



# THE STEINER TIMES

Spring 2010

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*Technical assistance and editing provided by Ashlea Walton, Ina Gerdenich, and Katrina Klaphake*

## Spotlight on the Schmitt Family

*By Kim Easterday*

If you're wondering what a Waldorf education can give your child, you need look no further than the family of Larry and Becky Schmitt. All four of their children, Laura, Kristen, Evan and Melanie, attended Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor (RSSAA) and all have moved on to exciting and challenging lives. The Schmitts have graciously allowed us a peek into their rich and vibrant lives so that we too, can see the wonders of Waldorf in action.

Becky explains that when it was time to send their first child, Laura, to school, they found themselves disappointed in what the traditional school environments had to offer. Searching for something more creative, with a focus on the needs and abilities of individual students, led the Schmitts to the Rudolf Steiner School.



*(from left to right) Michael Olabisi, Laura Schmitt-Olabisi, Becky Schmitt, Melanie Schmitt, Larry Schmitt, Evan Schmitt, Kristen Schmitt*

The Schmitts liked what RSSAA had to offer. They especially liked the fact that children could grow and blossom at a pace that allowed them to fully experience all the joys of childhood. They recognized that the children were taught to "think for themselves" with a curriculum that met each child where they were developmentally.

As Becky became more involved with the school, first as a parent volunteer and then later as the school administrator, she discovered not only how rich the curriculum was but also how broad and integrated. A microbiologist herself, Becky liked how children were brought to a subject that was age appropriate in a way that encouraged questions, allowed for skepticism and gently nudged children into participation.

The Schmitt children, the first two attending K-8 (the High School was not yet open) and the last two graduating from 12<sup>th</sup> grade, have used their Steiner

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## RSSAA Receives Energy Efficiency Grant

RSSAA Lower School is one of the first schools in Michigan to receive an energy efficiency grant from Energy Works. It includes an investment-grade energy audit (\$10,000 value), which gives a detailed engineering analysis of our school to identify specific cost-effective improvements that will save our school thousands of dollars each year.

The Energy Works team will then assist us in making an Energy Action Plan to identify priorities and develop a timeline for achieving savings. Once the Energy Action Plan is complete, a \$5,000 matching

grant is available towards the first \$10,000 in energy efficiency improvements! Keep an eye out for upgrades in the Lower School building.

If you're interested in helping with this project, please contact Katrina at [kklaphake@steinerschool.org](mailto:kklaphake@steinerschool.org).



## Consider Supporting a Business Partner

Have you given any thought recently to the relationship between our school, our Business Partners, and your connection to RSSAA? There are many reasons why you should consider utilizing the services of one of these partners.



- Supporting an RSSAA Business Partner is good for our local economy by shopping local, we can make a difference, to the overall health of our city, our state, and ultimately our school.
- It's good for our bank account. Every time you conclude a transaction with one of our Business Partners they in turn make a contribution to our

school.

- Dealing with a Business Partner helps make them aware of our school and encourages more business owners to set up business relationships of their own.
- It just feels good! Many of our Business Partners are fellow RSSAA families whose generosity is rewarded when you support them.

Give it some thought and next time you make that all important purchase, be it groceries or a new home, please consider an RSSAA Business Partner first. A list of our partners is at [steinerschool.org/support/scrip](http://steinerschool.org/support/scrip) and in the school roster.



## Welcome Caroline Freitag

It's not often we can welcome into the fold one of our own, but that's just what has happened with our new 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Caroline Freitag (the former Caroline Weinert). This RSSAA graduate comes to us after teaching 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grades for 3 years at the Detroit Waldorf School. When the Detroit School downsized last year we had the unique opportunity and the perfect position waiting for Mrs. Freitag. When asked why she decided to become a Waldorf-trained teacher she had this to say: "I've wanted to be a Waldorf teacher since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. After graduation from Adrian College with a degree in art and German, I was a bit nervous that I had picked the wrong majors. But, after a call from RSSAA teacher, Margot Amrine, directing me to the Detroit Waldorf School's teaching position, I knew I'd done the right thing." Turns out she was right: she got the job and was able to teach while continuing her Waldorf training. Did she make the right choice? One only needs to see the smiling faces of her 4<sup>th</sup> grade class to know that we did! Welcome Mrs. Freitag!

