

Gifted Resource Council Fosters Friendships and Social Skills

The powerful impact Gifted Research Council has in helping gifted students develop their social skills and fostering friendships spontaneously emerged in articles by a GRC alum who recently earned her master's degree and by a GRC instructor who has won multiple professional honors. Young professional Maggie McCoy credits GRC for helping her and many other GRC students develop friendships that "have lasted for years." Counselor Nancy Bonn-Winkler cites the importance of gifted students developing emotional intelligence, communication skills and building relationships. She calls Gifted Resource Council "an extraordinary asset to the gifted community" not only because of the opportunities it offers for academic growth, but also because it helps



Maggie McCoy with one of her friends from GRC, Becka Eisenberg. Becka is currently attending Washington University's law school.

nurture the emotional and interpersonal skills that gifted students need for happiness and success in life.

For more than a quarter century Gifted Resource Council has selected the best available teachers from throughout the metropolitan area to challenge and inspire our talented students. We stress both the importance of engaging, hands-on academic challenges and providing abundant opportunities for bright children to connect with other talented children who share their intellectual passions. We believe this fosters intellectual growth, important social skills and friendships among young

people who will grow up making a real difference in the world.

GRC Parenting Instructor Honored

For more than a quarter century, Gifted Resource Council has recruited the best available teachers and counselors from throughout the metropolitan area to challenge, inspire and mentor our talented students and their parents. Nancy Bonn-Winkler, M.ED., has been selected for four honors for her outstanding work with gifted children: Rockwood Elementary Counselor of the year, Rockwood Elementary Teacher of the Year, St. Louis Suburban Elementary Counselor of the Year and, most recently, Missouri School Counselor of the Year.

"I am delighted, but not surprised that Nancy has earned state-wide honors," said GRC Executive Director Susan Flesch. "For the past five years, she has done an outstanding job offering key insights at GRC parenting classes. Her passion for helping gifted students and her ability to communicate her insights to parents are extraordinary."

Bonn-Winkler developed a guidance curriculum that is widely used in her district. Here are some of her insights.

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Alumna Credits GRC for Career Inspiration, Enduring Friendships

Maggie McCoy, M.Ed., graduated with a BS in Biology from Loyola University in Chicago in 2010 and went on to earn her masters in secondary education in May of 2011. During the seven years prior to entering high school in 2002, she participated in Fall and Winter Saturday Learning Labs as well as Summer Academies such as Ancient Academy, Space Academy and Math, Marvels & More.

"In the summer of 2001, I participated in the 4th year that GRC offered a two-week trip to the rainforest of Ecuador," she said. "During those two weeks, I and several other 7th and 8th grade students studied soil composition in the rainforest at the Jatun Sacha Biological Research Station. We also had the opportunity to travel to some tourist areas around Ecuador. This program in Ecuador probably had the largest influence and impact on my future goals and interests."

"The trip was one of my first experiences with what

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Dialogue with the Director

“Will you be my friend?”

Anyone who has spent time as a second grade teacher (as I did in my early years as an educator) has heard this plaintive request. Often children will ask quite forthrightly of a peer on the playground: **“Will you be my friend?”**

Even young people older than seven ask this same question every day. It may not be phrased in such a direct manner, but the question is still the same. **“Will you be my friend?”** Yes, adults too search for a positive response to that question.

In our increasingly technological world, that question is more often expressed via social media sites, particularly the popular Facebook page, when a person is “friend requested”.

Gifted Resource Council has also stepped into the “Facebook World” with our own new, official Facebook page, thanks to the efforts of Mary Angert, a member of the GRC Board of Directors, who also regularly updates the GRC Web site. Please feel free to look us up online – and to “friend” GRC!

But what does it mean to really “be a friend”? Does having 600 “friends” on Facebook make a person more likeable than if one only has 50 or fewer “friends”? Or



Steve Randall, veteran GRC “Checkmate!” teacher, is concentrating on his next move against several chess students during Learning Lab.

maybe isn’t even on Facebook at all? Does a “friend” you have never met really count as a friend?



