

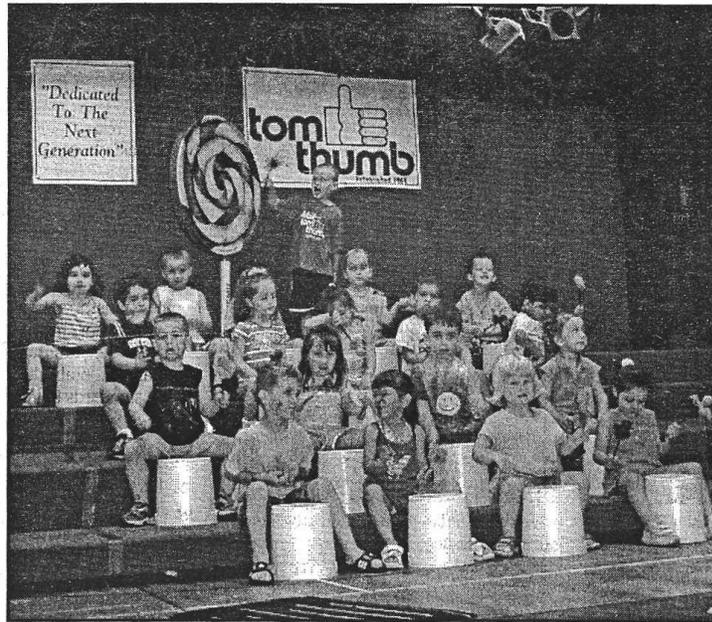
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# Nancy Brophy Day: Celebrating a visionary

by Kathy Grantham



Nancy Brophy



Tom Thumb drummers perform on stage.

Throughout its history Westchester County has been blessed with many outstanding men and women. Nancy Brophy, founder director and owner of the Tom Thumb Preschool in Mohegan Lake is among that august group.

June 4 was proclaimed "Nancy Brophy Day" by the Westchester County Board of Legislators, celebrating her commitment to the highest standards of excellence during the past 35 years of nurturing and teaching children to be "the best they can be."

Becoming a leader doesn't spring from a vacuum; character is formed as an amalgam of life experience at home and at school. Brophy's school years were spent in the Canal Zone, Panama, where she attended a multiracial and bilingual comprehensive high school.

Under the auspices of Wayne University, she toured eleven countries in Europe, then accepted a two-year teaching position at a very small international school in Peru, teaching all academic subjects in grades one through eight.

At a United States Army dependents' school in France, she taught seventh and eighth graders. Returning to the United States, Brophy continued to teach junior high students in Massachusetts and at Copper Beech Middle School in Yorktown.

In 1968 Brophy opened the doors of the Tom Thumb Preschool creating an environment that emphasizes the development of each child's ability to be comfortable and confident in their challenging social settings. Her school is a model of modern pre-kindergarten education and enrichment.

In the mid-'60s, Brophy was teaching at Copper Beech Middle School; Ann Gaspari was teaching French, and they shared similar ideas about educating children. When Brophy opened the doors of Thumb Preschool in 1968; she invited Gaspari to join the newly established school as a French teacher. In 1993, Gaspari was honored when Brophy asked her to assume the post of Assistant Director of Tom Thumb. "Working with Nancy is a challenge and a joy because she always tries to do better whatever was done yesterday," Gaspari said.

Many parents are themselves Tom Thumb alumni. With an enrollment of more than 380 children a week, ranging in age from two years and nine months to five years, counting half-day and whole-day sessions, simple arithmetic gives a staggering idea of Brophy's reach.

A faculty of 10 head teachers has a complement of 20 assistants, by law, and a two to one ratio in each classroom.

Two half-days a week cost \$160 a month; three half-days cost \$330. Half-day kids get everything the all-day kids get; drumming, physical education, vocal music every week; with piano keyboard and French for the older kids.

Full day students are slated for an enrichment program in academics, science projects, other topics of interest suited to their age level and learning to speak in front of a group.

Since most children love to beat a drum, Brophy's love of music and music-making led to a drumming program taught by a certified drumming teacher who comes to Tom Thumb from Connecticut twice a month. From overturned white buckets, Brophy created drums and made drumsticks for the children that are not only very safe and soft, but color coordinated for the left and right hands. Drumming is wonderful for their focus with the added plus that every child is successful. The little drummers gave a tremendous performance at the recent graduation, drumming to their drumming teacher.

Brophy concentrates on binging life skills to young children, especially in their social/emotional development. Being able to get along with people, learning to share, knowing about school routine and how to behave in a classroom or at a theatrical presentation are all first steps in establishing a pattern of behavior. "Since Nancy and I have taught older children in the past, we know these are life lessons that carry on through all of school;" affirmed Gaspari.

Living and teaching outside the United States for 10 years has also shown Brophy there's not just one way to teach children.

As the driving force behind the school's music program, Brophy will request an appropriately adapted Saturday performance of "The Music Man", for example, performed by Spotlight Theatre, the acting company that uses her gymnasium and stage at night. She will have taught the songs and story beforehand.

Devoted to musical and performance art, she has also been the inspiration for jump-starting other people's projects like Pat Concilio and John Leonard's Spotlight Theatre, Olympians Theodora and Sorin Cepoi's Dynamic Gymnastics, Mara Hobel's Rising Stars, Roberta Humphrey's "Dance for Joy" and many educational opportunities for Tom Thumb kids over the years.

"In case of a medical emergency, the children are in good hands because we have an approved health policy with the Mohegan Fire Department whose EMT's are only 30 seconds away," explained Brophy. "In 36 years, we've only had two medical emergencies."

Applauding Brophy as a visionary in the field of education, Gaspari said, “She lays the foundation necessary for strong and healthy minds that are then ready to learn a cope with all that life has to offer.”

The Westchester County Proclamation on June 4 was the first public recognition of her work. How fitting that “Nancy Brophy Day” recognized the tireless effort of someone who could be a template for all dedicated and devoted teachers of our children.

