After School

Alumni notes



MIKE ISHMAN

Sarah Ishman ’09, paralegal in 2019
We are our choices

Sarah Ishman ’09 ran the school’s Judicial Committee with great skill, administering due process and rule of law with fairness and compassion. Now she’s a paralegal at the law firm of Perry Shore Weisenberger & Zemlock. Sarah arrived at The Circle School “terrified” in 2004. She remembers:

The summer before ninth grade, I found myself at an admissions meeting at The Circle School. I think most kids find the idea of do-what-you-want-when-you-want fun and exciting. For a girl who was nearly perfect at doing what other people want, I found it terrifying. I couldn’t tell you what exactly I was looking for, but I did know what I didn’t want: I didn’t want my mom to be treated like the customer, instead of me. I took what, at the time, felt more like a plunge than a leap of faith, and enrolled in The Circle School.

I spent the next five years at The Circle School cultivating friendships that will be lifelong; reading; diving into photography; learning about similar schools, and then relocating to Washington (state) for six months to observe a new one; organizing, fundraising, and executing a field trip to Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. From the beginning I took a heavy interest in the day-to-day governing of the school, running School Meeting and the Judicial Committee. I experienced great support, love, community, and respect. I took classes at a local college and read stories to little ones, I laughed, I leapt, I breathed, I made mistakes, and I found great contentment.

The most meaningful thing I learned from The Circle School was that we are our choices. Being given the chance and space to have ownership over mine has made all the difference. I feel the effects of attending The Circle School every day in the choices I make. •



SEAN MEMMI ’09

Robin Stillwater ’08
Nurse, minister, Navy officer

Robin Stillwater ’08 worked for Americorps as a live-in caregiver for adults with developmental disabilities, and then earned a degree in nursing (2013), became a licensed RN, and worked as an emergency room nurse for two years. More recently, Robin earned a BA in religion and a master’s degree in divinity with concentrations in interreligious engagement and racism (Union Theological Seminary). Her final project won an award from the Islam, Social Justice, and Interreligious Engagement Program (ISJIE).

In 2017 Robin was commissioned as a U.S. Navy officer, and is now in a Clinical Pastoral Education Residency with the Veterans Administration.

While here, Robin was a Medical Responder, Judicial Committee Chair, Cooking Corporation officer, and member of Chore Committee and Natural Resources Group Corporation.

Robin says “Going to The Circle School has given me the strength and self knowledge to do what is right for me, even if it is against the norm.” •



Jesse Bert ’96 worked at three different internships during his last three years at The Circle School, all related to metalwork. He earned a BFA from Rochester Institute of Technology and a master’s degree (MFA) from East Carolina University, both in Jewelry and Metalsmithing. In addition to his studio work (which you can see at left and at jessebert.com), Jesse is Adjunct Professor of Jewelry and Metals Design at Technological Institute of Monterrey. Jesse’s primary work format is sculptural jewelry incorporating recycled and found objects. About living in Mexico, Jesse says “When I’m not teaching or working on new pieces, I love to be outside. I tend to my cactus collection or spend time exploring the Mexican countryside and hiking in the mountains.”

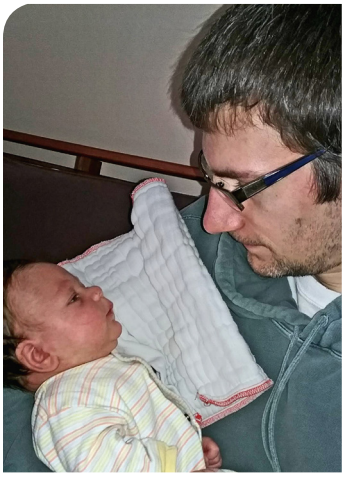


“NOLA” (2018) Boxwood, copper, silver, ebony, maple, applewood, eggshell, hand-stamped, die-formed

Jesse says “one of the most enjoyable and influential things” he did at The Circle School was a three-day sailboat expedition on the Chesapeake Bay, at Echo Hill Outdoor School. •

Jesse Bert ’96
Metalwork in Mexico





Austin Vogt ’02 and Felix, 2018
Dad, PhD, medical researcher
Played cards a lot at school

Austin Vogt ’02 enrolled when barely out of diapers, stayed for 16 years, and later served as a school Trustee. After leaving The Circle School, Austin studied at Allegheny College on a merit-based scholarship, majoring in biochemistry with a minor in English.

