



Open Doors Learning Center

A New School in Scottsdale for 2e Children

The elements of the story Kelly Rostan tells about her family may sound familiar to many parents of 2e children, at least up to a point. A gifted son who has also been assigned at least seven other labels from the alphabet soup of multi-exceptionalities. Trials of medication and special diets. Holistic practitioners. The feeling that, as a parent, you're alone in your search for answers and support.

But in the 12 years since her son's birth, Rostan and her husband, a family practitioner of osteopathic medicine, have gathered support, information, and knowledge of what works for their son and what doesn't. By now, says Rostan on her website www.az2e.org, "We have been able to weed out most of the people who have been obstacles to [her son's] progress."

One daunting need for the family, however, is a school to provide the right environment for her son. So Rostan, in collaboration with an experienced, like-thinking educator, is taking things a step further than most parents. She's starting a new school, the Open Doors Learning Center, in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Where Do You Start?

It's not as if the new venture is starting from scratch. In 2004, at a conference sponsored by The Gifted Development Center, Rostan heard consultant and therapist Marlo Payne Thurman (formerly Rice) speak on the intensities and sensitivities of the gifted. Rostan says of Thurman, "I felt as though she was describing my child. I made arrangements to visit Brideun and have been in contact with her ever since." Brideun was a school for the twice-exceptional founded by Thurman to test and verify her educational model for such children. (See the January, 2006, issue of *2e Newsletter* for a profile of Brideun.)

Rostan has been involved in a gifted parent support group, which, among other things, has brought Thurman to Scottsdale to share her school model and her expertise with 2e kids. Rostan has also advocated for 2e change in the Scottsdale school system. According to Rostan, she was one of two parents asked to participate on a 2e task force for the Scottsdale Unified School District.

"We spent an entire year developing a 2e model that became a 2e program in one of our elementary schools," she says. She helped bring in 2e experts like Thurman and Dennis Higgins to speak to educators, administrators, and the community at large, and to consult for the 2e program.

However, when the teacher involved in the elementary school's 2e program left, the program was discontinued, according to Rostan.

Rostan's collaborator in the new school is Terry Damlos, who has 19 years of teaching experience and is the founder of the Open Doors Center. The two, says Rostan, share a desire to provide an alternative educational environment that will serve the needs of 2e students, as well as other "out of the box" learners.

Of her teaching experience, Damlos says, "It seems that I was always drawn to the kids who were very bright, but had another label attached to them – Asperger's, AD/HD, and so forth. Not only was I drawn to them, but they were drawn to me as well. Perhaps I identified with them and could empathize with them. I respected them as amazing beings and they knew that; they responded well in my class."

Getting Organized

The new school has been offered space in a church in Scottsdale. Computers are being donated. The group will have access to a kitchen and green area for playing and planting a garden. "The only thing we currently need," says Rostan, "are cupboards for storage of supplies."

Barbara Probst, occasional contributor to *2e Newsletter* and author of the book *When Labels Don't Fit*, will be on the school's advisory board, says Rostan. So will Marlo Payne Thurman, who was recently appointed chair of the Asperger's division of the United States Autism and Asperger's Association. Another advisory board member is Miriam Cherkes-Julkowski, Ph.D., a former professor and long-time practitioner in the area of giftedness and disabilities who will also provide consultation and evaluation services.

As the school prepares for its August launch, Rostan says she has received a great deal of interest, especially after creating a website. The school organizers have held information meetings and have provided an opportunity for interested parents and their children to experience a hands-on lesson with Damlos.

The school will start out with a group of no more than 10 students of mixed ages in grades 3 through 8. The curriculum will be based on "expeditionary learning," thematically-oriented units combining traditionally separate topics such as math, language, writing, etc.





A New School in Scottsdale, concluded

Arts will be emphasized and integrated into every unit.

Damlos says that her teaching technique is the result of years of research, observation, and trial and error. She emphasizes the “expeditionary” aspect – children *experiencing* what they learn about. Also important to Damlos is the element of *service learning* – students bringing their knowledge and experience back to community. For example, if a thematic unit centers on gardening, it may culminate with students taking an expedition to a local food bank and proudly donating the vegetables they’ve grown in the school garden.

Social skills will be embedded into all activities. Rostan, a professional occupational therapist, looks forward to creating sensory-friendly spaces that benefit the students. A speech therapist will be available for consultation if needed.

Damlos says, “What I want Open Doors to achieve is to bring joy back into learning. I want the children to use their creativity and imagination to discover knowledge. I want them to truly respect themselves and others and discover and experience this wonderful world that we live in.”



Why Start a New School Now?

Rostan expresses hope that this is the right time to offer an alternative educational choice, even in light of the difficult economy. She notes the major budget cuts in Arizona and how the state is ranked 50th nationally in per-pupil spending for public education by the *Report Card on American Education*. “A program geared for 2e kids who don’t fit into our public school system is desperately needed in our community,” she maintains.

Rostan’s son and her husband are her biggest

supporters, she says. She goes on, “We feel strongly that there must be an educational environment where all students are recognized and celebrated for their unique gifts and talents. Where teachers become facilitators, mentors, advisors, and friends. Where kids can develop a true love of learning, by having the opportunity to be curious, to create and explore.”

For more information about the Open Doors Learning Center, visit www.AZ2e.org or www.opendoorscenter.org. ☐

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