

## Waldorf Alumni Forum

# Jelena Jaehnig

DENVER WALDORF SCHOOL GRADUATE

## Why I Became a Waldorf Teacher

*Jelena Jaehnig was born in Stuttgart, Germany, and attended the original Waldorf school there for the first three grades. At age nine she moved to Denver with her family. Her father, a priest of the Christian Community, and her mother, a trained Waldorf class teacher, helped to start the Denver Waldorf School. Jelena attended the school through the eighth grade, and thus she experienced a very large, firmly established Waldorf school as well as one in its pioneer stages. Since the Denver school had no high school, she attended an academically rigorous, independent high school in the city.*

*Growing up with two brothers, and with parents busily involved in the early years of the Waldorf school and the Christian Community in Denver, Jelena lived in a busy household alive with many visitors and volunteers. Jelena went to college in Denver and Germany and completed a master's degree in history. After teaching at the Denver Waldorf School from 2002 to 2003, she moved to Oregon to teach at the Eugene Waldorf School. She spent the 2005–2006 academic year volunteering at the Waldorf school in Guanajuato, México, and learning Spanish. Jelena has taught high school German, music, and art and has been a class teacher for several years. Her current class is now in fourth grade. She lives with her husband, Chris Bianchi, and his two children, Maize, 11, and Rose, 8. Her hobbies include hiking, reading, practicing Spanish, and painting.*

—R. E. K.

I was blessed to attend Waldorf schools from first through eighth grade. When I was in first grade I knew that I wanted to become a Waldorf teacher. My determination to pursue this vocation stayed with me as I grew up and was only strengthened as I realized how many wonderful activities I would be able to engage in by Waldorf teaching: telling many different stories and biographies, performing science experiments, experiencing the power and beauty of language, making music, doing drama, drawing, painting, and modeling clay, to name but a few. I wanted to work with children in all of these fields.

The basis of our work as Waldorf teachers is the acknowledgment that each child who comes to us is a unique individuality and that he or she has a destiny to fulfill. Our task is to help the child prepare for that life purpose. We seek to unravel the mystery of each child in our care and to learn, little by little, how best to help that child develop in a healthy manner and to acquire the skills, capacities, and knowledge needed to live well in the world. Among the things that we try to impart to each child are the following.

### Flexibility in Thinking

Even an academic subject like mathematics can be taught in a way that cultivates mathematical ability but also something more. For example, in teaching addition, one can teach that  $3+3+3 = 9$ . This is true, of course, and the children can grasp the abstract



Waldorf graduate and Waldorf class teacher Jelena Jaehnig with two of her students

the human being could not use in his current stage of development were taken out as a precipitate. Because man took the animal forms of his older brothers out of his line of evolution, he attained his current high stage.

Because the early apes increasingly lost their human characteristics, they became animals, although the most highly developed ones. Even now, the monkeys and apes, in their infancy and early years, with their upright forehead and sitting posture and their playful and curious behavior, show that their origin was close to that of human beings.

Moreover, primate researchers have shown that gorillas and chimpanzees, particularly the younger ones, have signs of a self-awareness. Mountain gorillas in East Africa, after a rainstorm, will observe themselves with amazement in the reflecting mirror of a water puddle. And in experiments using mirrors, chimpanzees are able to identify themselves. From

this evidence, a movement has arisen to give these close relatives human rights and to end their use as subjects in medical research.

We human beings still have unmastered drives and emotions in us, and if the process of cultural education does not succeed, we can easily degenerate and fall prey to them. Nevertheless, the human line of development increasingly has been able to leave behind its apelike characteristics.

We come, then, to the conclusion that our original question—*Who has descended from whom?*—presents a false choice. The human being has not descended from the apes. The apes have not descended from the human being. Rather, both come from a common mixed form, from which each went its own way, keeping some characteristics, discarding others. In this idea, we have a meeting of rigorous natural science and the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner. ☉



*Alumni Forum, continued*

reality of 9 being the sum of three 3s. However, a Waldorf teacher is more likely to present the material in a manner like this:

A village baker has to send nine loaves of bread to a farmhouse in the mountains. He is too busy to go himself, so the job falls to his wife and their two sons. The wife is far along in a pregnancy, however, and one boy is seven years old and the other only four. Each person has a backpack. What do you think would be a fair way to divide up the loaves of bread between them? How many should each one carry?

The conversations among the children around such questions are wonderful. Different possibilities emerge. Nine is no longer just  $3+3+3$ . It can also be  $2+4+3$  or  $5+2+2$  or  $0+5+4$ . A math lesson becomes an exercise in flexible thinking.

