

COMMENTARY

Diane Chernow's giant warm circle



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By Friday at noon on the sixth of June, the gate to the children's garden will swing shut forever behind Nash. Kindergarten, as they call it with a German word, will be history.

Nine months ago, my youngest son had never spent so much as a single morning in day care, pre-K, pre-school or any other program designed to press him cheek-to-jowl with his fellow Americans, thereby jump-starting his sociability, force-feeding him his ABCs, guaranteeing his familiarity with colds, and getting him out of his parent's hair so their careers could rocket into the stratosphere.

Instead, he'd spent most of his first five years with me, jump starting his take on old men — the kind who pee in the woods, watch birds and clouds as if they mattered, and wander around marshes all morning. Fortunately, when he wasn't with me he was with his mom, a sophisticated, earthy, brilliant kid lover, and even more of a marsh hare than his old man.

Amy and I figured Nash would come out no worse for wear, anyway, than the day-care model of young American now mass-produced.

Still, we had a lot riding on the American system of public education, at least as it shaped up at Alva Elementary School, the easternmost school in Lee County.

We both felt sharp trepidation about Nash's fate in public school. Alva's doors opened on the north bank of the Caloosahatchee River in 1914, but that was not reassuring. It was merely a fact.

Another fact beyond our control: Like it or not, Nash's teacher, Diane Chernow, his assistant teacher, Jennie Taylor, and his principal, Callie Lawrence, became the constellation in his kindergarten universe beginning from moment one, at 8 a.m. on Monday, August 20, 2007.

They'd all been in the game a long time, but we had no idea who they were, or what they planned for six hours a day with our son. Their curriculum appeared so much more regimented and demanding than our own kindergarten experiences that we began to call it kinderbooten, or booten-campen as whimsy dictated.

But that changed. We soon realized that we were watching an extraordinarily talented human being at work in the children's garden.

In her middle 50s, Diane Chernow was born and raised in New York City, the daughter of a Scottish immigrant mother and a Jewish father.

Like a skilled doctor or midwife, she birthed a classic set of twins in the minds and hearts of 18 strikingly different young people: Basic Knowledge (BK) and Delight in Learning (DL).

You can't have one without the other. In education, you either get those twins, BK and DL, or you get nothing. Now nine months later, Nash can read, write, add and subtract. (He has to, at least minimally, to advance to the first grade.)

But Ms. Chernow didn't merely meet that school-board standard. She tuned it up, creating something with power and speed and range that reaches far beyond the basics, for each child.

First, she gave her 5-year-olds a rich palette of art and story, along with an empire of beginning science.

She invested them with imagination, with reason, and with a wide world beyond their ken. A year ago, for example, she spent a month in China, and she poured that experience into her class like cream into a cat's bowl, as a treat. They lapped it up.

To quote Louis Berman, she proved to be "a master of simplification and an enemy of simplism." She never patronized her students, or spoke to them as if they were babies, aliens, or Army privates.

Ms. Chernow was not alone in her effort to teach my son and his classmates. Ms. Taylor helped her do it, and Ms. Lawrence allowed her to do it. (Principals must insure that teachers meet the board of education's curriculum requirements; when teachers get creative with the curriculum, principals can get creative with their criticisms.)

Ms. Chernow had some extra punch in her bullpen, too: a determined set of regular volunteers, seven or eight of them, all parents or grandparents. They took to her public school classroom — the big leagues in education — like talented relief pitchers who had come up to the majors through the School-of-Life League.

What does all this mean to us? Amy and I feel unaccountably lucky to have found such a school, and such a teacher, working in a profession where she is underpaid, underestimated and largely ignored.

But more important is what this might mean to Nash, who will carry her daily efforts all his life.

So I decided to ask him straight out, and share his response with you, in this column. These are his recent supper-table comments, word for word.

What do you like about Ms. Chernow, or for that matter, what don't you like about her?

"She is very good and is strictly very intelligent and she can handle my class very well. There's nothing NOT to like about her. "She's sort of cocky and she's sort of silvery and gleamy. She gives you a taste of how your mind

would be with her yet she can be very strict when the time comes, then nice after strict.

"She has taught me songs and how to say tables in Spanish — la mesa roja, la mesa azul.

"She's taught me about Vincent Van Gogh, 'Starry Starry Night.' And Georgia O'Keefe who would look at the flower (reflected) in her eyes, and then copy it. And Egyptian kings, King Tut.

"She taught me to be very nice to other people. What makes her mad: when somebody talks when she's talking. But she gives you a few more chances.

"She's a very happy teacher so she almost always laughs.

"Skida winka, skida marinka do/ I love you in the morning and I love you in the afternoon, so skidamarinka do.

"The bear went over the mountain and what do you think he did? He saw another mountain, and what do you think he did? He climbed the other mountain, and what do you think he saw?...

"She has a kitty and a dog named Barney. I gave her a pretend cat, she loves cats.

"But if she were an animal she'd be a bear, because bears are half nice and half strict, and you can train 'em almost to be nice, and walk 'em on leashes and stuff.

"And she also plays the drums."
(Do you still think about marrying her someday?)

"If she's still alive. And when she gives you a hug, it's a warm, melty, warmy thing.

"And she treats everybody the same, not like DP's teacher (Nash's older brother). He loved his teacher and she only loved one kid the most."

(How did she teach you to read and write?)

"She didn't teach me about checkers, but, ah, I think I copied her about writing. She'd write it out and then we'd sound it out. And write it.

"She's just a giant warm circle of love.
Dad, are we having dessert tonight?" ■

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