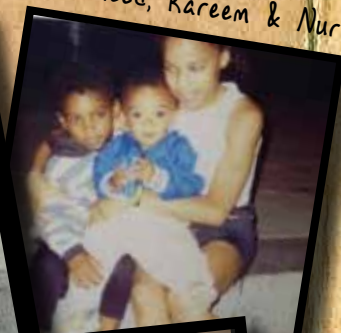


Nuri & Davina



Khaleed, Kareem & Nuri



NURI RICHARDS

The Root of a Flourishing WSMS Family Tree

West Side Montessori School lost a dear friend when Judy (better known as Nuri) Richards died of cancer in August

of 2013. Nuri was a longtime supporter of WSMS, but more than that she was an inspiration to all of us in the passion and dedication with which she upheld her lifelong belief in the importance of early childhood education, of family, and of giving back to one's community. The legacy of this remarkable woman lives on in her children and in her grandchildren, and in the choices they have made in their lives. WSMS is honored to have been one of those choices for five members of Nuri's extended family.

Nuri came to New York in the mid-1970s in pursuit of a career in entertainment after being named Miss Bermuda. David Harris remembers spotting her walking on Columbus Avenue: "I just went up to her and said, 'You are the most beautiful girl walking on Earth.'" She laughed, and they soon discovered common goals and interests (David was then beginning his career in film, theater, and television). They were married and had one child together, daughter Davina. Although Nuri and David later divorced, they remained close friends. David is a devoted father and grandfather, and, thanks to Nuri, is close to her subsequent partner, Jim Alston, and her sons by him as well.

Nuri first became a familiar face at WSMS during the mid-'90s as the mother of her two sons, Khaleed ('94) and Kareem ('96). The boys' father, Jim Alston, recalls, "Nobody could work as hard as Nuri did, identifying quality educational opportunities for our children, attending meetings, getting to know the community

personally." Nuri and Jim were both active members of the Parents Association; those of us who were there at the time will fondly remember Jim for the great fried chicken he regularly provided at the Spring Fair.

As someone with a more traditional academic background, Jim was surprised that what appeared to be minimal structure in the Montessori classroom was so effective for Khaleed and Kareem: "The boys have done extraordinarily well. I can't imagine them having a better start. Their time at WSMS fostered independence, encouraged them to try."

Nuri was also a student at the time, at Columbia Teachers College, and her studies made her even more appreciative of her sons' experiences at WSMS. After receiving her master's, she taught in the Bronx for a few years. Then, to allow for flexibility in supporting her three children's academic pursuits, she took on a part-time schedule as a substitute teacher/proctor at Hunter Elementary (where Kareem started kindergarten) and at various independent schools (including Dalton, which both boys attended). She was thrilled to return to WSMS in 2008 as the step-grandmother of Max Alston ('10), then as the grandmother of Lila Harris Franks ('12), and as the step-grandmother of Henry Alston (4W).

From the beginning Nuri recognized the impact that a quality early education can have on children—and on their parents. In recent years she dreamed of opening a school for low-income inner-city kids. She knew that a well-rounded and supportive environment encourages children to try their best. And she recognized that every child is different. She encouraged her own children to find their roles in life, and she was proud of their choices.

David, Nuri & Davina



Davina Harris went to Morningside Montessori School, then to the Chapin School. An alumna of Wesleyan University and the University of Michigan Law School, she is now a child welfare attorney working on abuse and neglect cases in the Bronx. Her mother was pleased that she chose to use her law degree in public service.

