

Sara Wilford Retires

PSYCHOLOGY FACULTY, 1982–2014

DIRECTOR, EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER, 1982–2003 & ART OF TEACHING PROGRAM, 1985–2014

BY GILLIAN GILMAN CULFF '88

Sara Wilford directed the Early Childhood Center for two decades and the graduate Art of Teaching Program for nearly three—touchstones of an extraordinary career dedicated to children's learning and growth.

Jean-Paul Maitinsky '88, MSEd '89 still remembers his first meeting with Sara Wilford. He was a new student in the Art of Teaching Program, and they sat down to talk inside Wilford's office at the Early Childhood Center (ECC). "The afternoon sun was streaming through the windows overlooking the playground," says Maitinsky. "We sat at a round coffee table and discussed what it would mean to be a student teacher, how to observe children, to be sensitive to the nuances of separation, play, language development, and to connect my studies with the life of the center. I somehow knew she was more than a teacher."

As Sarah Lawrence celebrates 30 years of the Art of Teaching Program this spring, Wilford '72, who founded and directed the program until her retirement last June, will be stepping down from her role as program adviser. During her long and influential

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career at Sarah Lawrence, Wilford also directed the Early Childhood Center for 21 years, served on the psychology faculty for three decades, and co-founded the Child Development Institute (CDI), for which she remains an adviser 27 years later.

"Describing Sara to those who do not know her is rather daunting," says Jan Drucker, longtime friend, colleague on the psychology faculty, and CDI co-founder. "How to convey the intensity of her blue-eyed gaze as she probes an issue, brainstorms a challenge, or listens to a child or adult student? How to capture the mix of intellectual and psychological understanding she brings to all she does? How to characterize her unflagging interest and energy?"

Drucker recalls how, just months after graduating from the Center for Continuing Education, Wilford slipped naturally into the role of ECC head teacher. "And an exceptional one," Drucker says, "with a way of relating to her very young students, and their parents, with a balance of warmth, respect, and curios-

ity that made her a wonderful model for her college student assistants as well."

In 1985, having returned to direct the ECC after seven years in the Bronxville public schools, Wilford was asked to create the Art of Teaching Program. "She established a unique educational program for teachers that expressed the values of the College and its pedagogy," says former Dean of Graduate Studies Susan Guma. "In it, theory and practice are seamless."

To her graduate students, Wilford was a devoted teacher and mentor. "She always made time for her students and had wise and thoughtful advice that was delivered in a kind and gentle way," says Elinor Guma Coiro MSEd '01, Susan Guma's daughter. "Even when her door was closed, it was always open for us ... and we all knew it. Her children's literature course was one of my favorites, mainly because her passion was palpable."

Mary Hebron, interim director of the Art of Teaching Program, has worked closely with Wilford for more than 30 years and describes her as "an incomparable colleague and friend" who has long championed equal access to high-quality education.

"What is central in knowing Sara, I believe, is her amazing work and persistence in bringing to children and families the best that schools and education can offer," Hebron says. "I believe the values that are the foundation of Sara's legacy are visible in the work she has done in bringing into the ECC and into the Art of Teaching Program a diversity of persons that reflects our society, always with the hope of building institutional practices that enable social justice." 🍌



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