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## Guest Editor's Note

### *Special Issue in Honor of Sally L. Smith (1929 – 2007)*

#### *The Sally L. Smith Methodology for Infusing the Arts into the Education of Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD*

When Sally L. Smith claims, *We do magic... magic with a very solid base of knowledge* (Muheim, 2007), referring to her pioneering methodology for educating students of all ages with learning disabilities, those who do not know otherwise might think that she was speaking figuratively or exaggerating. But that is not the case. Sally Smith made magic on a daily basis. Children and adolescents with learning disabilities come to The Lab School in Washington (DC) or Baltimore and they have fun. They learn. They feel good about themselves. Adults with learning disabilities who did not get what they needed in school come to Sally's Night School and learn to read or write or to use a computer. Parents are reassured about their children's futures. Special education teachers feel effective because they are supported, inspired, and energized by their work.

Sally developed a methodology for making magic upon which she built a large educational institution with three campuses and an enrollment of nearly 500 students, Grades 1 through 12, intelligent students with moderate to severe learning disabilities. She trained legions of special education teachers including The Lab School faculty as well as graduate students in the Masters program in Special Education: Learning Disabilities she directed for decades at American University in Washington, DC. Sally figured out how to reliably engender the joy of learning in students of all ages, be they Lab School students or teachers.

Sally Smith's books tell us a lot about her methodology for making magic, starting with her best selling classic *No Easy Answers* (1995), followed by *The Power of the Arts: Creative Strategies for Teaching Exceptional Learners* (2001), and concluding with *Live It, Learn It: The Academic Club Methodology For Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD* (2005). There is much to be told, however, that cannot be found in her books. Those who studied and worked with Sally know things about her methodology that Sally did not know – things they have learned from years of applying her methodology.

This special issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* is a collection of writings by Sally Smith's colleagues. Some pieces are brief, personal reflections that illuminate some aspect of the experience of their shared journey with Sally. Others seek to illustrate more specifically how the author has successfully implemented Sally's theories and methods. In the first set of articles, the reader will find five complementary perspectives on Sally's contributions, including a Lab School artist (Mark Jarvis), a protege (Dr. Jennifer Durham), the Lab School Curriculum Coordinator (Dr. Mary Allen Edgerton), a parent (Kim Tilley), and a high school administrator (Meredith Reynolds).

Sally loved art, and she hired talented artists to teach at The Lab School (Smith, 2001). As Sean Rozsics puts it in his mesmerizing article describing what it is like to be an artist at The Lab School, *Doors vocalist Jim Morrison once defined art as anything that gave form to energy and in this respect Sally was incandescent*. The artists and the art classes are the heart of The Lab School, but Sally expected every teacher in every classroom, whatever program level and whatever the subject matter, to be creative and use artistic principles to bring vivacity, interest value and engagement, clarity, and memorability to the subject matter. The articles by Rebecca Alberts and Lisa Holley illustrate how they do that in their science classrooms.

The Academic Club Methodology provides a conceptual framework for social studies and humanities instruction (Smith, 2005). Noel Bicknell elucidates the method in its pure form for elementary age students in his article on the clubs, providing new insights and deeper understanding of this dynamic approach. Susie Wolk and Nancy Rowland expand on the methods for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade programming in their contributions.

Key to the success of The Lab School approach is the integrated role of the related services of Speech/

Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, and Psychological Services. Sally recognized the need for these intensive, individualized clinical services in helping to remove the developmental roadblocks that crop up to interfere with students' ability to benefit from the academic program. At The Lab School, direct, pullout services are provided as needed, plus the clinicians are members of the child's team developing, classroom-based interventions as well. Three articles explain how this works from the perspective of the three disciplines.

The final section tells the fascinating story of two mothers who wanted to create a new school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania based on Sally Smith's methodology. Many parents read Sally's books or visit The Lab School and wish there were such a program for their children in their hometowns. These brave adventurers actually made it happen and today the Academy In Manayunk, Pennsylvania, modeled on The Lab School of Washington, brings the magic to a different place with a different set of folks. The magic is happening because the principles of The Sally Smith Methodology transcend any one time, one place, and one set of people. Jackie Ford and Chris Herman add their perspectives to Patricia Morgan's and Nancy Blair's saga in the three articles in this final section.

Sally Smith would have been the first to have told the reader that without the extraordinary people who *are* The Lab School, nothing she might have said or written about would have had much value. The amazing artists, teachers, administrators, clinicians and support staff as well as parents and the fabulous students have actually made the magic happen, and much of the magic is not amenable for capture in words. For example, the magic of Karen Hanish and Shaun Miskell, and Steve Wolfe defies telling in this journal, but Sally knew it.

