

## **Opening Day Speech to Parents September 13, 2009**

Welcome. I hope your summer has been a good one, and that both new and returning families are excited about joining (or rejoining) the NCS community. On this first day, I want to start at the same place that we begin on graduation, the last day of the school year: by acknowledging the swirl of emotions you must be experiencing today—notably, the ambivalent mix of anxiety, excitement, and hopes for the future. On both of these days I also thank you for the leap of faith you take in trusting us as partners in the raising of your sons and daughters. Sharing your children with a school is a bold decision; we aim to recognize and live up to that trust, especially during these critical years of your child's formative development. This time of pre- and early adolescence are periods of profound physical, cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, even existential change and growth. We feel honored that you have chosen us for what is likely one of the most important educational decisions of your child's life.

In our time today, I would like to do three things:

- Paint a picture—using a researched-based palette—of what an exemplary middle school looks and feels like. I will return to these criteria often in the emails I'll send throughout the year, hoping that besides searching for your child in the photographs, you'll also begin to see that NCS is indeed one of these exemplary schools.
- Recount an evocative occasion and sketch out a telling description that illustrate who we are and where we are going.
- Allow ample time for questions, so we address your immediate concerns and issues. (And if per chance you have unanswered questions, please be sure to call or email Libby, Nick, houseparents, or advisors. The only bad question is the one that is not asked.)

Regarding exemplary schools, the National Middle School Association articulates 14 benchmarks for such institutions. (<http://www.nmsa.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/tabid/115/Default.aspx>) To avoid putting you to sleep, I've compressed these into four key items that NCS has practiced since our founding.

First, the curriculum of an exemplary middle school is relevant, exciting, exploratory, and challenging. Second, the teaching at an exemplary middle school is responsive to individual learning styles, developmental variation, and personality—decidedly not one-size-fits-all. Third, an exemplary middle school culture promotes strong, deep, and potentially life-changing relationships, both peer-to-peer and student-adult. If past history is a reliable predictor, impressive numbers of our seniors will return for their NCS reunions in years to come, because their memories of teachers and houseparents will be more robust than those of other role models (with the obvious exception of you, their parents). Fourth, an exemplary middle school puts an institution-wide emphasis on promoting individual health and wellness. At a minimum, that means strong advisory systems, access to counseling resources, formal and extra-curricular work targeted to high-risk behaviors of current American adolescence, as well as sound nutrition, ample nursing care, and development of healthy living habits. At NCS, these function as our floor, not the ceiling.

Yesterday evening in Manhattan, almost 125 people assembled to roast and toast NCS/Treetops music teacher Don Rand—and to honor his 50 years of middle school service. Attendees included former campers and students, teachers and counselors, the odd smattering of parents. People flew in from Seattle, West Virginia, and San Francisco; a crew of former teachers carpooled down from northern New Hampshire; one mom drove up from South Carolina. In short, a rare assemblage came together to honor a remarkable man: consummate pianist, master composer and librettist, mountain man (who purposefully stopped counting after climbing 44 of the main Adirondack peaks), head of the English department, speech-writer to several headmasters, houseparent for 30 years, and a teacher clear in his preference for the energy, excitement, fast pace, and rough-hewn character of middle school education. Don turns 83 in a couple of months, so one hope I have for all of you is that your child will take lessons with Don, to help ignite a life-long passion. I also mention this because we have long been a place to attract and cultivate adults as multi-talented as Don. For your child, it might be a Jane, or Peter, or Dave, or a Colette who serves up that transformative experience. There surely is only one Don Rand, but we have a school full of dedicated, masterful adults.

Let me finish with a more concrete profile (with apologies for the pun). On your way in, you passed the recently poured foundation for the new student and staff residence that will be ready for occupancy next summer. For most of the new families, it will be your child's residence at some point during his or her NCS career. However, rather than its size, capacity, or exciting "green" features, I'd like to focus on the building—the first new residential space for children constructed in almost 40 years—as a reflection of our identity, both who we are now and what we hope to become.

One of our defining institutional characteristics is the special nature of our residential program. The new building will be an architectural affirmation of our values, one of which says: "We are committed to small, nurturing, child-friendly residential spaces, where teaching families can join their lives to those of the boarding students in their care." In addition, the new residence will ease an acute staff housing shortage of recent years, and along with other bricks and mortar enhancements to come, help to attract and retain the renaissance adults with whom your children form such meaningful relationships. The new building will also provide additional program space. As vibrant as the current program is, generations of NCS teachers have hoped for capital improvements now coming closer to our grasp: a music classroom, a project space cum science lab for younger students, a fiber arts room, a theater. The new residence will not satisfy all these needs, but it will free up space in the main building to create some of these programming areas, as well as to complete a much needed, staged renovation of the main building. As lovely as this building is, the insulation, plumbing, and wiring all date to the 1940-50s. Upgrades are long overdue.

Finally, I'll take a few questions. I am reminded that your children are not shy, and I assume they come by that honestly, so fire away. Who has the first question?