



THE MEHER SCHOOLS



# Wednesday Messages

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## Remembering Our Founder, Ivy O. Duce, On the 125th Anniversary of Her Birth

*Mrs. Duce's son-in-law remembers the founding of the school and the special role played by his daughter—her granddaughter—Ivy Mary Knowles*

Yesterday, February 25, we celebrated not only the 45th anniversary of the founding of The Meher Schools but the 125th birthday of its founder, Ivy O. Duce. Mrs. Duce was the *murshida*, or spiritual teacher, of a small nonsectarian spiritual order, Sufism Reoriented, that was founded by the Indian mystic Meher Baba in 1952. Meher Baba was Mrs. Duce's spiritual teacher.

Mrs. Duce's granddaughter, Mary, played a special role in the founding of our school. We asked her

father, Duncan Knowles, to share his memory of how the school came into being. (Mrs. Duce passed away in 1981.)

“Our daughter, Ivy Mary Knowles, who we call Mary, was born with Down syndrome. Up to her fourth year, she attended a special program in Danville, but on her birthday she passed its upper age limit. The program's principal loved Mary dearly and broke down in tears because she didn't know where a child like Mary could go next.

“My wife, Charmian, and a dear friend, Ellen

Sirota, were very concerned and talked with Charmian's mother, Murshida Duce, about this. She loved her granddaughter Mary deeply, and the bond between them was very

strong. It turned out she was already pondering where Mary could go, and they launched a search for a school with the right values. When that proved unsuccessful, she decided she would have to start such a school.

“Although Mary was the catalyst for this idea, Murshida Duce

also knew many young married couples in our area with children who needed a school that offered not just solid academics but a grounding in love, honesty, fairness, respect, and service to others. So she founded her school in 1975 as the White Pony School.

“Once the school was up and running, Charmian brought Mary's former principal to visit. She thought it was perfect! And so it was.

“Mary attended the school for seven years. She was never (Continued on page 3)



*Ivy Duce, with Mary, at a play Meher Schools students performed for her in 1979*

## Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

# *Conversations About Skin Color*

“**I** DON'T LIKE PEOPLE WITH BROWN SKIN,” a preschool girl explained to her teacher. This statement might lead people to believe that this little girl had learned racial bias at home and should be “talked to” about the unacceptable qualities of this kind of thinking. Fortunately, teachers understand that even young children make spontaneous, uncensored observations about skin color.

The teacher, who happens to have pale skin, responded by asking. “Why don't you like dark skin?”

Her answer was, “My parents don't have dark skin and I don't have dark skin. I don't like it.”

The teacher commented, “I love dark skin. I think it's beautiful. I love seeing people who have all different skin colors. I'm so happy our school has so many different skin colors.”

There are many ways to speak to children about skin color, depending on their ages, their observations, and questions. The important thing is not to dismiss the subject. Sometimes young children have made negative comments to other children about the ugliness of their dark skin.

Studies show that families of color are more likely to speak to their children about these issues because they have to teach them to interpret other people's reactions, maintain self-worth, and navigate in the world.

White families may feel that bringing up skin color is introducing a subject that divides people. However, research also reveals that bias in favor of white skin exists even at the preschool age, so simple discussions about the value of living in a world where people have a variety of skin colors is helpful. Older children are ready for more involved discussions.

There are many children's books at every reading level that introduce subjects related to diversity in delightful, thought-provoking ways. We will have a display of children's books at our compassion symposium on Saturday.

## **NEW SANDBOXES**

We replaced the two old sandboxes on the playground over Presidents Day weekend. Our building and grounds supervisor, Dick Clark, along with third grade teacher Scott Rose and four other volunteers, built new sandboxes and replaced the old sand with 16 cubic yards of new sand. They left the sand in huge piles rather than spreading it out because Scott said the children would have more fun with it that way. And he was right!



Some of the money for the project came from last spring's school dance; some came from a series of fundraising events staged by our fifth grade.

# Remembering Ivy O. Duce

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isolated for her disability. Instead she was integrated into normal classrooms and always embraced and supported.

“A huge benefit to Mary was that the teachers were dedicated to bringing about an environment where students could learn to express love in their lives. And since Mary’s nature was so purely loving, she grew and responded with a love that melted my heart.”

Ellen Sirota became Ellen Evans and would go on to be the school’s principal for its first 41 years. The school was formally established on February 25, 1975, modeled on the principles of Meher Baba’s “Prem Ashram” (“School for Love”) in India in the 1920s. (Meher Baba’s birthday is also February 25, and we honor him along with Ivy Duce as the school’s founders.)

The school has always welcomed children with atypical developmental patterns. Children with Down syndrome, language and developmental delays, and autism have joined our classes as fully participating members. Before moving to our current location in 1979, we shared space



*Ivy Duce with Meher Baba*

in a Lafayette school with a county special education program for severely handicapped children, and we provided opportunities for children from that program to join us in our classes.

Duncan reflects, “It is now more than 40 years later, and I still feel that love in Mary that was nurtured by what is known today as The Meher Schools. I have no words to express how grateful I am.”



*As an adult, when Mary became withdrawn after recuperating from spinal surgeries, her mother, Charmian, had the idea that ballroom dancing might help her re-engage. It did, and Mary won trophies in ballroom competitions. For her day program’s annual show, she performed a dance to the song “If I Could Dance With My Father Again.” Here Mary dances with her father, Duncan!*