

# A World of Opportunity

Kirk Smothers, newly appointed head of Delaware Valley Friends School, looks to the future while honoring the school's legacy as a place where students with learning differences thrive

by PINA RAHILL  
select photography by JODY ROBINSON

**When Delaware Valley Friends School** in Paoli showed interest in Kirk Smothers as its next head of school, he was, by all intents and purposes, otherwise engaged. At the time he was enjoying a position he loved in a wonderful school in a dynamic part of New York. Even so, the possibility of working for a school as progressive as Delaware Valley Friends School had him, in a word, intrigued.

"It's the only school that I would have considered [leaving my job in New York for]," says Smothers, who grew up in Colorado and also spend time in Baltimore and New Mexico. "It's a lot to uproot a family."

In New York, Smothers was a founding director of a secondary-education program in a Quaker school for children with learning differences, also known as LD. As part of his responsibilities, he continually sought out ways to improve the school's educational model, and in the course of his search for best practices he had gotten quite familiar with the name "Delaware Valley Friends School." The decision was practically made for him.

In July, Smothers, along with his wife and his 8-year-old son, left New York and moved south, taking up residence in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Mount Airy. As the newly appointed head of school for Delaware Valley Friends School, he is now immersed in what he calls "my grand listening tour." Smothers is charged with leading a school that, over the course of its nearly 30-year history, has become known for offering a rigorous college-preparatory experience that readies students for college life and beyond.

Delaware Valley Friends School opened its doors to 21 students in September 1987. Today, the school serves more than 150 students, in grades six through 12, who have language-based learning differences such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and central auditory processing disorder. It also serves students with ADD/ADHD or who experience difficulties with executive function, organization and memory issues.

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—Kirk Smothers, head of school

Delaware Valley Friends School offers a rigorous college-preparatory experience that readies students for college life and beyond. The school also encourages involvement, either in after-school sports or other nonacademic activities. **BELOW:** Delaware Valley Friends School students Maura Weil, Daryn Youngblood, Dori Markovitz and Robin Truit are shown attending the National Association of Independent Schools People of Color Conference and the Student Leadership Diversity Conference.



"We are blessed with a school that doesn't need a reinvention," Smothers says. "We have an incredible faculty and administrative team."

Even so, Smothers realizes that Delaware Valley Friends School needs to determine where the school should focus its attention for the next 30 years. To that end, he plans to kick off a strategic planning effort, part of which includes a commitment to continuing to help students develop their skills in math and science. Throughout it all, Smothers intends to keep close to the school's Quaker roots.

Smothers, who himself is a Quaker, explains the Quaker philosophy as one that believes in an inner light. "Everyone has inherent goodness—everybody, even the person who cuts you off on the highway," he says. "At Delaware Valley, there's an incredible underpinning of looking at people as having infinite worth." This becomes powerful for children who, because of their learning differences, are sometimes considered "lesser than."

"Our community looks at them for who they are and what they bring to the work," he says. "You could never divide those two halves. It's the interweaving of those two things that make it a model LD school and an exemplary Quaker school. Those two halves feed each other so profoundly."

Delaware Valley Friends School is one of 82 Quaker schools in the nation, only two of which provide dedicated high school programs for students with learning differences. Delaware Valley Friends School was the first. More than that, Smothers believes the school is one of the most established LD schools in the country.



Dori Markovitz, who also lives in Mount Airy, recently began her senior year at Delaware Valley Friends School. She came to the school in her sophomore year, transferring from another high school where she used to feel like something of an outcast. At Delaware Valley Friends School, she found a place where she didn't feel so alone.

"Delaware Valley is a place where you don't feel like a kid with a stupid brain or a kid with a disability who is not capable of greatness," she says. "It's a place where you can figure yourself out."

And that's exactly what they are doing. In fact, Smothers says that in the course of the many interviews he undertook in vying for the head of school position, Delaware Valley Friends School students were among the best interviewers he had.

"[They're] so articulate, so comfortable with who they are," he says. "They were not abashed about asking how I felt about certain aspects of the program. They were probably among the best at being clear about direction and were unified about knowing where they wanted more attention in the program."

It was apparent to him that they were coming from an environment that had fostered the ability to establish their own voices. In other words, he says, "The school was really doing right by them."

The numbers offer a glimpse of the school's success. In an average year, 98 percent of Delaware Valley Friends School students enroll in college *immediately* upon graduation. The national average for a child with a learning difference is 66 percent, and that percentage is *within eight years* of high school graduation.

So how does Delaware Valley Friends School do it? Smothers says it takes a lot of hard work. It requires helping students understand their learning differences, and it also involves dis-

pellling myths these students might have about themselves—myths reinforced in other learning environments that default to a judgment that these kids are either unmotivated or not bright, or perhaps both.

"It's a mix of [having a] specialized understanding of themselves as learners and then giving them opportunity to apply their smarts and creativity in an environment that is safe and challenging," Smothers says. "It's finding the 'aha' moments, and that can be very empowering."

Markovitz has experienced this approach first hand.

"[Delaware Valley Friends School] challenges you to the perfect amount," she says. "They figure out a way to personalize things for you. You have these really great relationships with teachers. They're giving you work that is meaningful, things that are going to help you for the rest of your life. They were rooting for me. They want you to succeed ... in the greatest possible way."

Markovitz has also experienced nonacademic benefits as a result of her time at Delaware Valley Friends School that she describes as equally "life changing."

"I joined the Diversity Committee, started to attend conferences, have more of an extracurricular life," she says. "I had time to do other things than my work. I started to have that again and discovered things about myself. I wouldn't be as happy [without that]."

Involvement is important at Delaware Valley Friends School. Smothers points out that 80 percent of students play sports after school. "We're not just a school for athletes," he adds, "it's just one way that people participate in the life of the school."

Simply put, Smothers is excited to be at Delaware Valley Friends School.

"This school is so compelling," he says. "I truly do think that nobody else touches what we do here at Delaware Valley Friends School." ■