

The Amazing History of NEST+m

by Karen Trott

At the end of NEST's 2001-2002 school year, the members of the PTA Executive Committee promised that every year, they would find a way to tell parents the story of NEST's unbelievable first year, in the hope that the existence of this extraordinary school would never be taken for granted. Little did they know then, that it would take three more years before such a prospect could even be considered.

Now, after four years, NEST's struggle to withstand challenges to our school's vision from District 1, from the now defunct NYC Board of Ed, Region 9, local politicians and the community at large has become almost too complicated and difficult a story to tell. Still, we have to try. As NEST approaches its fifth year, with all but three grade five classes in place, it's hard to believe that a school like this have ever been at risk – and is, indeed, at risk still. Who would object to high standards and achievements at a time when the City is clamoring for quality schools?

In order to truly understand what prompted many of the challenges that NEST has faced over the years, we have to go back to 1990, when Celenia Chevere was hired to open a TAG (talented & gifted) school in District 1: the Neighborhood School. In response to this news, the District 1 school board passed a School Choice Policy that declared TAG schools illegal in District 1, and based admission to oversubscribed schools on ethnic quotas, with no school allowed to be more than 20% Caucasian. (Keep in mind that less than five percent of all eligible voters actually bothered to elect a school board member, and that District 1's school board was peopled by members whose children attended schools in other districts.)

Ten years later, in October 2000, the Board of Education (BOE,) at the mandate of then Chancellor Harold Levy, announced the formation of a model school with academic rigor and something new: a K-12 seamless curriculum, created by Celenia Chevere. Celenia was known by many in education as the most talented and successful creator of schools in NYC, perhaps in the country, with the proven track record of Lab and Young Women's Leadership Schools among others to her credit. With NEST, which she anticipated would be her last project, she planned to create the finest school in NYC, a K-12 college preparatory public school on par with Stuyvesant. Intended as a prototype, NEST would be an all District school for eligible students throughout Manhattan. The Board of Ed (BOE) retained Celenia, Deborah Vila-Tracomì and Michael Kasloff on salary for a year to research, develop and draft the plan for what would become NEST.

In May 2001, the Board of Education passed a resolution creating NEST+m, which included the planning teams' template for how the school would operate, expand, instruct, recruit and admit students, hire teachers and renovate its building. One critical aspect of the plan involved locating a facility that could house the entire school without having to share space and ideologies with another school. There are few locations that could meet this criteria, but the most viable was Junior High School (JHS) 22, which had closed after having been a failing school for seven years, with less than 70 students in the entire facility during its last year.

At the time that Celenia and her team moved into JHS 22, the building was a wreck: infested with rats, mice and roaches, covered with graffiti and surrounded by yellowed windows or plywood replacement panes and encased in bars both inside and out. (It would be a year before we would discover that there actually was a row of windows behind the painted plywood in the gym.) From afternoon to late evening, the school's courtyard was the neighborhood hangout for kids and adults, and in the after hours, the parking lot was a playground where people sold and took drugs, had sex and partied. The transformation from JHS 22 to NEST+m was a 24/7 effort by Celenia, her staff and a tremendously committed custodial staff.

As renovations began, parents were invited to attend introductory meetings held at a variety of lower Manhattan locations. The backbone of NEST's recruitment material was the brochure which described the academically rigorous, seamless K-12 curriculum of the school and NEST's admissions' process. Emily Armstrong contributed her ten years of PTA experience, as past president of both the Neighborhood School and Young Women's Leadership, and worked as a volunteer, getting the word out about NEST through mass mailings, phone calls and outreach to the community and local politicians.

On May 7, 2001, NEST sent out letters of welcome, which included a request that families write to Acting Superintendent Helen Santiago expressing their enthusiasm for this great new school. It seemed curious, but many of us complied. Then, on June 6th, we attended orientation at Cooper Union, during which Emily suggested that we elect our PTA so that there would be a structure in place to help support this new school in its first months. Over the summer the Executive Committee planned its first event for Saturday, September 8, 2001 - NEST's Welcome Brunch, during which Dan Zane played, the kids drew leaves for our "Welcome Wall" and, notably, flyers written by Emily were circulated, asking us to write letters to Superintendent Helen Santiago, as our Admissions Policy was being challenged by District 1.