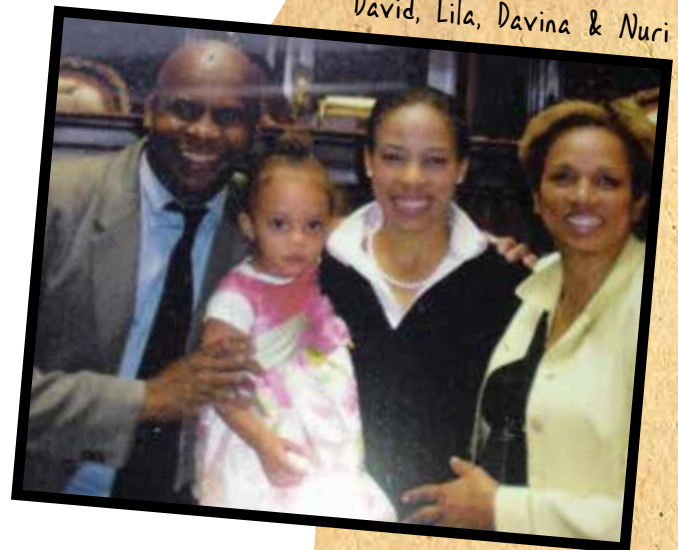
Davina sent her daughter, Lila Harris Franks, to WSMS in 2010. Davina found WSMS to be “empowering” for her daughter: “Lila has a passion for math and reading, and WSMS gave her a strong foundation, a love of learning, and the confidence to pursue her own interests.”

Lila started in the Garden classroom, and Nuri loved to pick up her granddaughter from school and see so many familiar faces in the ever-improving building. So did David Harris: semi-retired, he was often Lila’s after-school companion, and he came to know the school well. Already a fan of the Montessori approach (having sent Davina to Morningside and picked up Khaleed and Kareem at WSMS from time to time), he was impressed by the diversity at WSMS and the enthusiasm of the teachers. As he says, “Parents are engaged with what the faculty are achieving. You can always get feedback, even about difficult subjects. It’s a unique, closely-knit family.” David has embraced his role as WSMS grandfather with enthusiasm: he even appeared in this magazine, grilling hot dogs at last year’s Spring Fair.

Lila left WSMS for a Catholic school, then transferred this year to Upper West Success Academy on West 84th Street. Davina says she looked at a variety of schools for Lila and was generally attracted to progressive schools. She had reservations about Success Academy because of its reputation for being rigid. But Nuri told her, “I’ve watched my children and grandchildren as they grow, and I know that Lila is bright and curious. The Success environment is committed to challenging children. They look at a child’s potential, what she can absorb.” Her advice was well taken: Lila is flourishing and was recently promoted—mid-year—from first to second grade.



David & Davina



David, Lila, Davina & Nuri



Lila & David



Khaleed Alston graduated from Morehouse College and was pursuing a master's in Industrial Psychology at New York University when he began to have misgivings about his long-term commitment. Nuri, though already fighting cancer, had plans to attend a teaching job fair, and encouraged him to come with her. Intrigued by the opportunities he encountered there, Khaleed began interviewing with schools. He is now in his second year as a fourth-grade teacher at Grace Church School.

Khaleed has found his calling. He loves that "the kids are still young and energetic, the environment is fun, and what they do is constantly changing—children at this age are much more interesting than adults!" He has fond memories of making "bug juice" at WSMS and going to the park. As Lila's uncle, he often helped Davina with pickup. Seeing the school now, through the eyes of a teacher, he was impressed. "The gym is much cooler than I remember it, and the classrooms, too," he remarks.

Kareem Alston is currently a senior at Stanford University. He reflects his family heritage as head of the Arts & Education Committee at Stanford's Institute for Diversity in the Arts, an interdisciplinary program in the humanities that involves students in the study of culture, identity, and diversity through artistic expression. Of his WSMS days, Kareem remembers sitting on the classroom steps and singing; eating kiwis; and attempting to attach Thomas the Tank Engine to a hat he was making out of purple felt. And he remembers going to the Spring Fair, carefully removing his shoes to jump in the inflated castle, and seeing his mom watch him, a cup of coffee in her hand, chatting happily with her many friends.

Nuri encouraged her children to explore their interests, and Kareem is no exception. He has danced with Alvin Ailey American Dance

Theater and Urban Bush Women; spent time in Botswana; and worked with the Tertiary School in Business Administration in Cape Town, South Africa. He returned to Cape Town last summer to do independent research on local hip-hop culture and how it impacts social activism and perceptions of identity in a post-apartheid context. He is currently working on a senior capstone thesis and a documentary. Kareem's dad describes him as "a quiet storm." He will begin a master's program in African Studies at Stanford this fall.