### **A Sense of Fairness and Morality**

This little story about the baker and his family also takes the mathematical exercise into another human realm. The children have to consider the human beings in question and to do so with empathy and understanding. They have to decide what is fair, what is safe, what is possible.

### **Clear Speech and Clear Thinking**

In the language arts, the Waldorf teacher helps the children master grammar, proper usage, vocabulary, and punctuation. The aim is that the children become able to express themselves clearly and correctly in writing and in speech. Much emphasis is placed on enunciation, and the teacher strives to model clear, modulated speech that is pleasing to the ear.

Speech and thinking are two capacities that distinguish us as human beings. Both activities are directly connected to our Ego or higher self—our inner core of strength. Varied, rich, and intricate experiences in speech foster variety, richness, and intricacy in our thinking. A child who can clearly articulate a thought in a complex sentence will, as an adult, be able to follow the thoughts of others.

### **An Experience of the Beauty of Language**

We also want the children to experience the endless possibilities and beauty of language. The children learn by heart many poems and verses and thus internalize the English language as it has expressed, with artistry and imagination, the most profound human emotions, insights, and wisdom.

## A Sense of Wonder at the World and of Being at Home in It

Our aim in the teaching of science is to help children become adults who feel at home and confident in the world. To this end, we cultivate in the grade school years a sense of wonder and reverence for all natural phenomena. This begins in kindergarten and the early grades with nature stories that describe the myriad wonders of the natural world.

Starting in the third grade, the children experience individual phenomena in the context in which they exist, through observation and description. We do not take things away from their natural environment and cut them apart. Something dead and dissected does not give children a true experience of the phenomena. Yet a lively description of a plant or animal in its natural environment does. A child experiences only one aspect of a forest pond by looking at a single drop of pond water through a microscope and seeing the minute forms of life there. But a vivid description or, better yet, a field trip can bring to life the pond and all that exists within and around it. The children can see with their own eyes (inner and imaginative as well as physical) the murky water, the muddy bottom, the salamanders swimming among the algae, the dragonflies that hover above the surface, and the frogs that croak from under reeds at the edge and hop in with a plop when someone approaches. For a child, this experience is more meaningful than a view through a microscope. The full context of sights, sounds, smells, and sensations enhances and stimulates the child's sense of wonder and wholeness.

We do not burden children with the innumerable ecological concerns that exist today. They will learn of these soon enough. Finding out about them at too early an age can lead to a feeling of depression, helplessness, and resignation. Certainly it is essential to teach them to treat the Earth and life on it with respect, but they do not yet need to know about pollution and climate change and the extinction of species. That is not a state of mind that will enable them to help our planet as adults. One can only feel helpful and work for creative change if one feels empowered. Awe and wonder for the beauty of the natural world can bring this sense of empowerment.

## Interest in Other Cultures and Peoples

The study of geography and foreign languages aims to awaken in children a sense for other parts of the world, a feeling for different cultures, and interest in

our fellow human beings who live elsewhere. Such interest will help them to live in the world fully engaged and with a deep awareness of shared humanity.

## Grace and Consciousness in Movement

In eurythmy, a subject unique to Waldorf Education, the children learn to express in movement the invisible forces that give life, form, and beauty to the physical body. Since eurythmy for the children is a group activity, they also develop an awareness and sensitivity to others and a sense of space.

## Manual Dexterity and a Connection to Objects

Among my favorite experiences as a Waldorf student were the craftwork and handwork. Over the years, I carved a spoon, made a wooden box and a chair, bound several books, sewed items of clothing, and helped make a thermometer and build an electric motor. Such work develops fine motor coordination—which in turn enhances mental capacities—and teaches practical skills. It also helps one feel connected to the world and the objects in it. When I see the things I made or similar objects, they are familiar and comprehensible to me, not alien things.

## A Sense for Beauty

Every day, Waldorf students are involved in the fine arts and in the cultivation of aesthetic judgment. They must make artistic judgments involving color and form and the interaction between them. This helps cultivate a healthy sense for balance and harmony in all matters.

## Respect for and the Ability to Work with Others

A Waldorf student typically remains with the same group of children throughout his schooling. This creates an intimate and intense social situation. Since each student participates in every aspect of the curriculum, the children become supportive of each other. They develop an awareness of each other's abilities and a tolerance for each other's challenges. An important part of the teacher's work is to develop the social skills of the children.

Today, as a Waldorf teacher, I am striving to give these gifts to my students so that they will become free, confident, well-balanced human beings who can find their place and destiny in the world. ☉

