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Wondrous Happenstance: Meet Monique Marshall, 5th Grade Teacher

In her 19 years at Wildwood, Monique Marshall has worn many hats. She started as a 4th grade teacher, did a two-year stint as assistant librarian, taught in the Pods, and is currently teaching 5th grade. She is also an integral member of Wildwood's Multicultural Leadership Team and has been a Wildwood parent for most of her tenure here, with both of her daughters attending Wildwood.

If that's not enough service to our Wildwood community, Monique is also the creator and champion of the Buddy Partnership program between Wildwood elementary school classes and Central High School. Central High is a Los Angeles Unified School District public continuation school that is housed in one room at the Mar Vista Gardens housing development. It's a school for kids who have not been served by the system, a "last chance" place for kids who have struggled but still have a drive to get their high school diploma.

The beginnings of the Buddy Partnership with Central High started from what Monique calls "wondrous happenstance," a chance meeting at a professional development seminar with Vitaly, the teacher who runs the Central High program. "Wondrous happenstance is how my life is," Monique says. "When you are open to things, amazing stuff comes your way. And wondrous happenstance is available to anyone."

Vitaly and Monique met assuming that they were teachers from very different schools, very different classrooms, and very different school

communities. But the more they talked, the more the two realized that they had much more in common than not.

"When I went and visited Central High's one-room school, it blew me away how similar we were. Vitaly's classroom looked like my classroom," Monique says. "His approach is also to find things that are meaningful for students to connect to so that they are inspired to learn. The space he creates is rooted in respect. There's so much we have in common."

And so, seven years ago, the idea was born to create community and friendship between two groups of kids who would never otherwise come together in this Los Angeles community. "When the kids come together, we couldn't look more different on the outside," Monique says. "They're teens, and we're elementary. We have totally different socioeconomic backgrounds and completely different life perspectives. And yet, despite those differences, these two groups of kids come together and fall in love with each other."

Each year, the two classes take on a special learning project they create together. Last year, they wrote and recorded a song, "*The Friendship Revolution*," which culminated with a professional recording session. One year they made a giant mural about friendship, and another year, they studied drought together and undertook a gardening and landscaping project. Another project

was about food resources. "By total coincidence, Vitaly and I realized that both our classes were learning about food and where food comes from," Monique says. "At Wildwood, we were learning about health, organic food, and genetically modified organisms—and how the food you eat can affect your body long term. And by coincidence, our buddies at Central High were talking about food, but they were talking about 'food justice' and that not all people have the same access to food, let alone healthy food. So we were able to combine these teachings and then host a screening of the film *A Place at the Table*."

The goal of the Wildwood/Central High Buddy Partnership program was to create community and friendship between two groups of people who would not otherwise come together in Los Angeles. But so much more has come out of the program. The older students experience being role models, and they help build awareness with the kids. The young kids are not only mentored by the Central High students, but they also learn that they can look up to people who look different from them. "Vitaly and I think that we can shift peoples' belief systems and make lasting connections that bring us together, which really does make the world a better place," Monique says.

It might be a lofty goal, but knowing how Monique has already made Wildwood a better place, it seems manageable. [ww](#)

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