That was our first big problem: the fact that District 1 was claiming NEST as theirs. Our school had been designed not as a District school but as a Manhattan school open to students throughout the City, like the LAB in District 2 and the Anderson Program in District 3. It had also been designed as one school, with the same structures, criteria and expectations applying to all grades. The BOE, however, split the school in two to distribute resources, assigning K-8 to District 1 and the high school to the Manhattan High School District. NEST's lower and middle school were identified as part of District 1 and became fair game. None of Celenia's superiors, including those responsible for the initial resolution, stepped forward to address the issue. Some Ed administrators even suggested to us that the BOE had anticipated the problems Celenia would encounter with the "dysfunctional" (their word) school board and its low performing District 1, but felt that "if anyone can turn this situation around it's Celenia. And if she can't, no one can." In the end, we would realize that they were right on that score. But, Celenia could not take on the District 1 Superintendent and the BOE - they were her bosses. Besides, she was already working 20 hours a day, six days a week, (how else do you take a new school this far in four years? But that's another story.) So Celenia looked to Emily, her

PTA President and a formidable presence who could teach parents how to penetrate a bureaucracy.

The week before school started, all hell broke loose. People from the community claimed that at a meeting announcing the closing of JHS 22, students were told by the Chancellor's District Supt. that they were guaranteed a spot at NEST. NEST, while unaware of this promise, replied that it could not admit any JHS 22 students who did not meet the criteria. Then Councilmember Margarita Lopez claimed that the Board of Education had told her that all residents of the Baruch Houses (the buildings which surround NEST to the south and east) were guaranteed placement at NEST. Again it was reiterated that NEST could not admit any residents who did not meet the criteria. (Early on NEST had sent invitations to the Baruch House residents inviting them to an informational meeting about the new school, the same kind of recruitment procedure NEST used elsewhere. Only 15 people showed up. Marcy Rios, now our Parent Coordinator, was one of them.) Eventually we realized that we'd all been lied to. Despite our differing agendas, in the end we were all just fighting for what was best for our kids.

Still, irate neighborhood parents harassed students and parents and threatened to form a "human chain" barring our kindergarteners from entering school grounds on their first, already traumatic day of school. The BOE, folding under local political pressure, forced NEST+M to admit twenty one middle school students who did not apply to NEST and/or did not meet the school's academic admissions standards. The press was called in, and the Daily News ran an anti-NEST story that coincided with the first day of school. Local politicians pressured the Board of Education to disallow our school's admissions policy. The District 1 School Board attempted to impose their School Choice Policy on NEST, which dictated that students could only be admitted by lottery.

And then, on September 11, 2001, up on "the hill" as our section of the Lower East Side is called, a large group of kindergarten parents stood at the corner bus stop with their kids, watching as the second tower fell. Afterward, school closed for two days and the neighborhood was sealed off. Weeks later, PS 89, one of the schools displaced by the attack, temporarily moved into our building. For the next ten months our PTA attempted to console and support our students and teachers as well as PS 89's shell shocked PTA and staff, which had lost nearly half of their student body to relocation after the attacks.

During all this, the NEST PTA Executive Committee attempted to focus on the District's challenge to our Admissions Policy and the threat it posed to the school. Because we were doubling as a large part of the ad hoc volunteer Admissions Office, (working in 4 hour shifts, we returned calls, set up appointments for tours and conducted them, for lower, middle and upper school,) we were acutely aware of how vulnerable NEST would be if its Admissions Policy could not be maintained.