Luanne Adams  
Guest Editor

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# **The Sally L. Smith Methodology**



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## What Sally Knew and How I Found Out

*Mark Jarvis*

I am an artist and special education teacher at The Lab School of Washington. Twelve years ago I took a summer job teaching a drawing class at the school. I never intended to continue teaching in the fall. Then I met Sally Smith. At the time I knew art and I thought I knew teaching. I had no experience with children with learning differences.

Sally was keen on finding artists who she could infect with her special brand of passion and enthusiasm, and groom us to teach her students. She enticed us with the promise that we would change lives and possibly ourselves as well. We were free to innovate and design curricula for these kids that supported her theories about project-based, hands-on, creative education. We were allowed a great amount of freedom but woe to anyone who was uninteresting or uninspired. She would periodically call us in to her office to ask us what we were currently up to -- what excited us -- what got us up in the morning. She would critique and encourage and laugh and generally make you glad to be a teacher at a unique school.

All of Sally's work was born of the belief that learning styles are uniquely different and schools have chronically failed to honor these differences by designing exciting programs to engage these kids. Disenfranchised students who were suffering from an educational experience that misunderstood and marginalized them came to us clearly needing to be convinced that something would be different this time. Sally taught us that every aspect of our school, from the color of the walls, to the outdoor sculpture, to the joy in the classroom, should telegraph to the prospective student that this was going to be a new beginning.

In my third year of teaching art, Sally and I discussed how we could design a high school math curriculum that would make the subject less threatening and would utilize art to make it more compelling. Having seen the models created by students in the architecture program at the University of Maryland, it occurred to me that our kids might find that building a model of their dream house would be enticing.

For centuries people have been enchanted by miniaturization. Doll houses and model trains have filled many an imagination. These projects have allowed us to help the students with basic math, life skills, measurement, simple civil engineering, and design. This curriculum has enabled students to visualize in three dimensions the geometry concepts that previously eluded them. For some it provides an opportunity to experience something less rigorous but similar

to a freshman college course in architectural design. They developed a new vocabulary, learned to defend their work in critique, and most importantly, began the ongoing process of rehabilitating self esteem and awareness of the nature of their learning styles.

Of all the concerns that Sally had for the child with learning disabilities possibly none is more important than self esteem. She was eloquent in her description of what the interior life of this student is like: how fearful they are about being different, of being singled out as not being as capable as others. Never having been told what the nature of their learning disability is. Being given misleading information by educated adults who should know better. Being unable to articulate or advocate for themselves.

Seeing this as absolutely paramount in my job as a teacher of students with learning disabilities, I have learned to understand this intellectually but it was not until I had an experience totally unrelated to the classroom that my eyes were opened. Several years ago my wife suggested that we enroll in a swing dance class for fun and exercise. She was retired from a twenty-five year career as a professional modern dancer and thought this might be a kick. I always loved to dance in the honkytonks of my youth but never danced in any structured setting.

When we arrived at the class they were already under way. In a large room there were probably thirty couples. The men were arranged in an outer circle with the women facing them in an inner circle. These two circles would move independently of one another allowing the dancers to work with different partners. When I realized that I would not be dancing exclusively with my wife, who I could trust to tolerate my inadequacies, I began to feel uncomfortable but still game. The instructors began to explain and demonstrate the steps that were required of each of us. Everyone, especially my wife, was able to repeat these steps faithfully. I, in turn, did not have a clue. To make matters worse, I seemed to be the only one who did not.

The dance hall was swiftly becoming one of Dante's Seven Circles of Hell. My wife, who by now is on the other side of the hall with her partner, is doing just fine, thank you. She cannot rescue me. The poor woman who is now aligned with me is looking at me as if she may have to perform CPR on a total stranger. My ego, which is normally firmly intact, is starting to disintegrate. I continue to try to follow the

instructions that now seem to be coming faster. At some point I realize that my auditory processing has completely shut down and I can't understand a word this guy is saying. The anxiety and humiliation overwhelm me and I calmly, and in a dignified manner, speed walk out of the room.

My wife shortly catches up with me and, while sympathetic, she is not going to tolerate much self pity. She reminds me that it is no big deal but I am acutely aware of having spoiled her fun. It is interesting how immature a grown person can become when they feel inadequate, incompetent, and stupid.

On reflection, I cherish the memory of this experience in that it gave me a special bond with my learning disabled students. Imagine having these kinds of experiences every day. Imagine being able to count on it. Imagine how hard it must

be to get yourself up and ready for school knowing full well that there is a good chance that there will be some event that will make you feel inadequate, isolated and misunderstood. Now imagine receiving a report card every quarter to remind you and everyone you know just how poorly you did.

Sally Smith understood this completely. She reminded us constantly to remember who these kids are. She demanded that we find ways to help them have successful and rewarding experiences through art, music, dance, theater, architecture, photography, animation, and a shared joy of learning in a nonthreatening environment.

By the way, when I told Sally the story of my first swing dance class she thought it was hysterical. She suggested it as a prescription for all of her staff. I miss laughing with her.