

# POWERFUL STORIES, EMPATHETIC MINDS



SOME OF MY FAVORITE MEMORIES as a child were family trips to my grandmother's house during school vacations. As I walked through the front door of her home, I loved the aroma of the homemade desserts wafting from the kitchen. My grandmother gave me lots of love and attention, and I enjoyed the time I had to learn about my family's background and traditions through the details of

her stories. During each visit, my grandmother spent one evening telling us a story about her background or my father's childhood. There was always an important lesson within the story or some new layer revealed where I came to appreciate an important value. My grandfather's sudden death and how it impacted my grandmother and her two children demonstrated resilience. Her volunteer work at the local hospital where she provided support to sick or injured patients taught empathy. Through these stories, I learned about my grandmother's compassion for others, the sacrifices she made for her family, and her strong sense of integrity.

Stories aren't just the basis of fond family memories – they play an important role in the new wave of educational thinking. Daniel Pink's 2006 book, *A Whole New Mind*, provides compelling research to encourage us to develop a different kind of mind that will help us be successful considering a global workforce and the ubiquity of technology. One of the qualities that this next generation of thinkers will need to develop, according to Pink, is the ability to tell and derive meaning from stories. The days of "left-brain" education and training alone are no longer viable in a world that is increasingly complex and changing. Pink identifies two approaches to thinking and learning: left-brain thinking as sequential, literal, and analytical and right-brain thinking as metaphorical, aesthetic, and contextual. He argues that left-brain thinking can no longer be the sole driver of our careers and way of living. Instead, we need to train both sides of the brain to work together in order to become creative and empathetic problem-solvers and innovators. Pink outlines six "fundamentally human abilities" that are essential for personal fulfillment and professional success: design (creating beauty, meaning, and utility), story (using personal and emotional narratives), symphony (seeing the big picture, bringing together disparate parts), empathy (showing feel-

ing for and with someone else), meaning (bringing relevance and fulfillment to our work), and play (infusing joyful living through fun and games into our work).

At ECF, students are developing these senses within their experiences in the educational and co-curricular programs. Throughout our PreK-12 ethics and community service program, students are asked to grapple with real-life ethical dilemmas and to consider multiple perspectives. Their experience in ethics classes and throughout the many diverse community service programs instills empathy, compassion, and a responsibility for others.

Another way our students are learning about story (as well as design, symphony, and play) is through our rich arts programs. I admire the amazing and innovative non-clothing materials that Fieldston students use to create eclectic outfits for the annual Fashion Show in the spring. Additionally, I enjoy the ingenious student-choreographed dances, the musical theatre productions, and the inspiring jazz, orchestra, and band performances. Increasingly, we have seen more students involved with our filmmaking program where they have had the opportunity to combine the elements of design and storytelling within their films. Pink argues that stories provide "a context enriched by emotion, a deeper understanding of how we fit in, and why that matters."

As you read through the pages of this issue, you will learn how our students, faculty, parents, and alumni are telling stories through film and expressing their creativity and design. At ECF, many stories are told, written, and increasingly, filmed. As a visual medium, film makes diverse life stories accessible to many. For example, some of the critics' most acclaimed films for the year: *Avatar*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *Precious* tell compelling stories laced with strong emotion and deep understanding of the characters' purpose in life. In my grandmother's day, the idea of students making films would seem preposterous, but with new technology and more accessibility, student filmmaking is becoming more commonplace and very popular.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark J. Stanek". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Mark J. Stanek  
Head of School