

CORE VALUES

At 160 years young, Sayre School continues to inspire new generations of students

By Vickie Mitchell



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAYRE SCHOOL

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Last fall some 2,000 Sayre School alumni opened their mail and found Sayre founder David A. Sayre smiling back at them. Actually, it was a life-sized paper cutout of the 19th-century banker's face, his full cheeks ruddy, his mane of auburn hair swept high.

The accompanying "Message From Our Founder" explained that Mr. Sayre hoped the former students would take "a selfie with yours truly," add a caption "so I will know where your Sayre education has taken you," and post the photo on Facebook.

And so the fun began, and selfies from across the country and the world began to pop up on the Sayre Alumni Association Facebook page: David Sayre in Thailand, with retired engineer Tanit Khambanonda, Class of 1970. Sayre in Auburn, Alabama, with veterinary school students Mandy Kaiser '10 and Beth Blackey '05. Sayre wearing a surgical mask, in the operating room with Dr. Chip Larkin '72. Sayre in the garden, with Loretta Brock Clark '35, Sayre's oldest living graduate.

The selfies prove that a Sayre education takes its students places. And it also shows that although, at 160, Sayre is an old school, it is definitely not old school.

Sayre's 160th anniversary seemed a good time to remind grads of the school's legacy in a lighthearted and modern way, said Stephen Manella, who came to lead Sayre in 2012.

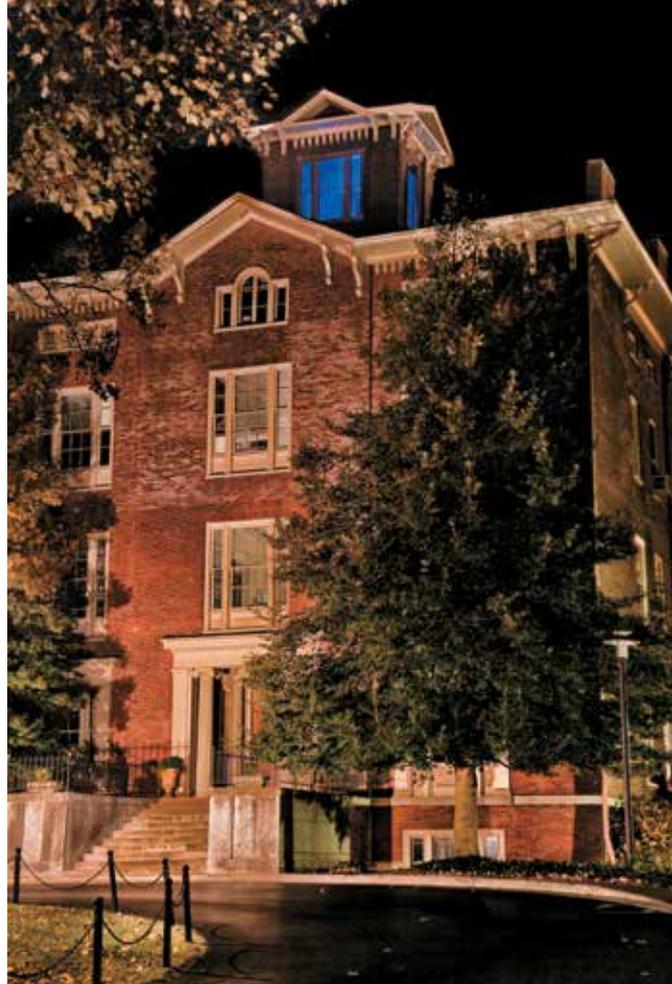
"We are proud of the longevity of Sayre, but we want people to know that the key to the longevity is its innovative spirit," he said.

The long "history of innovation," as Manella calls it, began with Sayre's founding in 1854 as the first privately endowed women's college. Then, in 1876, Sayre opened one of the state's first kindergarten programs. It offered the state's first high school computer programming

class in 1966. In 2000 it was the first school in the state to have a one-to-one laptop program for its high school students. It now has a one-to-one iPad program in its middle school.



