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Film honcho donates \$5 million to University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

Sherry Lansing: 'It's truly the most wonderful school in the world'



Zbigniew Bzdak/ Tribune Photo

Jonathan King works on a live drawing during an art class at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where the high school tuition is \$24, 870.

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By Barbara Brotman

Chicago Tribune reporter

There is a place in Chicago that profoundly influenced Sherry Lansing, shaping her 30-year career as one of the most powerful producers in Hollywood and the philanthropic role she has taken on since leaving it.

On Wednesday, she will say a \$5 million thank-you.

The University of Chicago Laboratory Schools plan to announce that Lansing, who graduated from the Lab's high school in 1962, has pledged that amount to support a new arts wing. The centerpiece, a 250-seat performance venue, will be named the Sherry Lansing Theater.

Describing her experience at Lab, Lansing, who grew up in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood, reached for superlatives.

"It's truly the most wonderful school in the world," she said by phone from Santa Barbara, Calif., where she was spending the Thanksgiving holiday.

"It was a totally nonjudgmental environment," she said. "You were totally free to be yourself."

Housed in Gothic, vaguely Hogwartian buildings on the U. of C. campus, Lab is one of the city's top private schools. The Obamas and the Pritzkers have sent their children there. Mayor Rahm Emanuel's children enrolled there when he returned from Washington.

Lansing's gift, part of the Lab Schools' campaign to raise \$55 million — the largest fundraising effort in their history — and her account of her years at Lab offer a window into the institution.

It is actually several schools, encompassing preschool through high school. Lansing attended Lab's high school at the urging of her mother and stepfather, a furniture manufacturer.

"The only thing that was valued was your brains. And that was it," she said. "Nobody cared what you looked like; nobody cared if you had money or you didn't have money; nobody cared about social status."

But having brains didn't mean you couldn't also be a cheerleader. "I loved being a cheerleader," she said. "It was very exciting. We played all the other private schools, Parker and Latin. We cheered our hearts out, and it was really fun."

She loved Lab's openness so much that she sought it out as an adult. "The movie business was as close to the Lab School as I could possibly imagine because idiosyncratic behavior was applauded," she said.

Fifty years later, several students attending Lab sounded like they could have been part of Lansing's class.

"Lab is very much a place where everyone does their own thing. It's very free," said Adam Wills Kelsick, 16, whose thing is theater.

"There's a stream of ideas, and almost no one says 'no,'" said Maddie Lindsey, 17, who also is involved in theater. "They say, 'That might not be the best idea, but you can certainly try it.'"

Lab feels like a family, Kelsick said. Earlier that day, he said, a teacher had invited him to make himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the classroom, sit down and talk.

Children of prominent families are treated no differently than anyone else, Lab students say.

"When Obama's kids were here, we were playing 'Spot the Secret Service Guy,'" said Tomi Johnson, 17. "People don't get star-struck."

"The cachet around here is for the kids who work very hard and are very passionate and academically driven," said Patty Kovacs, the school's college counselor, whose children attended Lab.

And they do work hard, students say. "We take grades very seriously," said Jaquell Hamelin, 16.

Because Lab is part of the U. of C., students can work at a high level, taking classes at the university or working in the laboratories of top scientists.

Tuition is in line with Lab's status as one of the city's elite private schools. It ranges from \$21,060 for full-day nursery school or kindergarten to \$24,870 for high school.

But faculty and employees of the U. of C. get 50 percent discounts; about 60 percent of Lab students come from university-affiliated families. In the current school year, Lab gave 225 students financial aid and scholarships totaling \$1.7 million. The average award is \$8,200.

One goal of the school's current fundraising campaign, which with Lansing's gift is up to \$46.5 million, is to offer more financial aid.

Forty-three percent of Lab's 1,780 students are nonwhite, and students and parents praise the school's diversity. But if Lab is a world of racial harmony, creative freedom, acceptance of differences and love of learning, some students past and present admit it's a bit of an anomaly in the wider world.

"We're a little sociological bubble," Kelsick acknowledged.

"I felt Lab was very insulated, and it wasn't very diverse," said Amina Dreessen, a former Lab student. "It's pretty racially diverse, but in terms of wealth — everyone there is pretty well off. I just wanted to meet different people."

Dreessen left Lab after eighth grade to attend Jones College Prep, a Chicago public school, and is now a freshman at Northwestern University.

She said she has no regrets. Jones "was probably not as good as Lab in terms of what I learned in the classroom ... (but) I met people from all over the city. It was a really good social education."

Lab is "sociologically pretty homogenous," said Linda Greenberg Hanessian, a Hyde Parker whose three children were "lifers," in Lab parlance, attending the school from nursery school or kindergarten through high school graduation.

"I have mixed feeling about Lab School," she said. "I think the kids got a fantastic education, even though not all the teachers were stellar, which you would expect paying the kind of tuition they charged."

Lab is not a conflict-free zone. In recent years, students have given the homecoming dance an unofficial theme incorporating a version of the word "whore" (this year's was "Apache Bros and Navahoes"), which has rankled others.

"I'm not excusing them, but they're kids. And it's in the popular culture," Kovacs said.

Those who love Lab see the school as a template for a better way to live.

"When I graduated, I knew the world was different," Lansing said. "You knew that you had lived in a utopian paradise. And you fight for the rest of your life to make the rest of the world like that."

After graduating from Lab and Northwestern, Lansing headed to California. She produced, marketed or distributed more than 200 movies, including "Forrest Gump," "Braveheart" and "Titanic." At 20th Century Fox, she was the first woman to head a studio. She left Paramount Pictures in 2005 as chairman and chief executive officer.

She is married to another Chicagoan in the movie business: William Friedkin, who directed "The Exorcist" and "The French Connection."

Now 67 and head of her own philanthropic foundation, Lansing drives by the school whenever she comes back to Chicago to visit her brother and sister.

"It's emotional, this gift," she said. "My parents sent me to this school. I wish I could tell them how grateful I am, how fortunate I feel in life."