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

This issue of GRC’s *mindwonders* focuses on the important topic of friendship, especially as it relates to the young people whom we serve. The interview with Nancy Bonn-Winkler speaks to the importance of developing interpersonal relationships for the healthy growth of youngsters. Dennis O’Brien’s column responds to the question: “How – and why – does GRC promote friendships?” GRC alum Maggie McCoy talks positively about the friendships that she made through Gifted Resource Council’s programs. And Maggie’s comments are not unique.

Many of the children that I encounter through GRC – as well as their parents – speak of the value of being accepted as the gifted child that they are and of the opportunity to interact with others who share their interests. In fact, that is often a prevailing theme for the children who return to GRC programs year after year – the feeling of acceptance and the renewal of friendships, to accompany the newly discovered academic knowledge.

Indeed, Gifted Resource Council fosters and encourages an ever-widening circle of friends for the talented young people who attend Learning Lab or GRC’s Summer Academies or Academic Challenge Cup. Teachers who work with GRC, sharing their special talents in a wide range of topics, all participate in specially designed workshops to enhance their ability to encourage the growth of interpersonal relationships among gifted children. We work hard to foster that love of learning, but not only that. We work hard to foster a positive response to that age-old question: **“Will you be my friend?”**

Susan C. Flesch

Parenting Instructor, continued from page 1

The Challenge of Mentoring Gifted Students

Bonn-Winkler appreciates the multiple challenges of nurturing the talents of very bright students. “Our gifted children come to us with great potential but they must have significant opportunities to learn. That means learning at challenging levels, experiencing frustration, learning how to recover and persevere, and ultimately to experience success that is worthy of their intellect. Part of my role as a counselor is to provide support to the gifted child, their families and teachers, so they can better traverse the learning experience AND their associated social/emotional experiences as well.”

Personal Experience Motivates Her Passion

“I grew up with very challenging circumstances and admittedly was a handful, okay two handfuls, in school. I had potential, but it was never tapped. Eventually, on my own, I did become enlightened as to what I could be and what I could do. Counseling drew me to kids; gifted counseling drew me to kids like me.”

“I have a strong internal sense of drive when it comes to advocating for services for our special needs population. Helping our gifted children receive appropriate academic programming can be done, but they also need balance in receiving social/emotional support as they develop as a person who is gifted.”



Nancy Bonn-Winkler

The Rewards

“I love sharing information and meeting community members when doing a workshop. BUT, the most meaningful rewards are those personalized moments when a parent says, ‘You made such a difference in the life of my child, you probably don’t remember her but she is succeeding because of you. You believed in her.’ Or when greeting buses a little one stopping to say, ‘What you said about bullying was just right Mrs. Bonn-Winkler.’ Wow! Now that fills my bucket!”

What Parents of Gifted Students Can Do

“Please continue to learn! Learn about giftedness, but also learn about those other fascinating components that help us understand ourselves and others better. The topics that are interesting to me are emotional intelligence, motivation, communication, relationship building, leadership, components of success, case studies and almost any mental health topic.

“At GRC I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share items of interest with the parents and to discuss how these items relate to their gifted child. Although I am immersed in gifted education, my own professional development certainly takes me outside that perimeter. At GRC I am able to share my new learning AND, through rich dialogues, I always come away with different perspectives, new ideas to think about and life stories to share with others. I am not sure who gets more out of the parenting classes, the parents or me!”

What GRC Offers Gifted Students

“At Rockwood’s Center for Creative Learning we support the work of the Gifted Resource Council and recognize GRC as an extraordinary asset to the gifted community. GRC programs provide a host of opportunities for children to come together to study topics of shared interest. It is a great way to learn more about passion areas as it provides for more in-depth learning experiences. A luxury for the children is having an instructor who is as excited about the content as they are and an instructor who “gets them” academically and socially, in ways others may not. When I walk through the doors of GRC, I see excited children rushing to get to their selected courses as well as those who are finished demanding a parent’s attention so they can tell them all about their learning experience. The excitement is palpable!”

Parents Ask: How—and why—does GRC promote friendships?

By Dennis O'Brien

First, let's discuss the reasons why Gifted Resource Council (GRC) structures all its programs to help children develop friendships with other gifted students. It's critical that parents understand why this is so important. GRC emphasizes this not only because it's a critical developmental stage but also because it's often hard for academically talented children to develop social skills and make friendships.

