

# Day School Graduate is Grateful for Her Years at CJDS

Meryl Stark is a graduate of CJDS and is now in her second year at Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts, where she received a full four-year tuition scholarship. A few years ago we asked her to speak at our Open House so that prospective parents could see what our gradu-

ates look like. We would like to share her words with you, the Jewish community. This is another reminder why CJDS is a vital part of the community and a key to ensuring the Jewish continuity of our people.

My name is Meryl Stark, and right now I'm a senior in the

International Baccalaureate Program at East Mecklenburg High School. I'm sure most of you don't feel like doing math tonight, but that means I graduated from CJDS in 2001.

Like many other seniors, my main focus this fall is not jumping in piles of leaves, but managing

the pile of college applications and endless essays. Right now, my first choice is a very tiny engineering school with only 300 students. Many of my peers who have been in large public schools for their entire lives are perplexed as to why I would want to go to such a small school, but it all goes back to my experiences at the Day School and its personal environment.

Everyone at the Day School was like a family to me, from the teachers to my classmates, many of whom I had been with since the two-year-olds in preschool. Even though I don't see my old classmates very often, I still feel like I have a special bond with them from all of the experiences we shared together during our years at CJDS. I learned that it wasn't about the number of relationships I had, but the quality of them. My teachers genuinely cared about their students. I remember in Kindergarten I had this purse that I carried around with me everywhere. One day when I got home, I realized that I didn't have it and I was about as distraught as any five-year-old could be. My mom tried to offer me substitutes, but I wanted my purse. Even worse, I didn't know where it was. Later that evening, we got a call from my assistant teacher saying that she had found it at school, and she was on her way to our house to reunite me with my precious purse. Now I know it's not how much I cared about that purse, but how much Mrs. Headley cared about me. She could have just as easily left it on my desk for me to find the next day, but knowing how attached I was to it, she went the extra mile. This demonstrated the dedication that all of my Day School teachers had to their students, and yes, I still remember this so many years later.

While this atmosphere certainly made CJDS a very special place, it wasn't the only thing. I have so many fond memories of both Judaic and secular activities, from standing on my desk and shouting the words to the Jewish calendar song, to having lunch with Mayor McCrory, to writing and publishing a class poetry anthology, to participating in the Bracha Bee, to Sukkah-Hopping, to the baby guppies in our aquarium/terrariums, to slipper day, to winning the favor of the Kindergarteners in the mock presidential election because they had the most electoral votes, to eating lunch in the classroom before we had a lunchroom, and of course, the annual Chanukah per-



formances at the mall in front of Santa Land.

Most importantly though, I feel like the Charlotte Jewish Day School has given me the confidence that I have today.

I once read this joke in *Reader's Digest*:

Around the High Holidays, an army commander lined up his whole company and asked all of the Jews to step forward. He then told the Jews that they could have the days off for Rosh Hashanah. The next week, when it was almost Yom Kippur, the commander again lined up his troops and asked the Jews to step forward. Knowing that Jewish soldiers would get another day off, the entire company stepped forward. Smiling, the commander said, "Only those who were Jewish last week can be Jewish this week."

I don't think of myself as having two different identities when it's convenient—Jewish and secular; I'm not just Jewish on Shabbat and holidays. The Day School has taught me that being Jewish is my identity. It is so much a part of me that I can't separate it from who I am.

As we say in the Maariv, or evening, service each night "we rejoice in your Torah and Mitzvot because they are our life and lengthen our days. ..." CJDS is to credit for successfully intertwining Judaism into my total learning experience and making it such a part of me inside and outside the classroom. Judaic studies were not just an extracurricular activity; they were the basis for my entire education.

The physical aspects of CJDS have certainly changed since I was a student here. I was heartbroken when they tore down the house on the hill; I had so many happy memories in that building. But now the Day School is a "real school" with a cafeteria, lockers, Smart Boards, and even music classes. However, I know that inside it's still providing the same loving and nurturing environment. I am very thankful to my parents for making the decision to send my brother and me to Charlotte Jewish Day School. ☆



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