

Meet Cover Director Lee Wagner

Nia House, Berkeley, California

Interview by Bonnie Neugebauer

With no intention of going into education, Lee Wagner followed his daughter to Nia House, starting there as a parent when his daughter was two years old. He worked for Far West Training Laboratories, visiting Head Start programs and then began substituting in the Oakland Public Schools, where he found himself focused on discipline all day. At that same time, he began volunteering at Nia House, a place where he found peace and purpose. "I was amazed by what kids are able to do and willing to do." From volunteer he became assistant preschool teacher, then preschool teacher, as he says, "working my way down to directing."

Nia House, translated to "purpose" in Swahili, is aptly named; for even at first visit there is great purpose evident in the work of the children and staff. Founded in 1974 by Tia Waller, and later Sandy Krestan, both from Cincinnati, Nia House has a long history of struggling to find a site. Financial constraints and budget cuts necessitated several early moves, but the current location, in converted school district bungalows surrounding a grassy play yard once a park, creates a welcoming indoor/outdoor environment. It looks like Nia House will be here for a while.

Initial funding for the program came with many strings attached. When this funding disappeared, Nia House had to bring in fee-paying parents. At that point the program became more diverse both economically and ethnically, which enriches the program. Forty per cent of the families receive scholarships based

on income, size, and available slots. Parents must be full time students or employees. Because funding is now received only from the City of Berkeley and parent fees; fundraising is another source of income. "This enables us to do what we need to do to run the program as we want to."

Nia House is a member of American Montessori Society with two certified teachers. "Montessori education has been misunderstood for so long, partly because it was originally only available to the upper class. That stigma remains. In California, we were the first to offer a Montessori education to low income children, whatever their family income level. We started serving 'only' poverty level families.

"I'm sold on Montessori — the individuality of it, the consistency, doing the presentations consistently over and over, independence. The fact that children are expected to own their own environment, that is the Montessori classroom. It's like a laboratory. Much of the attention to behavior and discipline happens through decisions about what materials are out, how the material is presented, and where.



Adults put things into the classroom that will support learning through self-discovery. It's like a triangle with children at the top, and the classroom and the adults on the bottom supports.

"We are aware that children learn in different ways even though material is presented in a consistent way. Some kids even learn to read upside down and backwards. Materials should be presented to children when they are most interested. They should see and hear and smell the presence of the information around them, so that when they decide to be interested, it's not really new."

In addition to Lee and Sandy, staff include: Lisa Baranco-Smith, Jeanie Maier, Tita Sath Lang, Phea Sath, Cinnamon Jackson, Eve Uberman, and Kay Yoshida. "We want to be sure to serve low income families, so our fees

are low. We have very high quality staff, but they are paid less than most Montessori teachers. We are working on compensation.

“Yet our staff do stay here — for other reasons. They see the unfolding of children who leave here confident, happy, and ready for public schools. Most of our children perform above grade level. The lure of free public school kindergarten is strong, but we encourage parents to keep their kids here for kindergarten — that’s when it all comes together. Children come back. We get to see what kind of people our children have become. We get to hear their stories about their time here at Nia House.

“We run into alumni every day. There’s no need to advertise any more. We have a long waiting list.”

Lee spends a great deal of time out in the community as director of the Starlings Volleyball Club in Oakland. He started the program when his daughter was interested in playing volleyball and they began looking for affordable programs. He sees the club as a hand up for girls with determination

and skill. Volleyball is a great opportunity for girls to win college scholarships — his daughter Asha earned a volleyball scholarship to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

A frequent visitor to the public schools, Lee likes to drop in and see how the Nia House children are doing. His wife is a vice principal, so that might be another reason. “I like being the director as long as I have time with the kids. Right now I spend one and a half hours a day with children. I need that.

“It’s like a family reunion here, with related staff, staff children and grandchildren in the program, former children bringing their own children.” Along with the high level of purpose, there is a great feeling of comfort here.

Looking back over the struggles to bring Nia House to its current stability, Lee remarks: “Our struggles deepened our determination to succeed and strengthened our purpose and goal to serve the needs of children. As we prepare to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Nia House, our history goes on; we continue to improve and to enrich everyone involved.”



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