A vision for education fulfilled

Carole Nysmith talks about the school she started 30 years ago that has grown and is thriving

by Kate Yanchulis
Fairfax County Times

Carole Nysmith sat in her office on the 13-acre campus of Nysmith School for the Gifted in Herndon and thought about the school’s humbler beginnings.

The private school opened in 1984 in the original Reston Visitor Center, “a perfectly round little building” just big enough for the original 55 students, she said.

“It leaked like a sieve,” Nysmith recalled. “But it was great.”

“We had the map of Reston still on the wall from when it was the visitor center,” said her son Ken Nysmith.

Ken Nysmith, 52, is headmaster of the school, which — after several moves — ended up in its current home in 2000, where it serves more than 600 children.

Carole Nysmith, 78, who founded the school, holds no formal role although she still keeps an office there and frequently gives tours, visits classrooms or walks the halls checking on students.

Before founding the school, she was a teacher at Sunrise Valley Elementary in Reston, where she enjoyed teaching students in the Fairfax County school system’s advanced academic program. But she wanted to offer advanced academics to students in kindergarten, first and second grades who were not served by the county’s advanced programs, which started in third grade.

She scraped together money from her husband’s savings and borrowed money from her two sons to start the school.

“I think back sometimes, and it kind of surprises me that I had the nerve,” Nysmith said.

To recruit students, she would put ads in local newspapers and hold talks at the Reston Community Center.

“Back in those days, Reston wasn’t that old, or that big,” Nysmith said. “So if I hadn’t taught you, I had probably taught your neighbor. Name recognition. I don’t know that you could do it these days, but in those days, you’d get people saying, ‘Oh yes, go listen to Carole.’”

Nysmith School opened with six teachers in kindergarten, first and second grades.

“They as they got older I planned on putting all the children back into Fairfax County’s gifted program,” Nysmith said. “But they wouldn’t go.”

Parents expressed a desire to keep their children at the school past second grade. By the late 1980s, Nysmith conceded, adding grades three through six.

And then some parents came in one day and said, ‘We really ought to tell you, Carole, we refuse to leave.’ I laughed, because I thought they were kidding,” she said. “They weren’t.”

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Carole Nysmith, on her decision to open the private school in 1984

So Nysmith expanded again, adding grades seven and eight in 1989. Today the school serves students from preschool through eighth grade — about 70 children at each grade level. Tuition ranges from $21,000 for full-day preschool to $30,850 for students in grades four through eight.

As the school has grown, so has its curriculum. It places a particular focus on science and technology, providing 45 minutes of science instruction each day for all students and offering state-of-the-art computer labs.

Nysmith said the school’s core mission has remained the same: providing individualized education for all students. Ken Nysmith said he thinks that helps set the school apart.

“We have a maximum of two teachers and 18 students in each classroom,” he said. “That’s how we’re really able to differentiate the instruction and connect with each child.”

Carole Nysmith is pleased when she sees her son greet every student in the halls by name, glad her vision for education has become a family affair.

“When I asked him to help at first, he said, ‘I’m not working for my mother,’” she said.

“And here we are 30 years later,” Ken said.

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