

A Tribute to Dr. Kendra Sun-Alperin, Head of School, The Harbor School 2014 - 2017

Presented by Dr. Kameha Bell, Chair, The Harbor School Board of Trustees
Saturday, September 9, 2017, Memorial Service for Dr. M. Kendra Sun-Alperin

Often when Kendra would need to speak in front of the parent body at Harbor, she would bring prepared remarks and read from them to ensure she communicated exactly what she wanted to share. Kendra, today I am taking a page out of your book and reading from my notes, because I don't want to mess this one up.

I had the privilege of knowing Kendra in many capacities. She was the Principal to my children's school, a friend, a confidant, and we had a professional relationship. I am deeply honored to speak on behalf of the Harbor Community and what Kendra meant to us.

While our time at Harbor with Kendra was relatively short compared to so many of you here today, we feel privileged and honored, because we believe that during her time with us, she was doing exactly what she was meant to do.

When Kendra came to Harbor as the Head of School in 2014, she was leaving the classroom and transitioning to a Headship, which is a tremendous transition all its own. And on top of that, Harbor had more than a few challenges in store for her upon her arrival! Challenges she met head on I might add!

But she was meant for the job, and it was meant for her. At a small school like Harbor, she was able to have close relationships with children and families, to be directly involved in early childhood education and to serve as a mentor and leader for our faculty and staff. And Kendra excelled at these roles.

She didn't just have talents, she had gifts. I believe this is an important distinction. To me a talent is a skill that must be developed to excel at it. But a gift is something you are given that allows you to change peoples' lives.

Kendra was gifted at connecting with children. So many times, I saw her stop whatever we were talking about or working on to tend to a child. Always expertly getting down on the child's level and communicating in a way that that individual child needed and could understand. She saw every child as a good kid, a unique child, who just needed the right environment and support.

A clear conduit for connecting with children was Kendra's smile...

Kaira described it as a "sunny smile."

One parent stated: "As we dropped off our kids in the morning, regardless of the weather, Kendra was there, smiling, even when it was pouring rain. In her green Hunter boots, and her Mickey Mouse umbrella."

Aarian lamented that he never got called to the principal's office for bad behavior. When asked why he wanted to go to the principal's office, he said: "Because I wanted to spend some time with Kendra, playing with her toys so I could make her laugh and see her smile."

And then there was her ability to solicit a smile...

Chance, when asked if there was time he could remember Dr. Sun-Alperin making him feel better, said: "yes, yes she did. There was this one time when I was sad and she told me a joke. What does a pirate say

on his 80th Birthday? "Hi Matey, I'm 80!"

Kendra's gift with children naturally parlayed into a gift with parents. When she talked about our children, it was as if the world stopped. Truly. Her eyes would light up. Our concerns would fade. She would manage to diffuse any anxiety or stress. She held our hands as our children grew and blossomed, and for those of us who were parents of graduating second graders, she held our hands as we figured out the next best school for our children. The next home. The next Harbor.

One parent said: "Kendra was always positive. Any conversation we had about our child and his ups and downs began with 'He is a terrific kid.' She was honest about his challenges, but never said there was something wrong with him or something we couldn't work with."

And one of my favorite areas that Kendra was gifted in was with our teachers. I know, that may not seem obvious, but this was where I was most proud of Kendra. This is the area she grew the most while at Harbor and through which she was able to impact the most children.

Her ability to mentor teachers and to build amazing morale amongst her staff was impressive. It is incredibly challenging to keep 20 teachers happy, but when teachers are happy and feel valued, they are better teachers... and they impact even more children and parents. Through her gift with our teachers, Kendra managed to expand her reach even further.

Kendra supported her teachers. She supported them in the classroom, and she was available when they had questions and concerns. She inspired them with her passion for early childhood education. She was a confidante and a mentor. They trusted her and admired her.

To quote them:

"She was a wonderful first boss and friend. She had the most supportive advice, and we had the best conversations. Her knowledge of early childhood education was admirable, and her sense of leadership was something I always looked up to."

"Kendra was an extraordinary leader and friend to all of us."

"Kendra was more than our Head of School, she was our friend and was seen as a friend to our students."

"Kendra was such an open book- she shared many of her feelings, thoughts and experiences. She always wanted what was best for Harbor, and she genuinely cared about us."

Lastly, perhaps Kendra's greatest gift was her ability to form a personal connection with everyone she interacted with. She made all of us at Harbor feel special, important and deserving of her attention. Her infectious smile made all those around her little, tall and everything in between, seem like you were the only person in the world that mattered. She inspired us with her dedication to her craft, her pursuit to be a Head of School despite her health challenges, and her courage to put herself out there.

Our sense of loss at Harbor is tremendous. But we are also so grateful. We were given the gift of Kendra.