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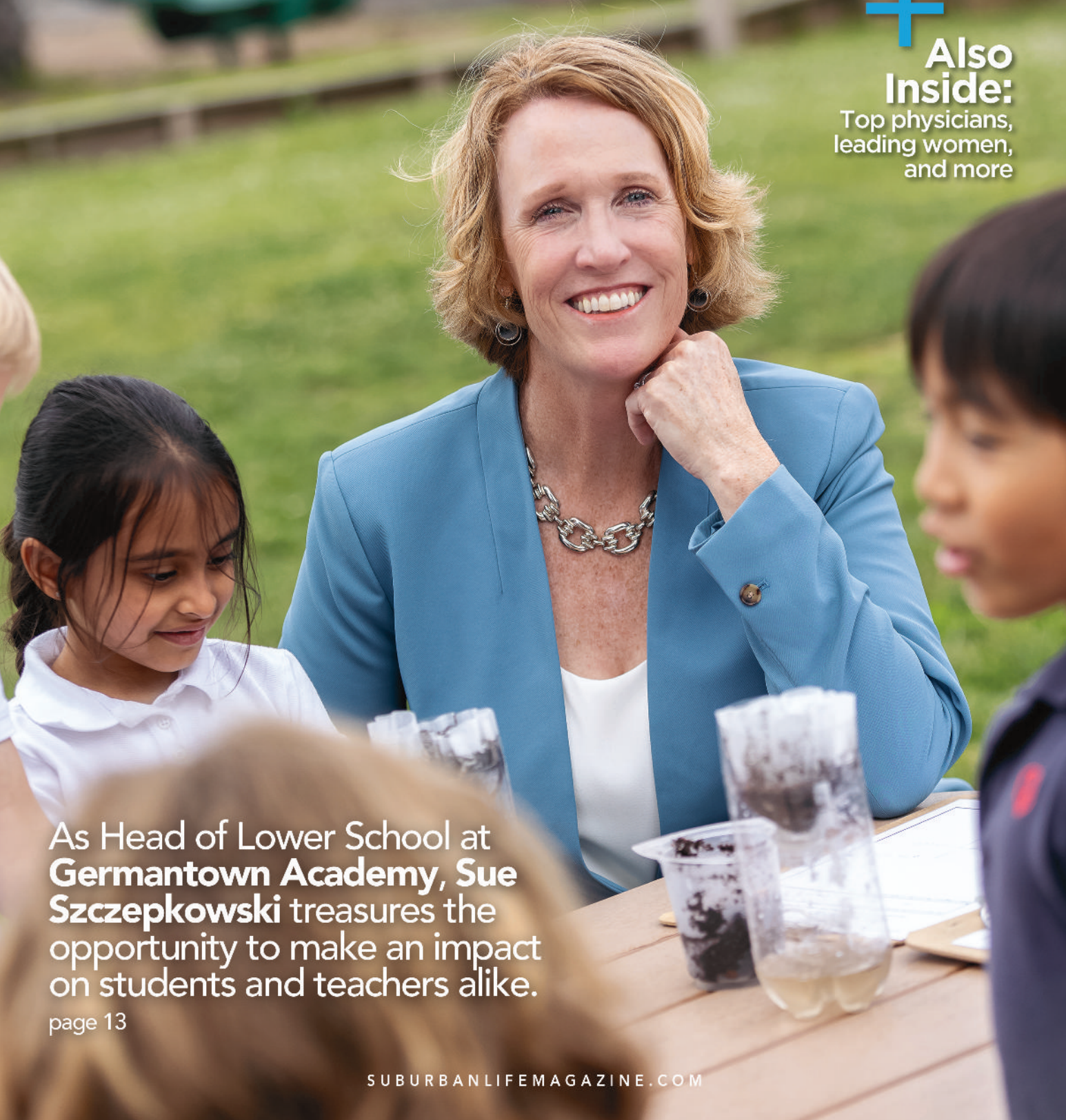
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# Blazing a Path

As Head of Lower School at Germantown Academy, **Sue Szczepkowski** treasures the opportunity to make an impact on students and teachers alike.



**M**any people become inspired to pursue a career in education based on their own positive experiences in school, or perhaps because they witnessed the personal fulfillment that a friend or relative received from being a teacher or administrator. Both scenarios apply to Sue Szczepkowski, Head of Lower School at Germantown Academy (GA), though she discovered her calling when she least expected it.

An aspiring lawyer during her undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania, Szczepkowski was also a standout player on the Quakers' field hockey team and had such a passion for the sport that she started coaching children while still in college. The role ultimately changed her path.

"One day I was on Penn's campus and I saw a group of elementary-aged kids going into the communication school for a theatrical performance," she recalls. "They were about 7 years old, and I loved watching them interact and I loved their energy. I just found myself leaning toward working with younger children. So I decided as a senior in college to go into elementary education."

Szczepkowski went on to earn a master's degree in elementary education from Penn and later added a second master's degree in educational leadership and her Pennsylvania principal certification from Gwynedd Mercy University. Her decades-long career has included various teaching and administrative roles in both public and independent schools, and through it all she has leaned on the lessons she first learned as a hockey player and coach.

Just like student-athletes, she explains,

the students in a classroom have unique talents, and it's the job of the teacher to put them in position to get the most out of their gifts.

"Being flexible and creating an environment where everybody belongs and can grow at different rates is how I always approached my teaching," she says. "I see myself as selecting good talent—people who will meet children where they are, appreciate them, and love them, even if they're tricky and have bumps along the way. Having those people on the team helps everybody grow and feel joy."

Szczepkowski previously spent four years as Lower School Head for Chestnut Hill Academy. She "pressed pause" on her career to start a family and raise her three boys before returning to education in 2012, when she accepted her current position at GA.

"I was really drawn to the school's mission," she says. "There are five points to the mission: It inspires students to be independent in thought, confident in expression, collaborative in action, compassionate in spirit, and honorable in deed. ... I just felt like I could really serve well here, and that my approach of building a strong culture for learning and teaching, and then hiring great people and allowing them to do their work collectively and not micromanaging, would embrace my strengths as a leader."

Overseeing students from prekindergarten through fifth grade, Szczepkowski has stayed true to the principles that have made GA a premier independent school for more than 260 years. At the same time, she has helped further the development of play-based education, physical activity, and outdoor learning.

She savors the opportunity to work closely with teachers, listen to their ideas, and give them the tools needed to put those ideas into everyday practice.

Szczepkowski is proud of how GA prepares children academically for middle school, high school, and beyond, while equipping them with essential life skills.

Szczepkowski is no longer involved with her first passion: field hockey. After previously working with Penn's team and with the United States Field Hockey Association's Olympic youth development program, she now gets her coaching fix nowadays through Girls on the Run Philadelphia. Her work with the nonprofit enables her to help young girls develop physical and emotional confidence and bring out their competitive spirit.

She also serves on the advisory board for EQuipt People, a company started by her former field hockey teammate, Christine Miles. EQuipt People strives to help organizations and their leaders create cultures of understanding through listening. Szczepkowski has already seen that concept resonate in her work at GA.

"Christine has worked closely with me and our teachers on emotional intelligence and team building, and I think that shows up with our kids and our teachers," she says. "We're going to be doing deeper work on specific game-based listening for students that is going to be revolutionary, so I'm very excited about that in the next year or two." ■

## Germantown Academy

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