Now with a master’s in biomedical sciences and a PhD in biochemisty and molecular biology, Austin is a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, “working on the structural biology of a protein complex involved in chromatin maintenance (protecting and storing DNA). The research has implications in aging and cancer.”

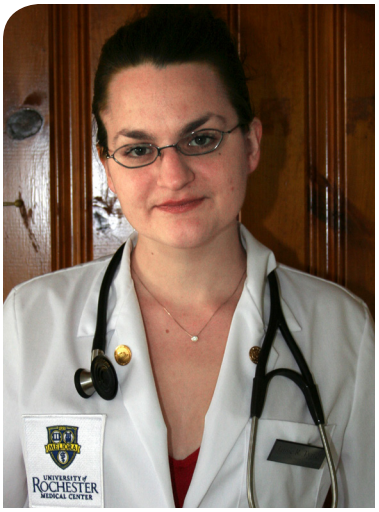
How did The Circle School prepare him for college? Here’s what he wrote from graduate school in 2010: *At The Circle School I played cards, attended School Meeting, talked with friends, hung out with my brother, took math classes, played role-playing games, and played and worked outside as part of the grounds crew.*

Graduate school is itself a reflection of The Circle School’s philosophy of self-directed learning. More so than undergraduate work, I’ve spent the majority of my time here designing my own course of study: choosing both what I want to research and how I want to approach that research. The critical thinking skills, self-motivation, and time management that are all inherent to The Circle School’s program are essential to the work I’m doing now, and I can’t think of a better way to prepare for graduate school.

In 2019, Austin writes: *I am also now married and have a child. Felix takes up a lot of my free time at the moment, but before Felix, and on occasions even now, I have dabbled in calligraphy, carpentry, and growing an orchard. My latest projects were a built-in dresser/wardrobe/desk for Felix’s room, re-doing fencing around four apple trees, and staking up some raspberries.* •



On a field trip 1989



Jamie Tyrrell '00 in 2010
Stage and stethoscope

Jamie Tyrrell '00 attended The Circle School for seven years, and then went on to Franklin and Marshall College on a full merit-based scholarship. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and *magna cum laude*, with a double major in neuroscience and theater, and spent summers paid to study Shakespeare in England. Returning to Harrisburg, Jamie worked in theater as a director, stage manager, and actor. More recently Jamie worked in the chemical engineering department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, taught MCAT classes (medical school entry exam prep), and entered medical school at the University of Rochester.

Jamie's mother, Marianne Tyrrell, comments: *In public school, Jamie excelled at everything, yet she was bored, frustrated, and learning bad lessons about gauging her success by her ability to jump through hoops created by others. At The Circle School she was set free to find her own boundaries, free to fly, free to be challenged. That is why I chose The Circle School for my children when they were little.* •

Assembling an excavated dog skeleton, 1996





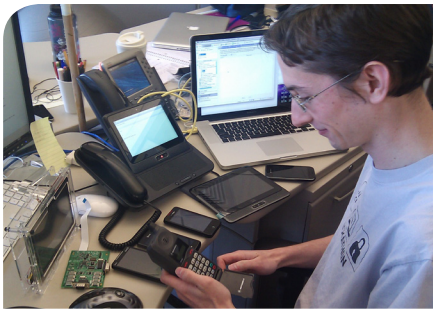
In his "closet office" at school, January 2005

Kyle Boran '05 attended The Circle School for three years, and then went on to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, graduating in 2009 with a degree in Management Information Systems. A year later, Kyle was a software engineer at Cisco Systems, where he is "entrusted with ensuring the quality of software that is used to secure an estimated 150 million computers worldwide."

