications and adjustments as necessary. Teachers take the initiative and help students achieve their goal.

What is the goal? The goal is that second especially hard day at Kradwell School: today, your graduation day. It is hard because it is so difficult to say good-bye; hard to say good-bye to people you really care about. One morning this spring, I heard a young student asked our principle, Mark, if he had any children. He looked around the library where about a dozen students had gathered before school and looked back at the little girl and said with the greatest affection, "Why, you are all my children." Truly, all of us who have worked with your sons and daughters at Kradwell feel privileged and thank you for sharing your children. Graduates, please do something for me, spend a few minutes with your families, thank them for sending you to Kradwell, thank them for all their help and support, and please tell them that from your point of view they couldn't have made a better decision.

