

# MAIN LINE SCHOOLS

## A lifeline to success for those who learn differently

By DAVID ROBINSON

While Lower Merion residents know Manayunk as a locus of nearby trendy restaurants and a killer hill for the annual bicycle race, they may additionally soon think of it as home to The Academy in Manayunk, located a few blocks from the Green Lane Bridge and Main Street.

The Academy, which opened last April, offers specialized, targeted educational strategies and learning opportunities for children with learning differences. The school serves grades one through eight, will add a ninth grade in the fall of 2008, and then follow through to high school graduation as the current students progress. Classes are small, teachers and assistants are many, and the focus is on reaching all types of learners with a variety of multi-sensory experiences.

What makes The Academy in Manayunk truly unique is the fact that it is licensed to use methods and materials of The Lab School of Washington, D.C., a premier learning difference school with 40 years of success at sending over 90 percent of their graduates on to college.

The Lab School is the brainchild of Sally Smith, mother of a child who learns differently. She could find neither a school nor educational program to teach him.

**“Too many kids struggle needlessly simply because the way in which they learn is incompatible with the way they’re being taught. Schools are filled with kids who have given up on themselves and conclude that they are ‘stupid.’ It’s tragic. It’s also painful — painful for the student, teacher, and parent.”**

-- MEL LEVINE

PROFESSOR OF PEDIATRICS AT THE U.N.C. MEDICAL SCHOOL IN CHAPEL HILL AND WORLD-RENOWNED AUTHOR, SPEAKER AND PIONEER IN THE EVALUATION OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES.



**A sign at The Lab School shows parents what reading is like for dyslexics: “This si wdat a learning bisadleb querson frepuehtly hasto conteub with wheu attemptiug ot nead a dook.”**

Smith had a master’s degree in psychology and cultural anthropology, had developed original techniques to help her son learn, opened The Lab School and never looked back as word spread of her success with students.

These days, The Lab School receives applications from 400 students around the country to fill 40 spots per year; Smith has now trained teachers for 26 years, is director of the master’s degree program in learning disabilities at

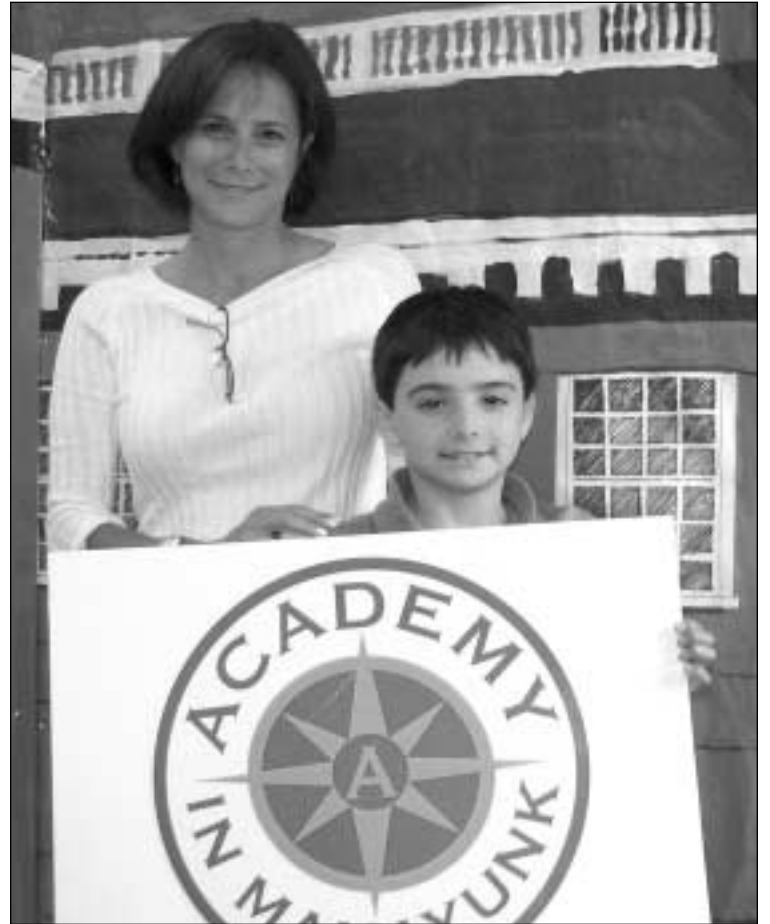
American University, authored eight books and has begun strictly licensing other schools to use her methods. Three teachers trained at The Lab School. Jackie Ford, Bari Goldstein and Speech Therapist Pam Greenblatt now teach at The Academy in Manayunk.

Students at The Academy have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and in most cases they have struggled terribly in mainstream schools. Lower Merion resident Amy Holtz, whose son Will attends the Academy, explained. “My husband and I didn’t feel he was making progress. We had him tested and the independent psychologist doing the testing enthusiastically recommended The Academy in Manayunk. Will and I were both nervous about coming to a new school, but adjusting and making friends only took a short while and now he loves it.”

Students with dyslexia, dyscalculia or auditory processing problems have difficulty processing and retrieving information. Sally Smith says of her students, “They are concrete learners, which means they have to do it, see it, touch it, smell it, taste it, to learn it.” She designed her school with less talk and more action. Her teachers believe that fun is the key to good teaching. Games and scenarios help students focus better.

One Lab School feature at The Academy is the use of academic clubs, where student’s imagination and enthusiasm are immersed in role playing and understanding the culture, social issues and problems of historical times. For a year, the children venture into lives of cavemen, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, knights and ladies of the Middle Ages, artists of the Renaissance, the American Revolution and the Industrial age. Graphic arts, music, dance, all come into play and hands-on activities allow for variety of learning.

“Cooking Italian food teaches students about Italy. Making a three-dimensional map with paint and sand, they learn more than if



DAVID ROBINSON/MAINLINETIMES

**Amy and Will Holtz at the Academy in Manayunk.**

they simply look at a map in a book,” Academy Director Pat Roberts explained. “Writing, math and perceptual skills are developed through multi-sensory materials and individualized instruction in academic periods. Diagnostic teaching helps teachers discover how each child learns best and how to accommodate the unique learning style.”

She also pointed out that the Academy is an ungraded school with “divisions” rather than grades. Elementary consists of 5 to 9-year-olds; intermediate from 10 to 13, and junior high from 12 to 15.

Nancy Blair, assistant director and director of admissions, added that a variety of research based reading and spelling options such as Foundations®, Wilson Reading Systems®, Lindamood-Bell®, Read Naturally® and RAVE-O (a

Tufts University program) are available to ensure students develop decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary development and comprehension skills.

During the recent summer session, as Will Holtz and his classmates were totally involved in a group working on a three-dimensional map with their teachers, Amy Holtz commented, “From the first day I came here, I felt the energy of this place. Will is learning to think on his feet. He’s making eye contact, speaking up and he actually started writing notes and leaving them on the refrigerator for my husband and me.”

The Academy in Manayunk is located at 169 Conarroe St., with parking across the street. The phone number is 215-483-2461 and the Web site is [www.aimpa.org](http://www.aimpa.org).