Kyle traces the theme of trust to his Circle School days: *What I remember most from The Circle School is trust. Even before I was enrolled, I expressed an interest in computers. Before long I was working on improving systems at the school. I mustn't have been enrolled for more than a month before I was given the password to the school website.*

At many schools you would find the computers locked down, available to students only for approved uses. The idea of a teen-aged student being in nearly full control of a school computer network is an unusual one. Yet, this relationship worked. In my time I tried to rebuild and improve nearly every system in the school, physically and virtually. I learned a lot and benefited both myself and other students.

In many ways I'm given flexibility in my job, because software engineering requires innovation. There is no textbook for innovation. You need to find things out as you go along and figure out how to do things better. You may need to take risks sometimes. In both school life and work life, this requires trust. •



Kyle Boran '05 at Cisco, circa 2010
150 million computer users trust him



Laura Owens ’13 in 2019
Associate Scientist
Energetiq Technology Inc

Laura Owens ’13 enrolled when she was eight years old, stayed for ten years, and then went on to college. Reflecting now on her Circle School experience:

I recognize profound opportunities I’ve had, and character traits I possess, thanks to my time at The Circle School. Most notable and appreciated in my recent college experience is my insatiable intellectual curiosity and sense of responsibility for my own education. When I take classes, I approach them with the mindset of wanting to get the most out of the learning experience, regardless of whether that class relates to my major or career goals.

In my last semester at college, I took a math proofs class intended for math majors, even though I’d never taken geometry. It was the most challenging course I undertook. I also took a world politics class where the professor assumed I was a political science major until the final day of class—and was offended to discover that I was a chemistry major. Although I wasn’t required to take either of these courses for my major, I approached them as opportunities to broaden my horizons. I have The Circle School to thank for these personally fulfilling academic experiences, because I grew up in a culture where we explored topics not because there was an expectation that students must learn them to be successful, but because we were genuinely curious about these subjects. This resulted in me having little training in traditional topics like mathematics and literature previous to college, but a keen ability to follow my passions and seek out answers to my own questions. •



Studying gravity in 2003 (above) and at the Hanford LIGO gravity wave detector in 2017



Sheridan Zivanovich enrolled for three middle school years, with homeschooling before and after, followed by a computer science degree from University of Pittsburgh and a job with Google as a software engineer. Sheridan writes about useful skills he cultivated at The Circle School:

Self-management. At The Circle School I managed my own time, with priorities dictated by my interests, often learning to play the drums, serving as a medical responder, and performing physics experiments. Despite my lack of background in academic subjects, I excelled in these classes during my undergraduate studies, because I understood how to manage my time and efforts. This continues to serve me in my career as a software engineer.

Self-efficacy. I became confident that I could succeed at previously unfamiliar tasks, like writing a college-level paper, taking a final, or planning a project.

Communication. Discussion with friends wasn’t limited to lunchtime gossip (though there was plenty). We proposed and discussed changes to the lawbook, monetary appropriations, and certification processes. Participation in school governance necessarily caused me to develop an appreciation for careful wordsmithing and precise communication. Being able to clearly and precisely articulate yourself, and understand the articulations of others, is an invaluable skill in any aspect of life that requires interpersonal interaction—which, as it turns out, is most aspects of life, even in highly technical workplaces. •



Sheridan Zivanovich, software engineer at Google
Second-place medalist, September 2018
First-place, February 2019

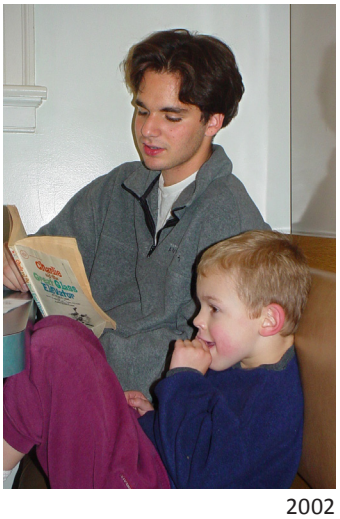


Connor Tyrrell '04 in 2019
Business & Technology Consultant
Marathon to Athens

Connor Tyrrell '04 started at The Circle School when he was seven years old. Having heard there was no dress code, on his very first day he wore pajamas. The funny part is that nobody really noticed. Near the end of the day someone asked if that was pajamas he was wearing. Connor said yes, and that was the end of it. That must have been fine with Connor, because he stayed for 11 years. As he says, he was "one of many students who truly grew up at The Circle School."