## Schmitt cont'd *from page 1*

education as a platform from which they went on to attend college and launch careers of their own. Learning about their accomplishments provides illumination to those of us whose children are still making their own way through RSSAA.

### What are they doing now?

**Laura Schmitt-Olabisi**, the eldest of the Schmitt children, completed a Bachelor of Science degree from Brown University, a Ph.D. in Systems Ecology from the State University of New York College of



*Laura Schmitt-Olabisi and her husband Michael Olabisi.*

Environmental Science and Forestry, and a Post Doc at the University of Minnesota. She is currently an assistant professor at Michigan State University.

Laura works with systems dynamics and geographic and

statistical models to ask questions about some of the most important threats to the sustainability of human and natural systems. She uses participatory techniques to integrate knowledge from experts in a variety of fields and combines this with insights from quantitative modeling, all in the service of promoting sustainable development.

When asked to answer the question “How RSSAA molded me for my subsequent work and life?”, there were two main things Laura emphasized:

The first is the way in which all learning and information is truly integrated in the Waldorf curriculum and also connected to the ‘real’ world. For example, during a botany lesson, students go for a walk in the forest to collect plant samples, perform experiments on these samples in chemistry lesson, then draw the plants and write essays about them in their main lesson books. Science, art, writing, and even poetry are integrated into the learning experience. I believe that this style of learning was very suited to my personality, and contributed to my pursuing a Ph.D. in systems ecology, a discipline which straddles the boundaries between the

natural, physical and social sciences. In my teaching and research at Michigan State University today, I always strive to emphasize a holistic and systemic approach to problems that are not bounded by traditional disciplinary barriers. I think RSSAA started me down this path!

The second thing I gained from RSSAA was the deep-rooted feeling that learning is its own reward, and is a critical part of the path towards becoming a better person and a better citizen of the world. Because I have chosen a career path in academia, I obviously internalized this message!

**Kristen Schmitt** also attended Brown University where she obtained her undergraduate degree in biology. She completed her MS in Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University. She currently works for an organization in Houghton, MI, the Northern Institute of Applied Carbon Science (NIACS). The NIACS focuses on taking the latest science on climate change and ecosystem responses to climate change, and making sure that it gets to those who are dealing directly with ecosystem management (e.g. foresters, land managers), thus, bridging the gap between research and what actually happens in the field day today.

Kristen agrees with her sister, Laura, that the Waldorf curriculum’s holistic approach was beneficial to her work. She states,

“Understanding the science itself and being able to communicate this to others necessitates being able to think about the interaction and feedback



*Kristen Schmitt conducting an interview with a villager in Nicaragua.*

between various parts of the global climate system. Exploring solutions to climate change also requires recognizing the connections between climate change and human health, social justice, education, the political system, economics, etc.”

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## Schmitt cont'd from page 3

Her advice to others thinking about a Waldorf education:

I understand that people are often curious about aspects of any education that don't fit into a 'traditional' model. Often the things that are most surprising to others are things that I never considered an issue. For example, people are surprised that I didn't receive letter grades as a 1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, and wonder if I did poorly on tests and homework as a consequence. I try to emphasize to them how much I really enjoyed school (it can be shocking, I know!). I looked forward to the start of the school year in the fall and to going to class. I had amazing and talented teachers who made me want to learn because I was fascinated with the subject, not because I would receive a grade. Learning was an enjoyable experience—as it should be—and that has carried over for me and for my other Steiner friends into our adult lives. I think that every child deserves that kind of experience.

After obtaining a BA in International Relations from the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University, **Evan Schmitt** went on to work for the non-profit Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C. Evan works on a project called Sports, Culture and Youth (SCY) where he facilitates international exchange programs, primarily in partnership with the State Department. The program, Sports United, brings international sports delegations to the United States and works with embassies on cultural and youth exchange programs.