Gifted children typically crave the respect of adults for their intellectual prowess and isolate themselves socially and emotionally from other children perceived not to have their intellectual abilities and interests. As a result, they often struggle to develop age-appropriate social skills. This limits their friendships, personal happiness and their ability to function as leaders throughout their lives.

Here are some of the ways GRC promotes friendships. Both *Learning Labs* and *Summer Academies* are deliberately structured very differently than conventional classes. Instead of being a dispenser of information and evaluator of learning, GRC teachers challenge students to raise questions or tackle a project, such as building robots, that requires them to work in teams while solving a hands-on learning problem.

There are no "Lone Rangers" at Gifted Resource Council because teachers and the GRC structure stress teamwork. For example, in ECO Academy, students work in finance, marketing and production teams. Each team, in turn, breaks their particular challenge into subtasks with students focusing on varying aspects of the challenge. Throughout the process, students are sharing what they have learned and making collective decisions about how to proceed. This interactive process proceeds until the robots are built, Medieval Life recreated, or the rockets launched and the data analyzed.

In addition to promoting the growth of interpersonal skills, this collaborative approach to learning actually helps maximize what students learn because each student benefits from the insights and productivity of all the others who are exploring other aspects of the challenge and sharing the results with the others.

Even *Academic Challenge Cup*, which involves more than 1,500 students over eight days each spring, is structured to promote teamwork in "friendly competitions" that center on teamwork, not individual prowess. Prior to the event itself, children prepare for months in advance working in teams of five under GRC trained volunteer coaches. All this preparation focuses on friendships and developing interpersonal skills as well as mastering the challenging concepts of the games.

In addition to structuring the learning experience to involve cooperation and teamwork, GRC makes it a priority for its teachers to promote the growth of students' social skills. Every semester, GRC teachers participate in an in-service workshop that focuses on various ways to promote the emotional and social growth of gifted students. "We make the emotional and social development of our students a high priority because we

recognize that often this is as important as engaging them in hands-on intellectual challenges," said GRC Executive Director Susan Flesch. "Our teachers are very creative in the ways they stimulate the intellectual curiosity and growth of students, and we want them to understand how important it is to help them develop stronger interpersonal skills as well. We also want to equip them with suggestions about specific strategies that have proven effective."

Here are some ways parents can help their student take advantage of GRC's opportunities to develop stronger interpersonal skills.

First, make sure you're not part of the problem. Well meaning parents make it more difficult for gifted children to acquire the age-appropriate social skills and same-age friendships by encouraging a child's intellectual growth at the expense of the child's social development. As a result of these factors, many children who excel academically are developmentally delayed in their psychosocial growth. This can be a serious life-long handicap.

Encourage your child to take advantage of the opportunities GRC offers to get to know other bright children. Parents typically enroll children in GRC programs because they value the intellectual stimulation they will receive and the hands-on approach that will engage their child in the learning process. Children understand this because their parents talk about it. However, it is also important to let your child know that GRC offers valuable opportunities to meet other bright students who share her intellectual curiosity. Encourage her to take advantage of the opportunity to work with, get to know and make friends with other talented children. If you let your child know how much you value this, she is much more likely to engage positively with the other students.

Follow up with your child. Ask about the other children she is meeting. Show interest in what they are doing. Ask who is doing what, not just what your child is doing. Students often work on different aspects of a challenge as teammates. Ask what aspects of the challenge these other students are working on. How's it going? What is she learning from the other students? Who impresses her? Would she like to do things with some of them after the program ends? What? With whom?

Encourage your child to make friends of different ages through GRC programs. GRC deliberately designs programs that include students across a three or four year age span. Some parents mistakenly object that "My child is so bright he can hardly relate to others his age in school. He certainly should not be in a group with students two or three years younger than he is. We want him to be challenged and learn new things."

So wrong. This type of thinking assumes that GRC is structured like a regular classroom. But the reality is that GRC is committed to bring out the best in children through

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stimulating, hands-on learning challenges that involve teamwork, cooperative learning and leadership opportunities. Because the process is based on problem-solving and teamwork, not individual learning (typically through memorization of the same materials), GRC provides multiple roles that engage and challenge the differing abilities of all the students and develop stronger social skills and leadership potential.

