

Applying To John Thomas Dye: Our Guest Blogger Tells Her Story

Description

Do Or Die For John Thomas Dye

Before I begin this tale of very civilized rejection, I should note that my daughter had an ultimately happy ending: she got into a private school for fourth grade. But it wasn't John Thomas Dye.

When we began the search for a private school, we were very discriminating (if also naïve. Ok, that's being kind. We were, as I've said in my previous post, idiots). We didn't apply to ten schools, some of which were safety schools; we only applied to two. And one was, of course, John Thomas Dye.

Now, I'm an L.A. native. I went to Crossroads for middle and high school. I should, apparently, know something about all the private schools in the area, right? Well, maybe not. JTD is only for elementary school. When I was in elementary school (in public school, no less), I didn't know from JTD. No one I knew went there. The only impression I had of the place was that it seemed somehow, at least in my mother's mind, connected to old money and the L.A. Country Club. In other words, they don't let our kind in there (our kind being residents of Beverlywood?).

My impression of the school only changed when two different families I know from Anna's* preschool (Montessori Shir-Hashirim), got in. The first lucky entrants were very bright identical twins for kindergarten (a tough and unenviable job, gaining twins entrance anywhere). The second entrant was another girl who got in for third grade. Seemingly, JTD entrance was a breeze, right?

We never did any research on the matter (if I had ever looked at this blog, I would have known that hardly anyone gets into JTD, but instead I was oblivious). We just went along with the admissions process.

The first time I ever saw JTD was at its prospective parents' night. The locale, up in the Bel Air hills, has the impact of an eagle's nest, looking down upon the rest of the city in lofty assurance. There was a fire roaring in the auditorium. I couldn't get much of a read on the other parents, although it seemed far more diverse than I expected. Affluence level? I couldn't really tell. It had that waspy, money is something we don't really talk about here attitude.

It began with a short film, much in black and white, telling the story of the school's beginnings in 1949. The site looked much the same, the demographic was decidedly Anglo (not a shocker), there were some shots of traditional Thanksgiving, during which the founder parceled out turkey sandwiches with mayo (so L.A. Country Club, I could see my mom's vindicated grimace).

But that was the past. The present seemed refreshingly no nonsense, even mellow compared to other schools we'd toured. The headmaster even stated, "It's just elementary school, people." For a person like myself, with limited tolerance for panic or pretension, this was a grand approach. I was sold. And hey, it seemed so friendly! Certainly they'd let Anna in.

There was one aspect that sent alarm bells off for me. There was a huge emphasis put on families, not individual kids. But what does a "family" mean, these days? For example, I'm divorced and have a significant other. We know families with same sex parents, single parents, and intact marriages that no one would want. What kind of "family" did JTD want? It seemed so no nonsense, but so squeaky clean and straight. Polite. Even if we definitely weren't the type of family JTD wanted, it would never say so on any level.

They introduced a panel of kids, who fielded questions from the parents. The kids seemed awfully nice, well spoken but not precocious. They answered some fairly inane questions in a patient way. They simply sounded like well-educated kids. The only false note for me was the underprivileged Latina girl from Hawthorne, who seemed to be in the position of token scholarship case. She was fabulous. Any school would have loved to have this kid. But she seemed so grateful. And that bothered me. She shouldn't have to display that for the school's benefit; everyone knows that every private school has highly qualified scholarship kids.

What struck me, though, was how nice the kids seemed. That was really stressed. There was a solid, long established behavior and honor code that was strictly followed. This was highly appealing. And the academics, of course, were already established as being of the highest caliber. JTD kids go to great middle and upper schools. End of story.

Next, the application. Nothing unusual there. We were fortunate enough to have the head of Montessori Shir-Hashirim, Elena Cielak, write a glowing recommendation. Elena carries a lot of weight at certain private schools, so that was a plus.

The interview itself was, in retrospect, a real mixed bag. At the time, I convinced myself that it went fine. The JTD AD is a very professional yet warm woman. She's very to the point, yet is so welcoming that you feel like your kids are already in. All I can say is: ignore this feeling. She started out the interview by saying that they had limited spots for 4th grade (I'll stick with my previous theme: we were idiots), and that, judging from her scores and recommendations, Anna would be a shoo-in at Archer for 6th grade, thus solving that lost year problem. That sounded nice. And I didn't hear the message underneath: we have no space, but she'll be ok.

Then, there was that stress on the family thing. I've written regarding this aspect of the interview previously. So I'll just reiterate that I felt we were being evaluated, as a divorced family, for any signs of discord. Now, we really don't have any. We work well together. But I got the impression that JTD's comfort level in this arena leans toward the traditional and intact. But, again, denial is a wonderful thing, so I shook it off.

Anna, naturally, loved the school. Who wouldn't? It looks like a hybrid of a farm, a country club, and a camp. It has a fireplace. It has lovely white buildings. It doesn't feel like it's in the city. It has a comforting vibe.

Of course she didn't get in. Although she made it onto the wait list, which I guess is an accomplishment on some level. What did we do to ingratiate ourselves? Not much beyond calling and keeping in touch with the AD. It's not like our unconventional family could buy JTD more land or pay for its new facility. So, we never made it off the wait list. She's going to Mirman instead.

Since then, I've learned a bit more about JTD. I had no idea that Los Angeles was littered with its rejection letters. I didn't realize that the 3rd grader we know who gained entrance had parents who worked JTD for years, attending school events although their child didn't even go to the school. Maybe they even gave money, I don't know.

So if you're seeking entrance to JTD (and hey, it really is a great school, so I wouldn't blame you), you'd better seriously work it. Get the family involved early. Go to every event. Charm the AD (although even if you're not charming her, you'd never know it). Don't be idiots. And then, cross your fingers and pray to the deity of your choice.

* Name changed for privacy. Thank you to our guest blogger, Jenny Heitz, for sharing her story. Jenny's daughter Anna attended preschool at Montessori Shir-Hashirim. She attended 3rd St. Elementary School and will enter Mirman School for 4th Grade this fall.

Editor's Note: For the past few years, my son has played football at Barrington Park in Brentwood with families from JTD. They are super-nice, extremely high net-worth, live in Brentwood and Bel Air. They love JTD. Some of the moms are socialites. They all belong to country clubs like Brentwood, Bel Air and The Jonathan Club. They vacation in Europe and Martha's Vineyard and other high-end locations.- Christina

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Author

admin