Connor was an entrepreneur from early on, starting with sales of origami at school when he was eight years old, and progressing to an online tee shirt business at 16 years old (doing about $25,000 in sales over a few years). He also got a job as a ski instructor at Ski Roundtop.

From The Circle School, Connor went on to Babson College, which is internationally renowned for entrepreneurial leadership. At Babson, Connor was a four-year varsity athlete and graduated *magna cum laude*. He double-concentrated in Economics and Information Technology Management, in which he was named as Babson's top student.



2002

After graduating from Babson, Connor setttled in Boston, where he is currently a Principal Consultant for Slalom Consulting, a business and technology firm. He has run three marathons, including the "authentic marathon"—in Greece, from Marathon to Athens. He is also founder of the website BrewGene.com—you tell it what beers you like, and it suggests others.

At The Circle School, Connor was often kicking a soccer ball, throwing a football, playing Capture The Flag, hiking the Appalachian Trail, or "doing anything else my friends wanted to do." As he got older, he became more involved in school government, at various times serving as School Meeting Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary, and as a member of the Admissions Committee and Computer Corporation. With the Natural Resource Group, a school corporation, Connor planned and went on many hikes, including some major expeditions lasting a week or more.

While loving life in Boston, Connor says he hasn't forgotten his "true roots at The Circle School." From Boston, Connor participated in a Circle School committee to redesign the school's governance structure in 2007, including creation of a Board of Trustees. Connor was elected the first President of the Board, a position he held for 11 years.

Inventing a new adjective, Connor reflects in 2019 on something he describes as particularly "circle-schooly:" *I love learning new things and I'm very good at teaching myself things.* •



In the sandbox, 1993



Amy Zecha '02 attended for three years. After The Circle School, Amy earned an associates degree at Harrisburg Area Community College, and a BA and MA in International Economic Relations at American University. With a specialization in East Asia and China, Amy worked in Beijing for the US Agricultural Foreign Service. She then returned to Harrisburg where she worked for Pennsylvania's Office of International Business Development as an International Business Marketing Executive.

Working with international companies considering relocation to Pennsylvania, Amy says she uses "the skills I honed at The Circle School on a daily basis. I am thankful for my inquisitiveness, flexibility, and communication and teamwork skills, which I learned and used while at The Circle School."

Remembering her Circle School years, here is what Amy wrote:

My first year was a period of intense growth. The freedoms and holistic approach of The Circle School were not only new and unusual, but also frightening. I had been taught that to succeed, one only needs to follow orders and work hard. At The Circle School, the lack of direct orders was initially overwhelming. However, by the end of my first year, I had come to appreciate and even to thrive in my new environment. I had learned to appreciate the opportunities The Circle School offers, and I was determined to become an active member of my school community and take control of my education. I was Chairperson of the Art Corporation (after reviving it from a dormant state), School Meeting Secretary, Judicial Committee Chairperson, and member of the Admissions and Office Committees.

During my years at The Circle School, my confidence soared and my curiosity and thirst for learning blossomed. I felt like I could do anything. I had transformed from a shy, quiet girl who worked hard and listened to her teachers without question, to an empowered, strong-willed person, ready to break conventional boundaries and pursue my education as I saw fit. •



Hladini Mensah '09 in 2010
Costa Rica to Colorado

Hladini Mensah '09 was homeschooled through 8th grade, and then attended The Circle School for four years. In fall 2009 she entered an environmental design internship program in Costa Rica, where she lived in a small village while studying green building techniques. There she helped build a house using the wattle and daub technique (a mixture of clay, sand, straw, and cow manure built onto bamboo frames), and was a volunteer teacher at the local elementary school. After a bookstore job to raise some college money, Hladini earned a degree at University of Colorado, majoring in Environmental Design.