If a lottery were in place, then admissions could no longer be limited to students and parents who were willing to sign NEST's contract agreeing to the school's vision and mission, and

accepting the consequences for violations. NEST would no longer be a model school. NEST's admissions policy would become an open door policy with no limit on the number of classes it was willing to fill, and the school that was described to us in brochures and practice would not survive. And, without the commitment of students and their parents, it would be impossible to successfully institute many of the innovative features Celenia brought to this school: contracts of commitment for students and their parents, a core curriculum, Regents in Middle School, college courses in high school, a gender split in math and science classes only from 6th grade on, a mandatory dress code, strict rules of social behavior, extraordinary academic rigor, arts electives in 3 disciplines, mandatory after school extra help, in-classroom staff development and the advisory system that is at the heart of all the schools Celenia creates.

Thanks to Emily, with her encyclopedic knowledge of the arcane rules of the local school boards, the BOE and the cast of characters therein, we as new parents in a fledgling school became educated in the Byzantine practices of District 1's educational bureaucracy. Forget fundraising - our PTA meeting became time to review legal documents such as the 1996 NYC Public School Governance Reform Law, the District One School Choice Policy and the Chancellor's Regulations. Emily recruited an education lawyer willing to advise us on how to challenge the issue. All this and we were barely four weeks into the school's first year.

On October 4th, Emily announced that she'd been informed by the District 1 school board that our PTA was illegal because our bylaws were not in place, and that we must disband immediately, elect a bylaws committee to create them, then vote on the bylaws and hold elections once again. (Emily was also told by phone that if she showed up at a PTA meeting she would be handcuffed and led away. Much later we learned that in fact, our PTA was not illegal, that in rare circumstances such as ours an interim PTA is allowable.)

Although this set us back as intended, it didn't stop us. At the end of October Abby Horowitz with Marcy Rios and Bonnie Kantor, produced NEST's first "Fright Night" for our kids as well as for PS 89 - the kids who really needed a party. Since we were not a PTA, our event was not a fundraiser. We had a great success but broke even. And elected or not, we were still parents, who sent emails, letters, made phone calls and requested meetings with individuals in the BOE chain of command who Emily had identified for us as the people to meet with, people with whom she'd already spoken many times and written to extensively.

En masse, we met with Helen Santiago, and with Corinna Gonzalez, Alice Cancel, Ferman Archer, Doreen DiMartini, trooped out to Brooklyn to see Burton Sacks, to Martin Luther King HS to see Tony Sawyer, downtown to Speaker Sheldon Silver's office, (one of our only supporters) and to the office of Assemblyman Steve Sanders who refused to support the school's admissions policy, saying that all District 1 students should be accepted by lottery to all District One schools, regardless of academic performance. This from the State's Education Chair, and despite the fact that District 2's Lab School was also in his jurisdiction.

On November 20th we held our PTA elections, with all candidates running unopposed. And finally, on December 17th, we had something to celebrate. As a result of pressure from the

NEST PTA, the Board of Education declared School District 1's School Choice Policy illegal, (which is was, ethnic quota and all.) We were informed that the District 1 School Board was rewriting their School Choice Policy to allow, even encourage, schools to have themes and admissions policies. We enjoyed a worry-free holiday. Then, on January 3, 2002, we returned for the bad news: Assemblyman Steve Sanders had demanded a meeting with our Supt. and the BOE to discuss rezoning NEST's lower school so that the Kindergarten classes would not fall under the newly accepted admissions policy but would instead impose a lottery system.

At Emily's urging, we dove back in with petitions, phone calls, letters and meetings, and began focusing on a request that our school be withdrawn from District 1 and placed under the jurisdiction of the Manhattan High School District, from which funds were allocated to our high school.

In January we huddled around a transistor radio in the PTA office listening to Mayor Bloomberg's inauguration address and cheered when he discussed educational reform and referred positively to a "K-12 seamless curriculum" - a phrase Celenia had created to define her vision and which had somehow reached the Mayor's ear. In the NY Times the Mayor announced his plan to eventually replace the 40 school district bureaucracies with 10 Regional divisions, and although grateful for the news, we knew it was a long way off and would still have to hang in till it could affect us, and hopefully in a positive way. Also in the NY Times, a lengthy and favorable article on our school appeared. The New York Observer followed with a very supportive editorial. On February 27 we held a Ribbon Cutting ceremony to dedicate the new courtyard and playground equipment, funded and built by Toys R Us in appreciation for our having hosted PS 89. Nothing could have been more welcome: before the renovation, the yard had consisted of two gigantic and completely dead trees edged by splintered fences and crumbling asphalt.

