

A special PLACE

BY ELIZABETH ZELMA

Mother-son team
Wendy and Evan
Levey, directors
of Epiphany
Community Nursery
School and 74th
Street MAGIC.



Magic on 74th Street

After Several Decades Of Encouraging Kindness and Creativity In The City's Littlest Minds, It's No Wonder Wendy Levey Is A Trusted And Beloved Figure Among Parents— Or That Her “Three-in-One” Nursery School, Summer Camp, and Children's Enrichment Center Are Among The City's Most Sought After Programs.

It's a Tuesday afternoon in February, and Wendy Levey's phone is ringing off the hook. In three days, many of the parents of Epiphany Community Nursery School's 50 four-year-olds will find out which, if any, private schools have accepted their children for kindergarten. They can ask for no better advocate than Levey; after seeing several generations of families through the application process, she knows how to diffuse a parent's anxiety while working with school admissions directors to ensure a good fit for both child and school.

You wouldn't know it on this particular day, but the wheeling and dealing involved in private school admissions is only a small part of Levey's professional life. Her primary focus is

educating the children who grace the halls of the four-story Upper East Side facility every day. Shaping compassionate young people with a positive self-image is her goal, and every aspect of the nursery school, as well as the activity enrichment center in the same building, 74th St. MAGIC (“Music Art Gymnastics Instruction Center”), is crafted to achieve that result.

“We're constantly reevaluating what we're doing and thinking, ‘How can we do better?’” Levey says.

While Epiphany, or ECNS, specializes in helping little ones mature into happy social beings and preparing them for schooling to come, MAGIC offers enrichment classes throughout the day for infants through tweens. A “Summer Days” camp for children ages two-and-a-half to six years old

continues MAGIC's work into the summer months.

Levey's background in early childhood education extends back into her own school days—during her summers in high school and college, she worked for Head Start. Prior to starting ECNS, Levey taught in Boston, as well as in New York at the Park Avenue Synagogue Nursery School. In 1975, Levey began ECNS with five students in the basement of The Church of the Epiphany. It didn't take long for the school to grow out of the space, so Levey relocated to 57th Street. The activity program was added in 1983.

Both programs kept growing, and in 1996 they moved into their current 74th Street location, where the family-centric organization has morphed into a family affair in itself. Today, one of Levey's strongest assets is her 27-year-old son and right-hand man, Evan Levey, who serves as director of operations for MAGIC and financial director for ECNS. Evan has worked at the facility since his teenage years. "I've always loved being in the gym and helping at the front desk," he says. "After I graduated from college, the directors of MAGIC were moving down South, so I took the reins. The fact that I grew up in the

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facilities and with the staff made taking a full-time role an easy transition."

With Evan keeping things running smoothly on the operations end, Levey devotes her days to achieving the organization's mission: keeping children healthy in mind and body, and providing a strong sense of security and continuity. "We always say how ironic it is that Evan is director of operations since we wouldn't let him go to ECNS because he couldn't separate from me, and now, while he is definitely his own person, we're incredibly close," Levey

5 Things Every Parent Should Know About Applying To Preschools in NYC

by Wendy Levey, founder and director, Epiphany Community Nursery School and 74th Street MAGIC

- 1. DO YOUR RESEARCH THE SPRING AND SUMMER BEFORE YOU APPLY.** Educate yourself through online research, consulting the Parents League, reading books, and talking to friends who have been through the process.
- 2. BE ORGANIZED.** Have a list of potential schools ready to go the day after Labor Day. Some schools require a phone call; others, like Epiphany, accept online applications.
- 3. HAVE A ROBUST LIST.**
- 4. BE NICE TO WHOMEVER YOU SPEAK TO ON THE PHONE.** This person is your gateway to the school.
- 5. THINGS WE DON'T LIKE:** Name dropping, professional 8 × 10 headshots when we request a small photo, nine-page essays about how gifted your child is, chewing gum or using your Blackberry while touring or interviewing, and arriving late for appointments.

says. "He was always at MAGIC with me after school and on weekends throughout his childhood, so Evan's familiarity with the pulse and the operations of this program are unparalleled. We have many a healthy argument, but I feel so lucky to have him watching over the financial side of things, letting me concentrate on what I do best—education."

On the philosophical spectrum of nursery schools, Levey classifies Epiphany as "traditional," though the curriculum is regularly being refined and updated, adding that the assortment of nationalities adds a richness and texture to Epiphany and MAGIC. All holidays are celebrated, including Chinese New Year and Diwali. Preparing children for the world they will enter after leaving nursery school is critical to

Levey, whose four-year-old students learn to look her in the eye and shake her hand every day.

"Looking at preschool as just Play-Doh and a snack is really cynical when you're talking about Epiphany," says Leslie Day Craige, chair of the school's Parents Association. "All the teachers take what they do really seriously."

The school's library houses 8,000 books, and a private outdoor play space on the roof ensures that kids get to spend time outdoors every day. The first floor houses a gym for the older

children as well as a mini-gym just for babies. Each classroom has a skylight or window, allowing abundant light to illuminate the artwork plastered on the walls, hallways, and doors. Hands-on projects are high priority at the school. "If a project calls for sparkly pom-poms," Levey says, "we're all over it."

For Levey, parent participation is integral to building school community. When interviewing families seeking admission, Levey looks for "the click," and a major contributor to it is a parent's enthusiastic attitude toward participation in school activities. "If a parent is too busy to be involved, it's not going to work," she says. When their children move on, Day Craige adds, many parents bemoan the fact that they won't find the same tight community at other schools. Levey also encourages kindness and good citizenship in her small charges by incorporating service activities into her curriculum.

Not surprisingly, Levey's relationship with her families continues long after their kids move on. Parents call her 15 years later for suggestions on college advisors, and she is always ready with book recommendations on any number of parenting topics.

For Levey, setting healthy, happy kids on the path to realizing their potential isn't just a profession—it's her passion. "Always hold the bar high educationally, emotionally, and when it comes to values," she says. "These kids are our future!" 