At The Circle School, Hladini says she "did what I enjoyed." She joined and held leadership positions in various committees and corporations, including the Music and Art Corporations, and the Library and Aesthetics Committees. She was one of a small group who worked for two years to study, plan, and fundraise for a two-week field trip to Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. Hladini also helped organize groups to study Spanish, mediation, and fashion design.

Hladini reflects that "The Circle School taught me how to learn, and helped me discover that I am creative, dedicated, responsible, hard-working, and community-oriented." •



Cabinetry, 2008



Dan Schiffrin '04 in 2009
The art of finding happiness

Dan Schiffrin '04 attended The Circle School for four years and earned a BA in literary arts at Brown University. Dan proposes that a true education is "the art of finding happiness." His reflections:

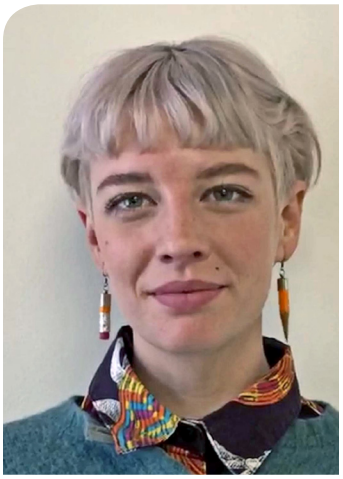
The Circle School gave me the time to figure out who I needed to be, to be happy. See, the thing that people don't understand is that education isn't about facts and theories, techniques and viewpoints. It's about learning who you need to be, to be a happy, fulfilled person. The Circle School gave me the gift of time to figure out how to exist in a satisfying way. And because the facts and theories are neither spoon-fed to you, nor forced down your throat, you learn how to learn. This, far more than history, science, and literature is useful because it is adaptive. And everything I learned, I learned because either I wanted to know it, or because I needed to know it to get what I wanted.

Really, what else is worth knowing? What you want to do and what you will need to do to get what you want—this seems to me, complete. Perhaps you want a story—learn to read. Perhaps you want to meet a girl—learn to flirt. Perhaps you want to carry a friend—learn to lift. Perhaps you want to go to college—master the SATs. At any moment I have the power to transform my entire life completely, irrevocably, and instantly. I get to choose who to be, what to do. I think The Circle School facilitates an understanding of this truth, while traditional education seems to undermine it.

My education at The Circle School was a product of the freedom of time and choice. Time and choice seem like inalienable rights, because they are completely indispensable for a true education, which I believe is the art of finding happiness. •

At school 2003





Taylor Kuyk-White '06 in 2018
Life based education

Taylor Kuyk-White '06 attended for four years "after a number of turbulent years in public school, struggling with school authority." Now she reflects:

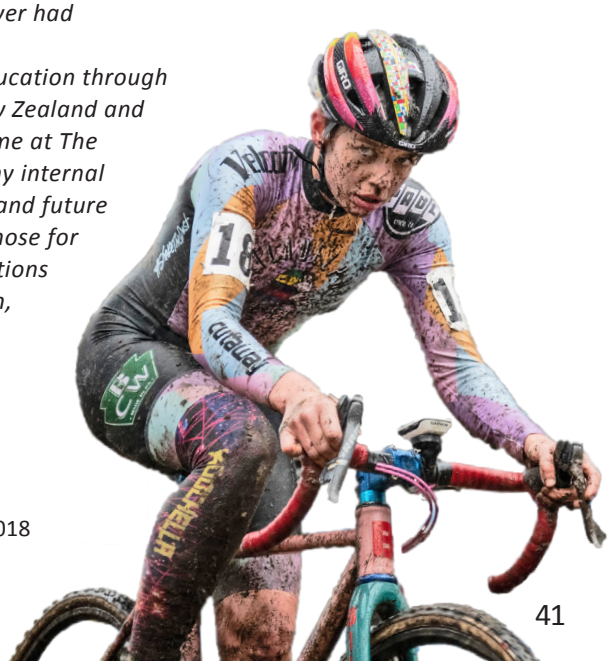
Being immersed [at The Circle School] where an inherent trust of children and youth is a guiding value was a bit of a shock! I could not believe that I would be permitted to spend my days playing video games should that be my choice. I did so, in fact, and The Circle School passed the test. Shortly after, the appeal faded and I spent my time exploring a budding passion for photography, discovering new music, planning and participating in overnight backpacking trips, and immersing myself more deeply in the joy of friendship than I had ever had the opportunity before.