Headmaster Stephen Manella takes pride in Sayre's blending of tradition and innovation.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAYRE SCHOOL

The original building, Old Sayre, now serves as the school's administrative office.

David A. Sayre: From silversmith to philanthropist

Sayre School's progressive path began with David A. Sayre, who moved from New Jersey to Lexington in 1811 to be an apprentice to a silversmith. Eventually he shifted careers and became a successful banker and was generous with his fortune.

Sayre's most lasting gift to Lexington came in 1854, when, with his wife Abigail's encouragement, he founded on North Limestone the first privately endowed college for women in the country and, perhaps, in the world.

At the time of Sayre's founding, "not a single endowed college for women existed in all Christendom [sic]," the president of Vassar College in upstate New York later said.

"There was vision and resolve and the courage to create something that did not exist before," said Manella.

Before Sayre opened his women's college, higher education for females was limited to "finishing schools," where lessons were on manners and etiquette.

Sayre's intention was "to educate women, not just to prepare them to pour tea," said Linda Talbott Barnes, Sayre

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School's development director and a Sayre alumna. "He wanted them to graduate with a degree that would carry as much weight as one from Transy or Centre."

Opening such an institution was an achievement; keeping it in operation was even more remarkable. Through wars and economic turmoil, Sayre survived, changing with the times. In the early 1960s, long after it had abandoned its origins as a women's college, it became the independent college preparatory school for preschool through 12th-grade students that it is today.

"Before the first running of the Kentucky Derby, before the Civil War, before the invention of the light bulb, Sayre was in existence, and it is still in existence, in the age of the iPhone," said Manella. "Think about that, and about how hard it was to be where we are and open during the Civil War and the Great Depression. It really is a remarkable story."



A cupola adorns the top of Sayre's Upper School.

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Old Sayre still anchors campus

Were David Sayre to land in Lexington today, he would find Sayre School's downtown campus right where he left it. Old Sayre, the 1820 home that he bought and expanded for his school, remains the heart of the campus. Its iconic cupola is replicated atop the Buttery, the school's 2001 cafeteria, and the Upper

DOWNTOWN AS CLASSROOM

Sayre School's location turns downtown Lexington into the school's extended classroom.

History lessons come alive at sites such as the Mary Todd Lincoln House. The handsome homes of the neighboring Northside neighborhood inspire an art class. A documentary about an environmental issue screened at the Kentucky Theatre can spark debate in a science class.

"If it's a pretty day, we might walk to Gratz Park with our writer's notebooks and find our own quiet spot and just write," said fourth-grade teacher Michele O'Rourke.

"We feel like we have two campuses," said Head of School Stephen Manella. "Our campus and Lexington, and it is all walking distance."



Woody Snowden, an Upper School history teacher, uses the city as a teaching tool in planned and spur-of-the-moment ways. When Georgian architecture came up in class one day, "I said 'Let's go!' and we started hoofing it around the neighborhood," said Snowden. "It is all right outside our door, so we can use it in an impromptu or a planned way."

Snowden's Federalism Road Rally is one of those planned activities. After he divides a class into teams, he gives each a downtown walking route and a time limit. "I turn them loose downtown to find as many examples as they can of how government affects the physical environment." As teams race around town, they make note of govern-



ment involvement in daily life, everything from "speed limit signs to

elevator regulations," said Snowden.

Sayre's urban campus also exposes its students to societal issues. After O'Rourke's fourth-graders read a book about homelessness, they went to the school's cafeteria, the Buttery, and made soup, which was then served to clients of the Catholic Action Center.

"The center's director also came and talked about homelessness and told about a family that was living in a car," said O'Rourke. "The kids were tearing up. It made the connection real."

Sayre requires its students to do community service. It is a requirement that students seem to embrace.

"Most of our students have vastly more hours [of community service] than are required," said Snowden.

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A rendering of the new Lower School. It is one of three new buildings planned to accommodate an anticipated increase in students.

School, Sayre's 2003 high school building.

