

Our Guest Blogger Tours The "Gooley & Precious" School

Description



The Fertile Crescent

Great Expectations: When School Tours Go Awry. Everyone has expectations about the private schools theyâ€™re considering for their child. When I was researching schools for my daughter, I spent plenty of time remembering what Annaâ€™s preschool head had said regarding different schools. I read lots of online material. I chatted with friends about their experiences. And then I dove in and took the tours.

Expectations, though, are funny things. They come back to bite you. Like the time I marched into a tour convinced of certain things about the school, and walked out of the tour clutching my vitals. How, I wondered, could I have gotten it so wrong?

I was fully prepared to like this nameless, not to be identified school. I really *wanted* to like it, since Iâ€™d heard great things about its academics and approach (its location didnâ€™t hurt, either). So, I entered the tour in a very friendly state of mind, as did my ex-husband and my significant other; a veritable threesome of good vibes, we were.

It was a lovely new campus, almost an oasis in the middle of surging suburbia. We were greeted and deposited in a modern library, complete with snacks and various giveaway items emblazoned with the schoolâ€™s name. Fancy. And then the AD got up to speak. And speak. And speak.

Hereâ€™s some of the things said that gave me a headache:

â–ª A gushy, mushy, corny rant about how our children are so special to each of us, and what good care they take of them. Well, for the price Iâ€™d be paying, good care is the *least* I should expect.

â–ª A constant bragging about the wonderful middle schools the kids matriculate into. One mention is enough. More than that seemed to point to some insecurity.

â–ª The headmaster telling a completely phony, self-serving story about some new kindergartner wanting to go to the school on a Saturday. Maybe the kid was just confused, not enthusiastic.

And then there was the very self-congratulatory community service program. The school hosts a â€œsister schoolâ€• type program once a year for physically challenged kids at a public school in an underprivileged neighborhood. For these kids, the AD said, the visiting day to such a beautiful campus to play games â€œwas like going to Disneyland.â€• Huh? The sister school is in an *underprivileged area, not the Third World*. There was even a video of wealthy kids pushing the poor kidsâ€™ wheelchairs around, with one of the pushers on camera, disingenuously saying, â€œThis is the my favorite thing Iâ€™ve done all year.â€• Iâ€™m all for community service, but I didnâ€™t like the tone.

What was even more bizarre was when they brought the elderly founder out to discuss his educational philosophy. It was very interesting, but it bore almost no relationship to what was going on at the school at present. This juxtaposition, in fact, was a bit stunning.

After about an hour of that, we finally got to the tour. It was given by two 6th graders, who were perfectly adorable (if perfectly canned). There was a lot of emphasis placed on an outdoor area with a silly name (Iâ€™m going to call it â€œThe Fertile Crescentâ€•). Such a verdant area was nice, although given the economic make up of the student body, how big a deal was it, really? After all, Iâ€™m sure all the kids had trees and flowers at home. Is it so important to have them at school? Just wondering about the need to point out the â€œCrescentâ€• constantly during the tour.

In fact, the emphasis on The Fertile Crescent seemed to encompass the whole problem I had with this school and its tour approach. The staff kept emphasizing self-esteem and feeling good, yet then would do a double take and describe it as an academically rigorous environment. And to its credit, when I saw the academics, they looked good. The math class I saw was fascinating and stimulating. But just when I was getting good and interested in the academics, theyâ€™d ruin it with mush. There also seemed to be a bit of denial about how children behave. My significant other asked the Vice Principal about whether the school had a behavior code (a relevant question, and one thatâ€™s particularly important for our child, who will manipulate a system unless there are very clear boundaries). The VP seemed a bit stuck. He did point out a somewhat haphazard code, but he seemed to dismiss the question with the

attitude of “we don’t have those problems here.” Please. Every school has those problems.

The capper, though, came toward the tour’s end. We walked into the music room, and a group of 1st graders “spontaneously” burst into singing “We Are the World.” Oh no. I thought the three of us were going to double over laughing. And yes, I realize that, to a less jaded little group, this musical display might hold appeal. Just not for us.

As we limped away, we all agreed that this school was wrong for Anna. She doesn’t need more coddling and self-esteem; she needs boundaries and discipline. We couldn’t get a real handle on the academic situation. And thus, we canceled her interview and tour almost immediately. One more school crossed off the list. Expectations dashed.

What was so disappointing about this experience is that the school had really shot itself in the foot. There was nothing wrong with the academics there. The staff seemed so well meaning. But the school was caught between what it really needs to be in order to survive in a competitive private school market, and what it felt the parents “needed” to hear. I guess we were the parents who just fully rejected the message as marketing, and that made us suspicious of its motives.

About a week after the tour, I received a little envelope from the school. It was a packet of sunflower seeds, the outside of the envelope stating it was from The Fertile Crescent. Needless to say, I didn’t plant them.

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 (see Jenny’s post from 7/28/10 “The Gooney and Precious School is a reference from this post). You can find Jenny blogging at www.findatoad.com a fabulous, well-edited site for adult and kids gifts under \$200.

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