After The Circle School, I continued my life based education through solo travel, sailing, and outdoor adventure. Time in New Zealand and Australia crystallized many lessons taught during my time at The Circle School, the most significant being deep trust of my internal compass that allows me to make choices about my life and future with confidence and joy. My next chapter brought me to Prescott College, an institution I chose for the similarity of values and environment. For four years I pursued adventures and conversations that sharpened my sense of purpose and understanding the world I wanted to participate in, graduating with a degree in social justice and outdoor education.

In 2019, Taylor now lives in Philadelphia where she has runs a cycling program for youth, "guided by the same principles that helped me build a path as a teen in The Circle School." With the Bicycle Coalition Youth Cycling Program, Taylor says she has found a way to combine her passions for competitive cycling, learning through adventure, and mentoring youth. •



First Place, Pro Womens 30+
2018 USA Cyclocross
National Championship



Competing in NBX Gran Prix 2018



Jyles Yates ’00 in 2010
Vermont adventures

Jyles Yates ’00 attended The Circle School for seven years. In 2002 he “moved to Vermont and married my true love, Peg.” He works “40 hours a week as a carpenter and 80 hours a week as an outdoor adventurer.”

Jyles’ reflections, excerpted from a letter to the school community: *Vermont is a place known for people who are very independent, and full of do-it-yourselfers. Peg and I call our house YOU-University. You think of something you want to try and you try it. Sound familiar?*

I’m at a point in my life where I’m confident with who I am and content with my past experiences. I was raised to take life and its many possibilities, dangers, and wonders, and run with it.

I received the best education available. I was taught how to live by my own choices, and was accepted and respected by my peers and teachers. I wasn’t afraid to live outside the box. I believe my childhood was the best it possibly could have been. •

Think of something and try it





Michael Wenzel ’99 (top left)
with classmates in Cairo

Michael Wenzel ’99 attended for three years—“one of the primary building blocks for who I am today.” After The Circle School, Michael attended the Culinary Institute of America and Harrisburg Area Community College, “paying his bills” by working as a preschool teacher, nanny, personal chef, and tutor.

After graduating from Temple University with a degree in Anthropology, Michael entered a linguistic anthropology program in Cairo, Egypt, where he studied “the maintenance of Upper Egyptian identity [despite] mass emigration and NGOs.”

Michael reflects: *[My Circle School years] are a constant influence on my life. My drive to succeed, as well as my internal strength and confidence, were built [there]. Those elements are more valuable to me now than anything I learned in a classroom. I spent my days [at The Circle School] flipping pancakes in the kitchen, being coerced by younger kids into playing football, attending meetings, and engaging in countless discussions. I miss the serious talks, the goofing around, the silly jabbering, and the good old-fashioned foolishness that everyone enjoyed regardless of age.* •



Cole Lightner ’07 in 2009
1st Battalion 9th Marines

Cole Lightner ’07 attended for five years and and then enlisted as a U.S. Navy Corpsman attached to the 1st Battalion 9th Marines, part of a quick-reaction Marine Expeditionary Unit. In the first of two deployments, Cole visited Haiti, Spain, Djibouti, Dubai, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Greece, and Croatia. Cole’s favorite memories of The Circle School are practicing and teaching martial arts—“still my passion.” Visiting school on leave in 2010, Cole said:

The Circle School was the first place where I could stand up on my own two feet. I learned to make a choice and accept what came from it. It has helped me attain things that others would consider unattainable, especially in difficult conditions—like 135 degrees in Kuwait with a hundred pounds on my back. Military life is a wake-up call for most people, but for me it was a natural stepping-stone after The Circle School. •

