



ORCHARD HOUSE SCHOOL

500 North Allen Avenue Richmond, Virginia 23220 804.228.2436 www.orchardhouse.org

Competition at Orchard House by Nancy W. Davies

In fourth grade, I had the good fortune to have Mrs. Albus as my art teacher. She included art history as part of our weekly art classes. As a nine year old, I used to think about different artists, particularly Brugel, da Vinci, and Michelangelo, with the hope of determining who the “best” artist was. Was it painting filtered light through a window, painting the haunting smile of a woman, or carving from a single piece of marble a magnificent sculpture? What constitutes “best” has had a long-standing hold on me. As the years have progressed and parents have increasingly asked, “Are Orchard House girls competitive?” I find myself circling back to the question of my childhood.

By design, Orchard House does not have an honor roll, student-elected positions, or tryouts for any sports teams, after-school electives, or school clubs, and it does not give awards. Every graduating eighth grade girl gives a graduation speech. Every girl has the option of taking advanced coursework in the upper grades. All elective opportunities are open to each girl. Essentially, the school does not use external rewards or elimination as a means of producing the “best.” At Orchard House, external rewards or awards or elimination are viewed as short-term motivators that interfere with the development of authenticity and long-term growth. Using rewards, awards, and tryouts to shape a girl interferes with her ability to see for herself what matters and what is authentic to her. The underlying assumption is that given the opportunity, people want to grow up to have meaningful lives that make a difference.

At Orchard House, we are committed to the healthy, authentic development of the individual. We believe that healthy, authentic individuals are the cornerstones of thriving communities and cultures. Unless a girl is following a deeply held personal

passion, throwing a child into highly competitive, exclusive situations at a young age can be counterproductive. I am increasingly alarmed at the number of girls who are resumé-oriented at young ages, excel through high school, get into competitive colleges, and in their sophomore year of college, feel they have been manipulated

by the system. In response, they find ways to drop out and away from the externally driven fast track. They feel used. Various systems- school, family, or cultural- viewed them as competitors rather than as human beings and in the process used them up. Too often, in our culture, girls internalize the message that performing and doing for others precludes who they are at a genuine level. After a while, losing one’s self in someone else’s dream takes its toll. At Orchard House our goal is for girls to be the subject of their own lives rather than the object of someone else’s.

So how does Orchard House inspire the best in and from each girl? What happens to Orchard House girls once they leave the small, inclusive environment?

The best within each girl is inspired through opportunity, access, expectation, time, and gifted teachers. Orchard House intentionally puts together classes from a wide range of backgrounds. Our students fall somewhere on the academic spectrum of average ability to girls who have been identified by their elementary schools as highly gifted. Seeing each girl as an individual learner with gifts of her own is where we begin. We see many fifth graders who identify themselves by the roles they have had in their earlier school years. It is not uncommon to hear girls

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talk about being in gifted programs or for girls to say they are not smart because they were not identified for gifted programs. We see our job as getting behind the roles the girls assume to the authentic nature of the individual girl. Initially, it is helping our students develop the skills, the mindset, and the work ethic to be successful regardless of prior roles. With a range of girls, identifying how to stretch each girl whether it is academically, socially, physically, organizationally, or cultivating leadership skills, is our first step. Having a talented faculty attuned to each girl is critical to the process of individual, authentic development. Ensuring that the girls have time to grow into their own skin is important, too.

For a number of girls, it is sixth or seventh grade before they genuinely internalize the commitment and the route to their own success. Our job is to see the girl and to nurture the process. When a girl takes hold on her own terms, wants the best for herself, and is continually refining and exceeding what that best is, then we have done our job. As Doug Welch, a seasoned faculty member said, “No matter what the outside best is, my personal best is always a higher standard.” Imagine a world of people always willing to exceed their personal best and you see the world we work towards at Orchard House. Being a small school, where we know each girl, and in most cases get four years with her, we can focus on the growth of each girl on her own terms.

So what happens when Orchard House girls enter competitive environments? Beginning in late seventh or early eighth grade, Orchard House girls are often ready and eager to face an openly competitive environment. By the early part of eighth grade, we often hear rumblings of wanting to be in a less protected environment and being ready for high school. Coming out of Orchard House, our students have many high school options. Many apply to highly competitive high schools and have to decide among great options from both public and private schools. Once in high school, many of our graduates are on their high schools’ honor rolls, frequently receive leadership positions and awards, are recognized for their artistic work, and in some cases, become

star athletes. Some have been valedictorians and salutatorians of their high schools. Beyond high school, our former students have had and have taken wonderful opportunities from a variety of colleges and universities. So, though Orchard House does not push competition among its students, our students, as they become authentically themselves, develop the ability to navigate whatever the next opportunity or challenge brings them.

Where Orchard House may lack some material resources, we have singularity of purpose, the school size, and the faculty expertise to support our unbridled commitment to the authentic, healthy development of each of our eighty girls. At Orchard House, middle school girls develop a strong sense of self through meaningful experiences; they have equal access to opportunities and the adult expertise supporting the process of authentic development. The girls gain a strong sense of self and of role in community. These are hallmarks that last a lifetime.

We have eighth graders ready to leave for the next phase of their lives. The next part of the story is the number of alumnae who return, from all points of their lives, because their time at Orchard House changed their lives. As they get further away from their Orchard House years, they often return in gratitude for the people and the time that supported them being themselves and the window into the women they are becoming.

So now, when I ask myself who is best: Georgia O’Keeffe, Madame Curie, Eudora Welty, Brugel, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Alexis Schaitkin, or an Orchard House girl, I put the question to rest. What strikes me is the elegance of purpose and the passionate dedication in each of their lives. As a result, their lives contribute to the greater good. Their personal best exceeded imagination. No contest.