

Interview with Dede Lyons

By Jacqui Dres

Dede Lyons is finishing up the 6th and final year of her Doctoral program in Cell and Molecular Biology at UC Berkeley. She received a BA in Biology from Mount Holyoke College where she graduated in 2002, Magna cum Laude. Dede also is an artist known for her beautiful water colors as well as a trained soprano soloist.



Highland Hall Alum
Dede Lyons, class of '98

Tell me about the research you are currently doing?

My work is in the field of evolutionary developmental biology (for short we call it "evo-devo"). Our lab is studying how changes in development will influence changes in evolution. So, for example, why do we look different than monkeys or dogs or starfish or corals? One way to think about it is that changes in the way an organism develops can have a huge influence of what it looks like as an adult. If certain changes to development happen repeatedly over millions of years, then organisms can end up looking very different from one another.

How did you become interested in this field?

When I was in college I took a lot of biology classes and much of the curriculum had to do with studying embryology and the study of evolution. I was originally interested in history, and took a course in the history of biology. From there I became interested the science itself. When I was looking for a place to do research during my summer and January breaks, I picked a lab at UCLA where we studied jellyfish. That got me more interested in doing graduate work in molecular biology and so I eventually ended up applying to the doctoral program at UC Berkeley.

How did your parents become involved in Waldorf Education?

My mom was looking for something that was creative, welcoming, and friendly for children. She went to visit the Steiner School in New York City (where we lived at the time) and she walked over to the high school and saw these seniors with crazy colored hair and outfits and they were walking arm in arm down the street. My mom thought, wow, if you could be that secure to walk arm in arm with your friends as a teenager and still be really creative and confident in yourself, it must be a good education. She was really impressed with the education and she wanted her own children to be that confident and creative.

So, you attended several Waldorf Schools?

Yes, I went from first through 3rd grade there at the Steiner School, and then we moved to California and I went to the Pasadena Waldorf School up to sixth grade, and then from there I attended Highland Hall and graduated.

Do you recall any classes or teachers that impressed you at Highland Hall?

All of them were really great. My class teacher, Mr. Murar, was a really wonderful class teacher and had a huge influence on me. Noah (Quatro) Williams' classes in Medieval History were really inspiring and made me very interested in that time period. In fact, I picked Mount Holyoke in part for its renowned Medieval Studies department before I got interested in biology. Although as a high school student I wasn't really that into American history, I remember Quatro's lectures about the civil war which now, as an adult, I have a lot more appreciation for. So, you never know what knowledge will mean more to you later on in life. I also owe a lot of my artistic ability to Dana Williams who was so patient with our often rowdy class. All of the teachers I had were really wonderful—I learned many valuable things from each of them that I still call upon today.

As you were applying for colleges, were you confident that you were well prepared?

Yes, I think I was. I was a little nervous about getting accepted to colleges, but once I went on the interviews I felt more confident. I think the same happened with most of my classmates. The colleges were impressed with our interviews. I spent most of my time in the interviews talking about Waldorf education, and I've heard similar stories from other Waldorf Students. Actually, the admissions department at Mount Holyoke later asked me to help them recruit more students from Waldorf schools because they did so well there.

Did you notice anything different about your preparation for college compared with kids from other schools?

I guess because at Highland Hall you're in such a small group and have access to teachers you feel really confident about talking and sharing your ideas. I think I was a little bit more vocal and a little less intimidated by the professors and older students compared to other people. I also think my writing skills were pretty good, at least in the top quarter of the students I was going to school with.

I recall seeing that you have quite an artistic background.

Like most Waldorf students, I enjoy art and I like to sing and act. When I was in college I was in some singing groups. I still do some knitting and art sometimes (I designed and made many things for my wedding last summer), but I haven't had much time to do those things lately. Sometimes the drawing still comes in handy; in my lab I find it's much easier and faster to draw my figures by hand rather than use Photoshop. And I'm the resident impersonator in my lab, so I guess all those acting classes amounted to something. I've also taught many people in my program to knit.



*Dede with her husband, Adam Schindler,
in Jaipur, India*

So what are your plans for your future?

I plan to stay in academia and become a professor and continue to do research. After I finish my Ph.D. this spring, I'll spend a few years as a post doctoral fellow and from there start a research program of my own.

Would you recommend Waldorf education to someone who was looking for a school for their child?

Yes, definitely. I've had a really fantastic experience with Waldorf education. What's great about Waldorf education is their way of teaching the whole child. They try and develop different aspects of your intellect and, for me, that has been really useful because I've tried a lot of different things and I've changed my focus in life. Having been exposed to so many different things has made me really confident that I can learn something new. And this has been really helpful to me. I think Highland Hall is a really fantastic place to learn.