

suburban life

+
**Also
Inside:**
Top dentists,
where
to retire,
and more

For 25 years and counting, **The Malvern School** has been offering an innovative, nurturing environment designed to help young learners thrive. page 50



an inspired start

by **BILL DONAHUE**

For 25 years and counting, **The Malvern School** has been offering an innovative, nurturing environment designed to help young learners thrive.

School teachers had a transformative effect on Kristin M. Waterfield's young life. Naturally, when it came time to choose a direction for her career, she wanted to return the favor.

What an indelible mark she has made, and it all began 25 years ago with a serendipitous encounter with a man named Joseph Scandone.

"I was out for a jog and saw Joe standing on a big pile of dirt and said, 'Hey, what is this place going to be?'" she recalls. "He told me about the school he was going to start, and my life changed forever. I was 23 years old and teaching second grade in my hometown, so I decided to move to Philly and help get this school off the ground. The experience inspired us to branch out on our own."

As the founder and CEO of The Malvern School and Malvern Day Camp, Waterfield has become a pioneer of early education in the Delaware Valley. The Malvern School has

nearly 30 locations in southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, each providing a safe and nurturing environment devoted to the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of children from six weeks old to eight years old.

The Malvern School embraces a diverse and innovative curriculum designed to meet or exceed the standards established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which is the nation's largest early childhood accrediting body. Each Malvern School has an abundance of resources, including computer labs for ages two and a half and older, but Waterfield says technology is not a central focus.

"Most kids get plenty of exposure to technology at home," she adds. "We want to prepare them to be learners for where we are in the world, focusing on things like character values and emotional and social

development. We focus on the essence of what it means to be a child: moving our bodies, getting messy, playing and pretending, and interacting with the things and people around us."

Waterfield cites "The Malvern Way™," which focuses on engaging the whole child in an environment of acceptance, respect, care, and encouragement, while fostering a lifelong love of learning.

"By the time they leave us, we want them to have a love of reading, words, and science, and to know what diversity and inclusion look like," she says. "We get compliments from school districts all the time. When a Malvern School kid goes to their school, they can just tell where the student came from; our kids have a strong connection with other kids, they're high-level learners, and they're very connected and respectful and social."

Waterfield believes The Malvern School's greatest strength is its staff—namely, teachers, directors, and administrators. Whenever the school brings on a new team member, it looks for an individual with an impeccable background, education, and work history, as well as a passion for early education.

"This is a people business, and I have surrounded myself with people who are way smarter than me," she adds. "We're building relationships with families. They are dropping off their most precious gift to us, and the minimal expectation is that we're going to love their kids, teach them something, and make sure they have a great time."

Many staff members have worked for



The Malvern School for 15 years or more. Jennifer Brenhuber, lead kindergarten teacher at The Malvern School of Glen Mills, is among them. In addition to her work in the classroom, Brenhuber serves as a director for Malvern Day Camp, which provides an enriching summer-camp experience to boys and girls ages five to 14 on the 15-acre campus of The Malvern School in Thornbury Township.

"I've been teaching here for 25 years," Brenhuber says. "I started as a substitute teacher and reading specialist, but I always loved kindergarten. I wanted to be a teacher as early as I remember, and I attribute that to my kindergarten teacher. Twenty-five years is a long time to spend in one place, and what keeps me here are the team we have in place and the kids; I love working with younger kids."

At Malvern Day Camp, Brenhuber has the opportunity to interact with older kids, many of whom used to be in her classroom; some of them now work as camp counselors. "I still get hugs from them," she adds. She loves the fact that she gets to bear witness to young learners' growth and development on a daily basis.

"You see some kids at the beginning of



the year and they're nervous and maybe a little afraid because it's something new for them," she says. "By the end of the year they're super confident and completely different than who they were at the beginning of the year.

"When they leave my classroom," she continues, "I

want them to be confident in who they are and be who they're going to be. Rather than forming them, I see my responsibility as someone who nurtures their abilities so they will love learning, be confident, and be the best they can be."

Kristin Craven has seen the effectiveness of The Malvern School's approach in her two daughters, four-year-old Morgan and one-year-old Olivia. Both have been going to The Malvern School for "pretty much their whole entire childhood," she says.

The Craven family interviewed seven prospective schools for their first daughter's early education, the first of which was The Malvern School.

"They set a really high bar," she says. "We couldn't see sending her anywhere else. We loved the curriculum and the emphasis on the arts, literature, reading—the whole gamut. We've seen a big difference in each of the girls in their time there. One of them will come home and tell us something really interesting that they didn't learn from us. Clearly, the difference is The Malvern School."

Craven's oldest daughter recently graduated from pre-kindergarten, and she's excited for the next steps in Morgan's education.

"I feel like we gave her the best start," she says. "She's going into kindergarten knowing everything she needs to know, and that's pretty amazing. She will be one of the younger ones in her class."

For anyone who is in the process of vetting early education options for their families, Craven offers a few words of wisdom: "Trust your gut when you look at these schools. Take into consideration the curriculum and the staff, and how friendly everyone seems to be when you're touring the school. Do the teachers seem happy? Do the kids seem happy? That's one of the things I fell in love with when I visited The Malvern School. The kids seemed genuinely happy, and it seemed like such a positive and community-oriented environment."

As Waterfield reflects on the past 25 years, she feels immense pride for what she and her team have built. She also feels gratitude for the trust of so many families, and a responsibility to continue giving young learners the best start possible.

"As we look forward," she says, "we will make sure the fundamentals continue to be present, while keeping an eye on what's coming next, and making sure we understand what a learner for today's world looks like. Trends come and go, but we will always make sure we are creating that whole child who is equipped to succeed when they leave us." ■



For more information about **THE MALVERN SCHOOL'S** programs, locations, and innovative approach to early education, visit malvernschool.com.