Leading martial arts training at school, 2006





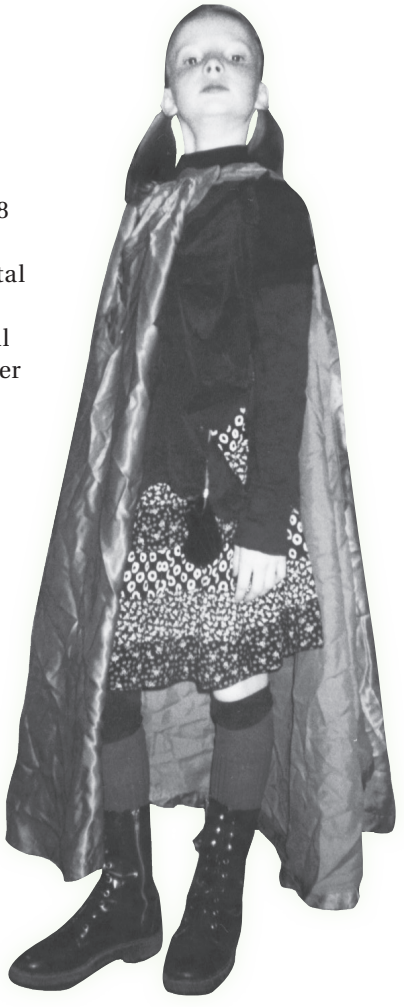
Jancey Mallory '04 and family, 2019
What I want for my daughter

Jancey Mallory '04 enrolled at three years old in 1988 and stayed for 16 years. After leaving The Circle School, Jancey earned a BS in Applied Developmental Psychology and a Master of Social Work degree from University of Pittsburgh. Later, after years of professional practice, Jancey became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW).

Jancey has worked in a variety of settings, including Western Psychiatric Institute, with "children and families facing enormous challenges due to poverty and trauma."

In 2010, Jancey wrote: *One of the most important skills I learned at The Circle School was how to solve problems. At work, I engage in problem-solving all day long. Each family I work with comes with a unique set of factors—strengths, weaknesses, values, goals, resources—that I need to consider to create a solution that works for them.*

At The Circle School I got plenty of practice solving problems. For example, when I was 11 years old, my friends and I made up a game called "Medieval Times" that involved building forts and sword fighting with sticks. Pretty quickly after the game started, someone pointed out that stick-fighting was dangerous and we had to come up with a safe way to do it, or stop playing. I remember thinking, "There is no way to make stick-fighting safe." But we did. We created detailed safety rules including things like how many feet away from bystanders stick-fighters had to be, and how many inches the diameter of the sticks could be. We engaged in the same process that I do at work today as an adult: we considered the unique factors of the situation, developed potential solutions, tested those solutions, and then analyzed their effectiveness.



Ready for Medieval Times 1997
Stick-fighting rules remain
in the lawbook today

In 2019, Jancey says: *I recently became a parent, which led me to reflect on my education and think about the kind of education I want for my daughter. Having completed college and grad school, and having a career, I'm living proof that kids who grow up without grades, tests, or being forced to take classes, can achieve at least the same outcomes as their peers who went to traditional schools. Knowing that, I would rather my daughter get to spend her childhood doing the things she loves and finds satisfying, over a childhood of mandatory classes and homework that for the most part she doesn't enjoy.*

Besides, it seems impossible to know now what subjects and skills are going to be most useful and relevant by the time my daughter is an adult. Will it be machine learning, or sustainable agriculture? Or maybe something that hasn't even been invented yet! It doesn't make sense to me to try to guess what subjects will be important, and then spend 12 years teaching her things that might be irrelevant by the time she grows up. What does *make sense to me, is for my daughter to spend her childhood discovering and exploring things that interest her, and participating in a democratic community; and through those experiences, developing skills that I am confident will be relevant to her life after school.* •



Jancey, 5 years old, is in the front row,
2nd from right, 1991