Evan believes strongly that his education at RSSAA



Evan Schmitt with a group from Tanzania taking an Aikido lesson.

has made him more effective in his work. He has found that, "... employers value creative thinking and problem solving as much as, if not more than, critical thinking. The fact of the matter is that most educational systems can teach people how to think critically about situations, but what really drives organizations forward is thinking of solutions that have not previously existed." A Waldorf education gave him the skills that set him apart. In Evan's work, he is always attempting to find new ways to create meaningful exchanges with international visitors. He said he

"...was hired for this job because I was able to demonstrate an ability to think of ways to use previous diplomatic mediums (such as sports) and apply them to much more localized issues of development in a manner that creates a measurable impact. I do not believe I would be able to do this as effectively without having instilled in me at an early age to use creative thinking to solve very difficult problems."

Evan's advice to parents and students considering a Waldorf education is, "to look at the difficult economic times we are in and think about what skills students will need in the future. There is no doubt in my mind that a Waldorf education will teach you to think in a unique way, and this is a *measurable* advantage as you apply for college and when you enter into the workforce. Just don't be surprised when you find yourself entering into a profession that in some way serves others over the self. For one reason or another, this tends to be the path of a Waldorf graduate."

After attending RSSAA K-12, **Melanie Schmitt** enrolled at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida where in 2009 she graduated with a BS in Biology with minors in Chemistry and Psychology. She is currently considering returning to school to pursue a Ph.D. in Psychology.

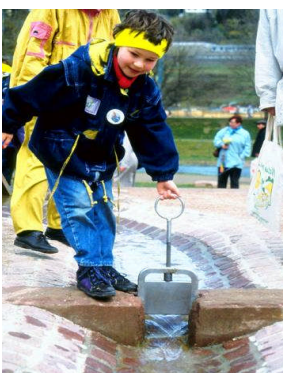


Melanie Schmitt on graduation day, Eckerd College.

## Natural Playground & Garden Planned at the Lower School

By Katrina Klaphake

The Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor believes in the fundamental importance of play and of being in the outdoors for a child's well-being. As such, we have focused on keeping our properties as natural as possible by preserving the surrounding woods and planting native plants and trees. Aging playground equipment and play areas at the Lower School needed rejuvenating, so over a year ago, a Playground Committee was established. Rather than simply installing new pieces of standard fixed play equipment, we planned to use this opportunity to transform our playground into a natural play-space that protects the ecology and nurtures behaviors in children like appropriate risk taking, creative problem solving, imaginative play, active



Water play

work related to real-life experiences, and nature-inspired learning.

The committee surveyed 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students last year, along with faculty and staff. We soon realized we needed an integrated plan that would allow us to proceed with improvements over several years' time. With the help of a donor, we were able

to begin work with Shannan Gibb-Randall, a landscape architect with InSite Design and parent at our school, on a Master Plan for the playground.



Third graders Max, Samuel, Jonas & Jimmy building forts.

A draft plan was presented at the March Parent Council meeting. It includes reconfiguring the blacktop area to handle water run-off using rain gardens and creative water play, and enhancing the middle school back playground with boulders, fort-building and challenges for older students. We are continuing to get input from students, faculty, and parents.

Approximately \$2,500 is still needed to complete the Master Plan in order to move forward. If you are inspired by this project or have some ideas, contact Katrina at [kklaphake@steinerschool.org](mailto:kklaphake@steinerschool.org).

### *Schmitt cont'd* from page 4

Along with her siblings, Melanie agrees that the real-world experiences her Waldorf education gave her have helped her in college and life. One of the most influential experiences she had was the culminating senior trip to Italy where she experienced art on a whole new level. Looking back at her high school experience, she came to appreciate the skills she gained with a small class size. "I feel that having a small class gave me a great advantage because of the inability to form cliques. We tend to gravitate towards those that share our views and our interests, and especially in high school, belonging to the right clique is very important. At Steiner, our small class sizes allowed us to debate topics and have open discussions expressing our differing viewpoints. With such a small and diverse community it was basically impossible to find two people who agreed on everything. This gave us the opportunity to develop the social skills we needed to work with and reach agreements with others, even if we did not feel the same way about certain issues. Many people I come across, both in the workplace and in college, do not

have these skills and working with them can be very difficult. They tend to be short tempered and have little tolerance for ideas that are dissimilar to their own. I have come to learn that when it comes to getting jobs, having good social skills and being able to work with people is as important, if not more so, than only getting good grades and being smart."

