

The Lab Mystique

A place where every five-year-old intimidates me

By Jeff Ruby

My wife graduated from the University of Chicago Lab Schools, which means I have spent my marriage enduring stories about how great Lab School is. Most Labbies are insufferable about their affiliation with Hyde Park's legendary private school, constantly reminding the rest of us that they're smarter and more confident and better connected than we are. Sarah's fellow alums matriculate at universities with lofty mottos like *Lux et Veritas*, and they often become deans at those universities; underachievers go on to the Supreme Court or the top of major Hollywood studios.

I am the product of public schools in Wichita. My old classmates have gone on to be Wichitans. While Sarah was learning needlepoint with Mayor Daley's son and dating the offspring of notorious antiwar guerrillas who bombed the U.S. Capitol, I was tipping cows and memorizing dates (Magna Carta: 1215, Battle of Hastings: 1066). The only notable person to attend my high school was the actress Kirstie Alley, who probably should have stayed a Wichitan.

Sarah recently stuck the knife in farther by taking a job teaching preschool at her alma mater. Her first class included kids from Italy, Russia, Greece, Korea, Spain, Indonesia, China, Germany, India, Iran, and France, the progeny of academics and inventors and authors. She had black kids and white kids, biracial kids and kids of gay couples. The room was like a U.N. meeting with potty accidents.

On my first visit to Sarah's classroom, I immediately saw what made Lab so special. Ideas and games and performances bounced around the room with such velocity that I couldn't keep up. When Sarah caught a kid breaking a rule about turning his fingers into a gun, the tyke's protest was simple and logical: "Guns shoot bullets. This shoots lasers." Another child lectured anyone who would listen on the flight patterns and habitats of pigeons at Brookfield Zoo. Whispers circulate among teachers about a first grader who wrote her own *King Lear* for children. When these kids talk matter-of-factly about spending spring break at Camp David with Barack and Michelle, it's easy to forget that they aren't more than a couple years out of diapers.



No matter how many stamps Labbies have on their passports, though, they're still only four or five, and so are their brains. One day, a boy asked Sarah how long he should microwave his lunch. "Well, you had the same sandwich yesterday," she said. "How long did you microwave it yesterday?"

"Thirty seconds. It was too hot. I hurt my tongue."

"If 30 seconds is too long, how long do you think you should try today?"

He thought for a moment. "Forty seconds."

I find this exchange reassuring. My inferiority complex can run wild, but at least I've mastered the concept of greater than—less than.

Now my precocious four-year-old daughter goes to Lab too, and I'm being served the Kool-Aid again. But this time I'm drinking it willingly, as only a proud parent can, watching her soak up everything the school has to offer. It hit me—*my kid is a Labbie*—when we were gaping at a brilliant leopard at the Lincoln Park Zoo, and I asked if she thought his spots were pretty.

"They are," she said. "But they're not spots, Daddy. They're rosettes."

Illustration: Anders Nilsen