On graduation day seniors line up on the 1820 brick path that leads to Old Sayre. This is a new tradition, begun by Manella, to remind the students of their school's long history and famous alumni such as women's rights champion Laura Clay and Nobel laureate William Lipscomb.

"I tell the seniors, 'you are standing where every person who graduated from Sayre before you has stood,'" said Manella.

The campus has grown since Sayre's day. It encompasses eight acres, the five of its original campus and another three in its Upper School campus two blocks north at Limestone and Huston Alley. Its current enrollment is 535 students.

With nine buildings spread across its grounds, Sayre feels much like a college campus, with students walking, running, and skipping to class, to lunch, to gym, and to the playground.

The campus will continue to change to accommodate the needs of a student body that Sayre hopes to expand by about 12 percent, or 65 students, over the next few years. Three new buildings are planned: a new Lower School, a second gymnasium, and an arts building. The campus layout would also be reconfigured "taking away some blacktop and returning some green space," said Manella.

"We had several periods of building around 2000 with the new Upper School and the Buttery, and now we are moving into that next phase of building that we think will define the campus for the next 20 to 30 years," he said.

An education of the widest range

David Sayre was mainly self-taught, but he valued formal education. His goal for students at his school, he said, was "an education of the widest range and highest order."

THOROUGHBRED CONNECTION

Given the long history of Sayre School and of the Thoroughbred industry, you would expect the two to be connected, and they are.

The school's gymnasium, built in 1962, is named for the late C.V. Whitney, a prominent owner and breeder; the Marie Louise Whitney Lower School (1972) is named for his wife, better known as Marylou Whitney. The Headley-de Waal middle school building (1963) honors Mrs. Christian de Waal, sister of Keeneland founder Hal Price Headley, and the Headley family.

A Headley descendant, Ben Haggin, Sayre Class of '84, is chairman of Sayre's board of trustees. He is a great grandson of Hal Price Headley and grandson of early Keeneland president Louis Lee Haggin II. Members of Claiborne Farm's Hancock family, including family matriarch the late Waddell Hancock, have served on its board.

"At the leadership level, on the board of trustees, there has been a long connection between the people involved with Keeneland and racing and with Sayre," said Head of School Stephen Manella.

Sayre students have also enjoyed racing and other events at Keeneland. Sayre has long held school dances, fundraisers, and reunions there.

"For my kids, who have graduated, it is a big thing to come back in October and have a huge reunion at Keeneland," said Sayre teacher Michele O'Rourke, the mother of four Sayre grads.

Several decades ago a favorite math teacher would take students to Keeneland for a lesson in statistics. And, of course, come spring and fall race meets, there are a few empty desks in Upper School classrooms.

"There are remarkable absences on Friday afternoons in April and October," said teacher Woody Snowden.



Sayre alumnus Ben Haggin has a long family connection to the school.

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There is evidence all around that Sayre offers its students just that.