While a Waldorf education may look unusual to many with traditional school system expectations, it is the results that speak most loudly to its effectiveness. The Schmitts show us there is real value in supporting an education that is creating members of society who do not necessarily think the way everyone else does. Our future will depend on a broadly educated populace and on people who can think creatively, cooperatively, and in ways that bring a different perspective to the discussion. Certainly, spending time in a Waldorf based curriculum leaves no child behind.

# The Power of Play

By Kim Easterday

Play is an integral part of the Waldorf curriculum and is vital for the healthy development of children. Until recently, in most traditional academic settings, the idea of play has been sacrificed in the pursuit of education. The good news is that play is making a comeback!

Recently, a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with the National Association of Elementary School Principals & Playworks, found most educators know that play, in the form of recess, "...has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom." These findings arrive on the heels of other groundbreaking research linking more recess to better behavior and focus in the classroom.

There is evidence that shows scaling-back recess comes at a cost to learning. In January 2009, the journal *Pediatrics* published a study of 11,000 third-graders, comparing those who had little or no daily recess with those that had more than 15 minutes of recess per day. They found that children who have more recess time behave better in the classroom and are likelier to learn more (Barros). In fact, the Playworks study showed that teachers were able to reclaim up to 18 minutes a day of learning time because many of the problems that arose in classes that did not have recess could be worked out on the playground. The playground was actually a conduit that created opportunities for students' meaningful involvement in conflict resolution and other life skills.

In October 2009, the Gallup Organization surveyed 1,951 elementary school principals about their feelings and experiences in regards to recess. Some findings include:

- More than 8 in 10 principals report that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.
- Two thirds of principals report that students listen better after recess and are more focused in class.

- An overwhelming majority of principals (96%) conclude that recess has a positive impact on social development and general well being.

Aside from the social and academic value of recess, the physicality of play is good for children's health. Given the new "Let's Move" initiative started by First Lady Michelle Obama to curb childhood obesity, there is no question that play belongs back in school curricula.

Free play is something the Alliance for Childhood has been addressing for some years now. In the article "Free Play is the Missing Link in Anti-Obesity Campaign," released on February 5<sup>th</sup> of this year, authors Ed Miller and Joan Almon state, "Efforts to reverse the obesity epidemic have until now focused almost entirely on improved nutrition and physical activity with disappointing results. The missing ingredient in this recipe is play. Good old-fashioned, child-initiated play, the kind that used to keep children moving and active for hours each day."



RSSAA second-graders Jonah McPhee and Shane Alexander, enjoy free play.

Many pediatricians agree. According to Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, "Encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidemic." The emphasis is on activity not exercise, which can turn some kids off and create resistance to moving at all. Free play activities, such as playing hide-and-seek, tag, or jump-rope, can be great for burning calories and improving fitness. Many of these activities can be seen daily on the RSSAA playground.

It remains to be seen whether or not play will make it back into the daily lives of our nation's children. Certainly it will always be a part of the Waldorf curriculum. Perhaps we've created a benchmark for non-Waldorf schools to use as they too, once again, begin to incorporate play into their curricula. One thing's for certain: the torch has been passed and our own children will remember the joy, the lessons, and the good old-fashioned fun they had on the playground!

## Taking Their Show On-The-Road: Praise for Steiner Quartet

By San Slomovits

Four Steiner High School students played Mozart at Hill Auditorium in January. Well, okay, they did not perform on the giant stage of the venerable concert hall, but nevertheless, did appear in Hill Auditorium. Following the Ann Arbor Symphony's annual Mozart Birthday Bash, the string quartet of senior Jessica Choi, (first violin), 9<sup>th</sup> grader Emily Slomovits, (second violin), senior Karin Roszell, (viola), and 9<sup>th</sup> grader Ruby An, (cello), played a Mozart Divertimento at the reception on the Mezzanine honoring Arie Lipsky, the Symphony's conductor for the past ten years. (The Divertimento was the same one with which the orchestra opened their concert earlier in the evening.) Members of the orchestra board, musicians, members of the capacity crowd that attended the concert and many local dignitaries, including Mayor John Hieftje, attended the reception. They received the quartet's performance with warm applause.