In addition, older students have opportunities to mentor and guide younger students who have the opportunity to learn from them. This helps them not only develop social skills and friendships, but also leadership skills that will help them in other situations.

For example, the friendships described by GRC alumna Maggie McCoy on page 6 involve half a dozen girls of varying ages. The young woman pictured with Maggie on page 1 is a year behind her in school, just entering her first year of law school, while Maggie last June earned her master's degree. And yet they remain good friends from their GRC days that began more than a decade ago, as do many other alums.

Teach your child basic social skills. Teachers and counselors who work extensively with gifted children remark at how often these children do not make eye contact with others, fail to smile at others or say good morning, use other children's names, praise others, ask "How was your weekend?" or make intentional efforts to be pleasant. Help your child practice these basic social skills.

Get to know other parents. Get out of the parking lot. Join other parents inside 5-10 minutes before the class is dismissed. Introduce yourself. Find out what programs their children are in. Look for parents who are in class with your child. Chat with them each week. This will make it easier for you to help your child arrange follow-up activities with other students after the program is over.

Bottom line: While Gifted Resource Council cannot control what happens in students' regular classrooms, it can help them develop important character traits and social skills by structuring programs that put an emphasis on relating positively with other gifted children. Hopefully, some of the traits and skills they develop, such as respect for others, teamwork and interacting positively with peers, will also help them develop friendships with children of all intellectual abilities.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. In addition to writing educational materials used by the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry and weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journals, he writes monthly columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, and regular columns for CHARACTERplus, Family Connection (Mo. Dept of Mental Health) and Gifted Association of Missouri. O'Brien's April 6 column, "Prevent teen suicide by addressing it," won the 2010 Missouri Institute of Mental Health award for outstanding reporting on suicide.

Each year for the past 20+ years on a late November evening, an enthusiastic volunteer with Gifted Resource Council would call past members and current parents of GRC students. The volunteer would begin the telephone conversation by saying, "Good evening! I'm calling tonight as a volunteer with Gifted Resource Council.....hoping that you are willing to continue your support of GRC with a gift of....."

Most people who answered their phones were extremely cordial to the GRC callers. Many engaged in pleasant conversations about the wonderful experience their child had in a GRC class. And those who were financially able would readily agree to consider a donation to Gifted Resource Council as part of their membership support of the organization.

Increasingly, however, we have discovered that more than 50% of the calls at the annual phonathon would end up as a recorded message. The pleasant conversations with generous donors were becoming fewer and farther between. The "friend-raising" (as well as fundraising) via a telephone call was feeling more and more like an intrusion on a busy family's precious evening time.

Thus, we have decided to discontinue the annual GRC Phonathon. This doesn't mean, however, that GRC is any less in need of donor support in the form of membership contributions. Tuition and fees for GRC's academic programs cover only 77% of the actual cost. Tax-deductible membership gifts must cover the rest.

Instead, we trust that you will respond to this request for support – without a personal telephone call. For it is the generous support of donors like you, who recognize the importance of challenging bright and talented children to achieve their potential, that helps assure the continued viability and vitality of Gifted Resource Council.

Thank you, in advance, for your membership contribution!

Career Inspiration, continued from page 1

I think of as ‘real science.’ There was a lot of problem-solving and critical thinking involved both in preparing for the trip and in actually carrying out the research in Ecuador. I would say that it is one of the experiences that started my interest in science.”

Academic Stimulation, Motivation and Expanded Interests

“GRC provided me with an interest and love of learning. The program in Ecuador sparked my interest



Maggie McCoy

in science, and I eventually went on to major in Biology. While my passion is for science, I also still love to learn and read about other subject areas. While I never felt that history was my strongest subject in school, I still wanted to attend Ancient Academy and was really interested in the topics we studied.”

“This interest in science and passion for learning that GRC cultivated in me through all its programs carried through to choices I made in my academic career. I was offered a position in Loyola’s Interdisciplinary Honors Program, which involved taking courses in history, philosophy, literature, theology, and culture of other societies. As an analytical and fairly math-and-science-oriented person, the curriculum initially seemed like something I would not take an interest in. However, I remember in my freshmen year of college thinking that it was probably a good idea to stretch myself a little and keep myself occupied with something other than science - and I loved every course I took in the Honors Program. It was incredibly difficult at first trying to shift my thinking, but I think that my love of learning definitely allowed me to enjoy the course of study. GRC certainly fostered this type of interdisciplinary thinking and love of learning.”