Nuri's family has another WSMS connection. Jim Alston had two sons before meeting Nuri: James and Jeff. Max ('12) and Henry (4W) Alston are the children of Jeff and his wife, Robin. Nuri played an instrumental role in steering her step-grandsons toward WSMS.

Jeff had been living in Atlanta, where he was a successful banker specializing in international trade finance. When he decided to pursue his interest in creative arts, New York seemed the obvious place to do that, and living there would give him the opportunity to spend more time with his half-brothers, Khaleed and Kareem. Upon moving, Jeff founded the management and production company Rebel Soul Music, while Robin moved into a key role as Director of Legal and Business Affairs at A&E Television Networks. Though they were living up on West 142nd Street, Nuri insisted that they apply to WSMS for Max. She chaperoned their first visit. As Jeff says, "It was clear that this school was head and shoulders above the rest. We agreed that if Max got in, we'd make it work."

Jeff's family has an impressive historical commitment to education. His mother's grandfather served as president of Howard University from 1926-1960, and successive generations of his family have made high-caliber academics a priority. So Nuri's encouragement was entirely consistent with family precedents.

Max thrived at WSMS, and Jeff credits Head of School Mimi Basso, together with Max's teachers, for recognizing who he was and helping identify the right next school for him. As Robin says, "[Mimi] knew Max's strengths and weaknesses, and when she talked about whether a school was right or wrong for him, she would say, 'because....'"

Robin loves the way children at WSMS have fun while learning. She remembers peeking through the classroom door at pickup time, watching Max laughing with his friends. Henry's favorite activity this year in 4W is building 3-D structures; he doesn't realize he's learning math. Max is now a happy third grader at the Cathedral School, and he looks forward eagerly to welcoming his brother in the fall. Robin, meanwhile, is sadly contemplating Henry's final days on 92nd Street.

Nuri Richards and Davina Harris were among the guests at WSMS's 50th Anniversary Celebration in February 2013. Few of us knew then that Nuri was battling cancer; it was the last time many of us saw her. That night, Nuri reconnected with other alumni parents, as well as members of the faculty and administration stretching back to her sons' days.

Jeff Alston sums up what drew Nuri—indeed, what draws so many of us—to WSMS:

"Manhattan is a challenging place to grow up, ... you don't have the familiarity of a small town. But WSMS is really about community: regardless of your socioeconomic background, everyone is there for the same reason. It's all about the children."

In light of Nuri's multiple connections to WSMS, along with her demonstrated commitment to the education not only of her own family but of so many others, we mourn her passing but celebrate her legacy.



Robin, Max, Jeff & Henry



Lila & Nuri



Lila & David



Davina, Nuri & Lila



Kareem Alston



Khaleed

MARGOT MACK ON NURI RICHARDS:

I have had the privilege and pleasure of working with Nuri's sons, Kareem and Khaleed Alston, as well as her grandchildren, Lila Harris Franks and Maxwell and Henry Alston. I will remember all the smiles they have shared throughout their time at WSMS, and I will remember Nuri and her legacy of love and learning.

Nuri Richards was a person who modeled directly the importance of education, to her children and to everyone she came in contact with. She always asked questions and often shared information on things that she had read or a class that she might take. I remember that she was very clear that each one of her children had their own individual interests and way of learning: what was good for one may not be what the others required, each child was unique. Her boys were delightful, kindhearted children—the fruit not falling far from the tree. When it was her granddaughter Lila's turn to attend WSMS, Nuri was present at conferences and always at hand to help out with whatever might be needed.

By encouraging her grandchildren to attend WSMS, Nuri was sharing an educational setting that she thought to be special, But, in actuality, Nuri was sharing something quite special with us: a dynamic extended family with enthusiastic, knowledgeable learners.



*From top to bottom:
Henry, Lila, Max*