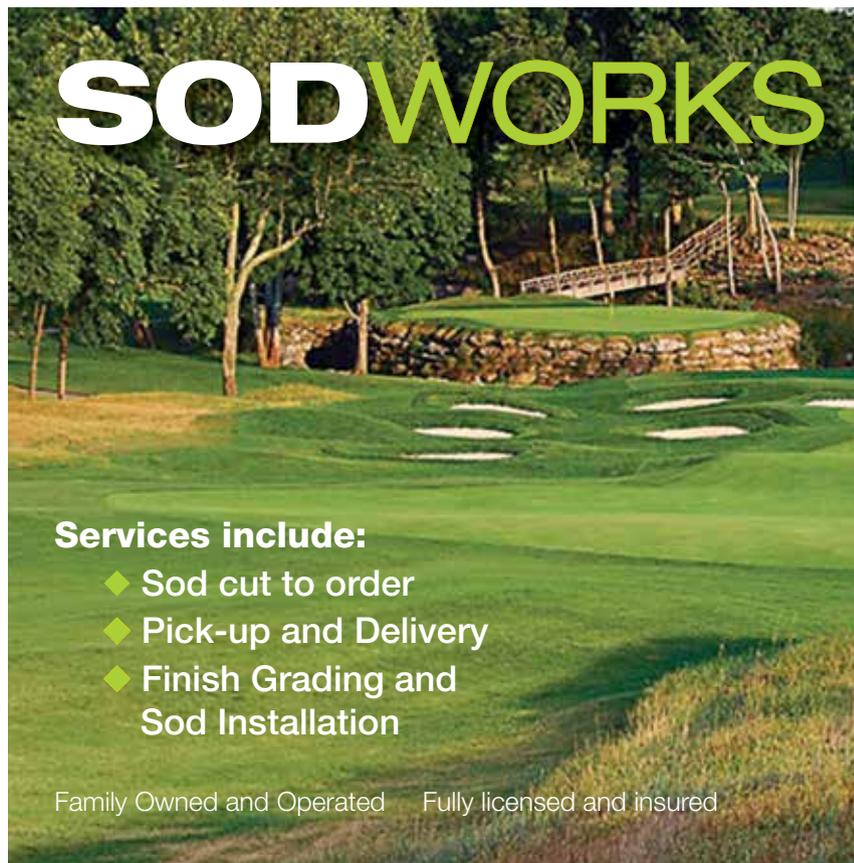
It makes the most of having a mixture of ages within its schoolyard. Through formal programs such as Future Spartans and Kids to Kids, older students mentor the young, serving as coaches for athletic teams and as guest speakers on topics such as bullying and prejudice.

Teachers look for opportunities for classes to interact with other disciplines and age groups. For example, teacher Michele O'Rourke's fourth graders and students from an Upper School English class got together to examine and discuss quilts that both classes were making as part of their studies.

From Lower School on up, Sayre also

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SAYRE SCHOOL

- 1** Sayre was founded as a privately endowed college for women in 1854, the first of its kind, predating Vassar College by seven years.
- 2** Despite the challenges of war and economic strife, Sayre has never closed. During the Civil War it was the only women's school south of the Mason-Dixon line to remain in operation.
- 3** Sayre's high school was closed in 1947 and reinstated in 1962. The year 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the Class of '65, the first high school graduating class of Sayre's modern era.
- 4** Sayre has been in its current location, on North Limestone two blocks from Main Street, since 1855. Its original building, Old Sayre, built in 1820, is now its administrative office. Old Sayre's cupola is a beacon for the campus.
- 5** Sayre has a second campus, a 50-acre athletic complex east of I-75 off Athens-Boonesboro Road. Sayre is working with University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension to turn 10 acres into an outdoor classroom. The first step will be to plant 50 apple trees and a pumpkin patch.



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Fourth-grade teacher Michele O'Rourke uses a smart board in her math class.

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puts heavy emphasis on communication and self-expression.

Jacquelin Whitaker Murphy '88, a new member of Sayre's board of trustees, came to Sayre as a seventh-grader. Her three children are all students at Sayre. "They start at such a young age, creating a play in the classroom then performing it, and, in second grade, memorizing poems and reciting them in class. Sayre makes it an open and welcoming and encouraging environment. I love what it has done for my children."

In Upper School, students must take a public speaking class and make a brief speech in front of the student body. O'Rourke's four children all graduated from Sayre, and she remembers how nervous each was before his or her speech. Yet, there was a huge payoff.

"My kids were so comfortable to go out in the world, to write papers, to express their thoughts, to share their own opinions. They are good thinkers, not just students who say, 'I want an A,'" said O'Rourke.

When Manella interviewed for his job at Sayre, he looked at the school not only through the eyes of a professional educator but more importantly as the father of three school-aged daughters. He was impressed with what he saw.

"I was looking for an institution with a strong value for education — not just academic strength but value in educating the whole child. Each of my girls has different interests. I saw that those interests would be nurtured here; I quickly saw that Sayre was not producing one type of student."

That would likely give David A. Sayre another reason to smile. **KM**