Quartet members (from left to right) Jessica Choi, Emily Slomovits, Ruby An, and Karin Roszell. Photo courtesy of Czarnecki-Dempsey.

The group got the gig because Barbara Sturgis-Everett, principal second violinist of the Ann Arbor Symphony, and private teacher to Roszell, was asked if she knew of a high school string quartet that might be interested and available for the event. Sturgis-Everett recommended her student's Steiner School quartet, which she knew was coached by fellow Ann Arbor Symphony member, principal cellist, Sarah Cleveland.

But much more than musical nepotism was involved. Maestro Lipsky himself had vetted the quartet when he conducted master classes for a number of cham-

ber ensembles at the High School earlier in the month. Here is what he had to say afterward about all the groups, and the quartet in particular. "I really enjoyed coaching chamber music at the Steiner School. The level was quite high and the dedication and love for music was evident. The quartet, which played the Haydn, was very advanced and I was very impressed with their depth and the thirst for musical knowledge they all displayed. I was so happy that they played in my anniversary celebration—what a nice memory! Bravo to the young musicians and their teachers!"

Earlier in January, the quartet also played in the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association's district-wide Instrumental Solo and Ensemble

Festival and received blue ribbons and a number one rating, the highest possible score. In March, the ensemble once again impressed the judges at MSBOA's state-level Solo and Ensemble Festival.

Sarah Cleveland, who coaches the quartet twice a week at the High School, has this to say about them. "It is a pleasure working with this quartet of smart, dedicated, talented, hardworking and enthusiastic young women. They clearly enjoy music making, as well as the experience of pushing themselves to ever higher levels of ensemble playing."



### Double Your Annual Giving Gift!

Thanks to the generosity of several families at RSSAA, we have launched a matching campaign for the Annual Fund. Every donation sent in will now be matched dollar-for-dollar up to a total match of \$4,000. Your generous \$500 gift becomes a \$1,000 gift! These gifts support delivery of our wonderful curriculum by providing classroom materials, faculty development opportunities, salaries, benefits and tuition assistance. Please support RSSAA by donating on-line at [steinerschool.org/donate](http://steinerschool.org/donate) or send a check to the Development Office attn: Katrina Klaphake. We also accept MC, VISA and stocks donations. If you have questions please contact Katrina at 734-995-4141 or [kklaphake@steinerschool.org](mailto:kklaphake@steinerschool.org).



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*“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings, who are able in and of themselves to impart purpose and direction in their lives.”*

*- Rudolf Steiner*

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## **Years of Wonder Conference 2010**

**“Being The Parent Your Child Needs”**

**April 23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup>**

**at**

**The Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor**

Open to the public and designed for parents, educators, home-schoolers and others interested in creating an environment where young children can acquire skills, capacities and knowledge needed to live well in the world.

Author and long-time early childhood educator Sharifa Oppenheimer will lead the conference as keynote speaker with lectures entitled: “Love’s Other Name - Discipline” (free on Friday evening) and “How Children Learn and How Parents Can Best Help Them” (Saturday morning).

The conference workshops will focus on enriching parenting skills, practices that foster vigorous brain development and creating a healthy, nurturing home environment. Parents will take home skills to support their children’s well-balanced, broad-based learning, and thereby give these children treasures to last a lifetime.

The Saturday conference (\$60 fee) features workshops in art, movement, language arts and family life. Registrants can choose to participate in up to three workshops. Lunch is also included in the registration fee. Register on-line at [steinerschool.org](http://steinerschool.org).

For more information contact:

[yearsofwonder@steinerschool.org](mailto:yearsofwonder@steinerschool.org) or Joann Constantinides at 734-995-4141.