

# PortlandTribune

## Park Academy gives special recognition to founder

BY CLIFF NEWELL

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**It took Piper Park a while to figure out that Lake Oswego's Park Academy was being dedicated to her on Dec. 16 of last year.**

"Four kids had already given speeches before I understood what was happening," Park admitted. "It was a complete surprise to me. I thought I had been invited to a Christmas program."

It wasn't Christmas that Park Academy was celebrating. It was Piper Park. She was especially stunned by the huge color photo of her that was veiled by a red blanket. After the big surprise came the kudos.

Park got her big day because the school she founded seven years ago has made great strides in helping children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities.

"Piper is very deserving," academy director Paula Kinney said. "She is so passionate about the school. She knows all of the students and they know her. She is a very hands-on, very engaged founder because of her passion for kids with dyslexia."

Numerically, the story of Park Academy is nice but not overwhelming. It has grown from 14 students in 2005 to 49 students today.

Other numbers are much more impressive. Ninety-five percent of Park Academy's graduates have gone on to college. One now is studying at ITT, and the school just produced two national honor graduates.

"They were going to drop out," Park said.

In a nutshell, that describes what Park Academy is all about. It takes kids who were shunned and mocked at other schools and helps them find joy and accomplishment in education. The school helps students discover the brilliance beneath their disabilities.

"These kids needed to go where they could learn and feel safe," said Kim Barton, the school's registrar and director of recruiting. "We make sure they feel safe enough to be who they are."

"These kids come to us very wounded. They leave soaring like eagles," Kinney said. "Now they don't even like to go on holidays. They can't wait to get back. This school has been a saving grace to them. Before, academic success for them was not a possibility."

Park



Does Park Academy dumb things down? Heavens, no. In the school's classes students are up, moving and engaged. One reason is because the teachers are highly skilled in their fields. Another is that many of the teachers, such as Chris Morrison, were once like the kids.

"I love this school because it has exceptional, original, creative kids who think differently," he said. "I love teaching here because of the curriculum that is not compromised. Here I teach Napoleonic history, Candide, Tolstoy, Orwell, and Shakespeare. I've never had a group of kids who enjoyed Shakespeare more than the kids here."

In fact, some kids who are a terror for some teachers are a joy to Morrison.

"There's this one kid who has been sick and missed the first few days of the new year," Morrison said. "He's the wackiest kid in the world. I miss him like crazy."

Park Academy is like a book full of heart-warming stories, and it all began with Piper Park's personal journey with her own dyslexic son.

"My 24-year-old is very bright, very charismatic, and God made him very cute so it's hard to get mad at him," Park said. "He was very good at covering up that he couldn't read."

When she finally discovered what her son's problem was, Park had an extremely hard time finding an educational institution that could help him. The experience left her with a great heart for kids with dyslexia.

"I said, 'I'm going to do something about this for students and their parents,'" Park said. "The world needs these kids."

Thus, there is now Park Academy, where a huge photo of Piper Park hangs in the lobby, and also where hope grows by leaps and bounds every day.

An even bigger honor for Park than her big photo was the words of the students she has helped. Students like William J. Cheng:

"When I came to Park Academy I was weary and sad. But then one day I met you. The woman who sought to help all those who faced seemingly overwhelming obstacles in life. You had a genuine care for those who faced trouble in their life and sought to help them.

"To me, you were a friend who did not hesitate to say hello to me. You became a torch in this dark world and have made my world a little brighter."

For much more about Park Academy go to the website [www.parkacademy.org](http://www.parkacademy.org).

The school is located on the campus of Marylhurst University at 17600 Pacific Highway.