In March, Supt. Helen Santiago announced that District 1 was taking over NEST's admissions policy, that her solution to the contradiction between our school policy and District 1's was to accept every K application regardless of criteria and completely disregard our admissions policy. We met with a publicist who would work with us pro bono in developing a press release to go public with the news. We scheduled a meeting on March 26 with Margarita Lopez, which was confirmed and reconfirmed but cancelled by her that morning and never rescheduled. We began to consider pursuing an Article 78 Proceeding (lawsuit) and discussed how to raise the \$25,000. it would cost. After an emergency meeting, our parent body agreed to vote to make a formal request that our school be removed from District 1 and placed entirely in the Manhattan High School District. After continued pressure, Celenia attended a meeting with Superintendents Helen Santiago and Tony Sawyer in which Tony backed Celenia's and Deborah's selection of K applicants and Helen withdrew her demands that Celenia accept District 1's lottery based list. Finally, our Admissions Policy prevailed.

In April Mayor Bloomberg traveled to Albany to campaign for Mayoral control of the schools, and to discuss the eventual dissolution of the Board of Ed and the local school boards. Then Speaker Sheldon Silver awarded our school a \$10,000 grant, a highly welcome gesture of

support at such a difficult time. And in between all the campaigning and admissions work, the PTA held a fundraising Note Card sale, organized Picture Day, hosted a Holiday Fair, Abby Horowitz and Cathy Santiago ran NEST's first scholastic Book Fair, we held a Valentine's Day party for middle and upper school, then a Spring Fair (Abby again) and an elegant onsite PTA gala.

NEST's first year ended on a high note, and our second year began with promise, when in October, the PTA hosted a Food and Wine Tasting Gala in honor of Richard Brown (Director of the Toys R Us Children's Fund.)

But, as the challenge to our Admissions Policy faded, we encountered a new series of threats that would play out over the following years. The 2002-2003 school year brought with it the news that NEST had been targeted as the ideal "temporary" location for two new charter schools, which would place 250 high school students right alongside our K and 1st graders in the adjoining vacant classrooms intended for our future 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders. In order to take on this new challenge, we had to first introduce ourselves, in another round of letters, phone calls and emails, to an entirely new hierarchy of Region 9 representatives, while still battling the last challenges of a disempowered but determined District 1 school board. After a long letter writing campaign in which the entire PTA participated, we ended the year having successfully convinced Region 9 that there were other, more suitable options for the new schools.

The year 2003-2004 brought another challenge. Although we'd won the argument that two new high schools were not appropriate neighbors for our K and 1st grade classes, the year we added a 2nd grade brought an announcement from Region 9 that they had found an even better match for our vacant classrooms: in fall 2004 there would be a new Charter school bringing their Kindergarten classes into our building. Once again we argued that NEST+m had been created as three schools in one building: a lower school, a middle school and a high school, all sharing the same administrative offices, dining hall, gym, nurse's office, library, etc. NEST's mission statement requires that every student in the building abide by the same rules and standards. The addition of another school, however small, with a different administrative staff and different rules would create chaos and undue stress for both schools. And to what end? In two more years there would be no vacant classrooms. The new charter school would be compelled to relocate yet again. Or would it? The BOE, and now the DOE (Dept. of Education) has a disturbing track record regarding this issue. There are many small schools that began as temporary, two year placements in larger schools. Despite assurances that the schools would be relocated after the two year period, they remain to this day, thereby managing to disserve two schools simultaneously.

It took most of that year to win our case against such a plan. It appeared that Celenia had almost succeeded too well. She'd taken a decrepit, nearly abandoned building and turned it into a prime piece of real estate that everyone wanted to share.

