

Educator returns to his roots in Louisville

Proponent of progressive education had beginnings on Sherwood Avenue

By Dorothy Taylor

John Delautre always hoped that one day he could return to his roots in Louisville. He grew up in the Highlands, and after graduating from Seneca High in 1972, he left to pursue a career in education which took him around the country and the world.

After more than 30 years, the perfect opportunity arose, and this passionate proponent of progressive education is back as the Head of St. Francis School in Goshen.

Delautre's family has had a presence in the Cherokee Park area of the Highlands for over seventy years. Delautre's grandmother, Lelah Bohrer, lived on Alta Avenue and Everett Avenue. As a child, Delautre lived for a time, on Sherwood Avenue and attended Longfellow Elementary on Duker Avenue (now The dePaul School).

During the '60s and '70s, he remembers helping his great-uncle and aunt, Sam and Rose Arnett, work on some of the rental houses they owned on Cherokee Road.

Delautre's favorite house was the Arnett's home, at 933 Cherokee Road, the one with the cupola and leaded glass in the block before Cave Hill Cemetery.

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An antiquarian by nature, Delautre loved the expansive mural of Mediterranean island life on the dining-room walls, painted in the '30s when inexpensive labor allowed for hand-painted murals instead of wallpaper.

“I felt a connection to the house and to the neighborhood,” says Delautre. “Exposure to the architecture of the Highlands made a huge impression on me. The aesthetic values of the late-Victorian period produced an amazing living space. The Highlands was the part of town I always talked about when I traveled. I felt at home in other cities that, like the Highlands, had areas which flourished during the Victorian period.”

Delautre's mother, Jean, still lives in the Cherokee Triangle, where he and his

family like to spend time, both now and on vacations in the years prior to their return.

Delautre and his wife, Anne, met while teaching at the Town School in Manhattan. She performed with a modern dance company in New York City, and was a professor of dance at the University of Memphis before the family's move to Louisville. The Delautre daughters, ages 10 and 14, attend St. Francis School and St. Francis High School respectively.

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When asked about early influences, Delautre tells of a trip he took the summer after graduating from high school with his good friend, Tom Sweets, and the late Amelia Brown Frazier.

“Tom's 'cousin Amelia' suggested he take a friend along to make the trip more fun for him,” says Delautre. The trio spent a month and a half in Africa and two weeks in South America. “I found a whole world out there – a world of new possibilities. The experience showed me that I could learn from other cultures and gave me the confidence and desire to travel.”

Over the years, Delautre has had many chances to experience more of the world. Fluent in French and an admitted Francophile, he lived and worked for three years in Paris. He's worked at all kinds of private, independent, schools in the Northeast, Miami, and Memphis. Along the way, he's become a strong believer in progressive education, a movement that had its roots during the early part of the twentieth century.

“The over arching idea of progressive education was forged from the collaboration of John Dewey and Francis W. Parker in turn-of-the-century Chicago,” says Delautre. They thought American education had gone wrong because it was based on the mechanistic, factory model – preparing children to be good workers, not necessarily good citizens. “The difference between what had gone before, and in many cases what has gone since, is that there is a civic component to progressive education. Our ultimate goal is to cultivate the potential of every individual child, but toward a higher



PHOTO: M J KIRTLEY

Above, John Delautre with his wife Anne, at 933 Cherokee Road, a home formerly owned by his great-uncle and aunt, where Delautre found early inspiration in the architecture and hand-painted murals on the dining room walls.

At right, Delautre enjoys time with students at St. Francis School in Goshen, where he is Head of School.



PHOTO: COURTESY JOHN DELAUTURE

purpose – a social, political and economic one.”

“As a society, we're obsessed with the campaign to quantify – to express in metrics – everything a child experiences in school. That can be done for certain areas of the curriculum. It absolutely cannot be done for other areas and is often misleading,” says Delautre.

He quotes Albert Einstein, “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

“Teaching to the test,” says Delautre, “is a serious problem that gets in the way of real education. Although there are pockets of enlightenment, large classes and limited professional development make it difficult for educators in many

school settings.”

Delautre's plan for the future is clear, “I want to solidify the mission of St. Francis School and to serve the families in this community as best we can.” He describes St. Francis School as an alternative that this community desperately needs. “More people need to know about it and to understand what we're trying to accomplish and how successful we've been at it for 40 years.”

Sometimes you have to leave for a time, to know what it's all about. “In my mind,” says Delautre, “it's been confirmed. Louisville has adequate chunks of everything a person could want. It has so many of the good things offered by the best cities in the world, and so few of the hassles.” ✱