Enduring Friendships

“I made a number of close friends at GRC as well. There was a group of five or six girls, including myself, that attended GRC every year, and we were usually in the same camps. As our years at GRC came to a close, we eventually continued our friendship outside of GRC programs. Even as we went through college, we still kept in contact and would often meet up on our breaks from school. GRC gave all of us the opportunity to meet and have friendships with other kids our age that had similar interests and passions, and those friendships have lasted years for me.”

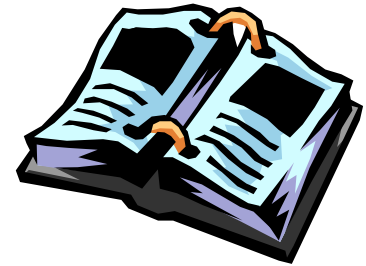
Maggie left for Ecuador in September of 2011 for six months to study the behavior of Long-Wattled Umbrella Birds. “This definitely would not have happened without GRC,” she said. “First, my desire to go to Ecuador this year was due to the fact that I had loved going with GRC 10 years earlier. I will be at the Bilsa Biological Research Station, in the Jatun Sacha network of research stations, the same place I went with GRC. I knew when I visited 10 years ago that I eventually wanted to go back, and now I am really excited to have that opportunity.”

Stepping Back Before Moving Forward

“The other motivation to go is that I just finished school and am a little unsure what I want to do with the rest of my life. It seemed like the perfect time to step back from school and the push to find a job and go do something that I have always wanted to do. I want to see if my passion lies in research or education. I loved my student teaching experience with 7th and 8th graders in a Chicago Public School, and all the other jobs I have held in education.. I also had research experiences in college, and I loved those. I am hoping that by taking a step back from being in school and my normal routine, I can gain some perspective on what I want to accomplish with my life and how I want to invest my time and talent.”

“This highly motivated and talented alum once again illustrates GRC’s ability to provide gifted students with the challenging enrichment activities and inspiration they need to become leaders of tomorrow. As Executive Director Susan Flesch said to Maggie, “We are thrilled to know that we made a difference in your life. That is indeed our goal!” Kudos and best wishes to Maggie McCoy.

Mark Your Calendar



January 28, 2012 – Summer Opportunities Fair at Whitfield School,
175 S. Mason Rd.

February 11-March 17, 2012 (Six Saturdays) – Winter Learning Lab at
Wydown Middle School, 6500 Wydown Blvd. Parenting Classes will be offered.

February 28, 2012 – Academic Challenge Cup's **LinguiSHTIK** Competition at
University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

February 29, 2012 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Equations** Competitions at
University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

March 1 & 2, 2012 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Creative Convention** at
University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parenting classes will be offered.

March 12-15, 2012 – Academic Challenge Cup's **Equations** Competitions at
Washington University. Parenting classes will be offered.

June 18-July 27, 2012 – GRC's Summer Academies at Crossroads College
Preparatory School, 500 DeBaliviere Ave.

Call GRC at 314-962-5920 for more information on any of these events.

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Now *you* can participate in shaping America's future by becoming a member of **Gifted Resource Council**, a not-for-profit education agency serving bright and talented young people. Your tax-deductible contribution will enable us to improve existing programs, extend offerings and reach more children. Your membership will not only benefit gifted children, but also entitle you to receive the following:

Gifted Member: \$60

- ★ Priority registration for all programs
- ★ *FREE parenting classes (\$160 value)*
- ★ Use of GRC Library

Intelligent Friend: \$100

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- ★ All of the above, *plus*
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mindwonders

informs the public about activities of Gifted Resource Council and about issues relevant to the development of bright and talented children and youth.

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Please use the enclosed envelope to mail your membership gift today.

Gifted Resource Council is a not-for-profit education agency serving the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area. Its purpose is to bring together the resources of the community, the schools and parents to help bright and talented children achieve their potential.