In 2004-2005, we were informed that Region 9 intended to place the New York Center for Autism Charter School into our building. We were assured the school would be extremely small, but would range in age from 5 to 21 years, and would require two teachers per child, physical therapy rooms and administrative offices, among many other space requirements. Again we rallied to the challenge and after many of the usual round of meetings, phone calls and letters, were able to dissuade Region 9 from following through with this plan.

I know that Celenia, her staff, and all of us on the PTA Executive Committee are unanimous in our recognition and gratitude to Emily Armstrong for leading all of these battles, and for the tireless, unwavering commitment she's made and continues to make on behalf of the school and our kids, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours she has contributed to guaranteeing the future of our extraordinary school.

Although the opinions of those of us on the Executive PTA vary wildly at times, we all agree on one given: that without Emily, NEST+m would not exist today. Without Emily, Celenia would not have been able to secure for us a school that achieved perfect or near perfect scores on every standardized test at every grade level* and a 100 percent graduation rate in its high school, which has had students admitted to Columbia, UPenn, Wesleyan, Yale and other outstanding post-secondary schools.

By confronting the challenges that Celenia in her position could not, Emily guided us in taking on a factionalized bureaucracy that has consistently overwhelmed the most sophisticated politicians of this great city. And despite the mountain of opposition she encouraged us to face, Emily often rallied us with the most ludicrous but effective slogan I've ever heard: in our darkest moments, she would holler out "Hey, don't forget, no matter what happens, no matter what they say, what can they do? We're just stupid parents!!!"

In November 2005, in recognition of exemplary leadership and incalculable effort, we created the position of "NEST+m PTA President Emeritus" for Emily, in order to acknowledge as well as encourage her continued participation as an honorary consultant to our Executive PTA, and in recognition of service and commitment above and beyond what anyone in their right minds could expect from one individual. Personally, if I had to identify only one among the many lessons I and all the Executive Boards of the past FIVE years have learned from Emily, and that we hope to pass on to our children, it's the fact (and I have to say, before watching Emily in action I didn't even think it could BE a fact) that there's absolutely no limit to what one single person can do - even if they're "just a stupid parent."

As of this writing, the fight for NEST continues. Despite NEST+m's extraordinary success, the DOE has decided to imperil the school by inserting in its building the Ross Global Academy, a new charter school which plans to also span grades K-12. The DOE's plan, which it had apparently intended to present as a *fait accompli* as the 2006-2007 school year began, only came to light as a result of a leak to a NEST+m PTA member. The information set in motion the PTA's attempt to quash the DOE's ill-considered arrangement, which will result in severe overcrowding and destabilization for both schools.

The partnership creating the charter school – New York University, the Ross Institute of East Hampton and the DOE – received about 1,000 letters from NEST+*m* students, parents, teachers and administrators pleading with them to find another location for their school.

In order to justify its decision, the DOE has recently recalculated NEST+*m*'s official capacity of 868 and arrived at a new capacity of 1,407, a spike of 62 percent. Even taking as a given the massive increase in what the school's building can allegedly accommodate, the DOE argues that NEST+*m*'s enrollment of 1,050 for 2006-2007 school year – when the school will finish its K-12 complement by for the first time adding a fifth and a full-size 12th grade – still leaves room for another K-12 school!!!

In response, and in addition to a massive phone call and letter campaign, NEST+*m* parents and students have held rallies of up to 800 on the steps of City Hall, in Easthampton, NY, at NYU, on the steps of the building where Joel Klein's cocktail party honoring charter schools was held, and at University Settlement where the Ross Charter school held its lottery. And on Monday, May 8, NEST+*m*'s PTA filed a lawsuit in State Supreme Court, arguing that the State Board of Regents erred in granting a charter to the Ross Global Academy Charter School. In a companion suit filed on Tuesday, May 9, the PTA argued that Schools Chancellor Joel Klein erred in deciding to place the Ross school inside NEST, where there is no room for the school.

And so, as unbelievable as it seems, the fight continues. The struggle goes on. In September 2006, NEST+*m* will finally reach its full complement of grades, K-12. Somehow, we'll get there – intact.

* ECLAS, NYS Standardized Tests, 8th Grade ELA and Math Tests, Regents and AP's

May 9, 2006