

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

By MARK SPIVEY • Staff Writer • November 23, 2008

SOURCE:

<http://www.mycentraljersey.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/200811230600/NEWS/811230305>

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

BY MARK SPIVEY • STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 23, 2008



PLAINFIELD —Norman Pressman described his relationship with his late sister Ellen as an "inseparable bond" shared between the only two children of Jewish Holocaust survivors who endured four years in concentration camps before moving to the United States to find a better life. No matter what distance their respective work put between them, he said, nothing ever diminished their closeness, a constant source of comfort throughout his life.

But it's doubtful any amount of description could ever encapsulate the permanence of that bond better than what he did on July 31, 2007. It was the day Pressman, who dedicated his life to the study of medicine — particularly oncology, or the study of cancers such as the pancreatic cancer that had claimed Ellen's life five months prior — officially stepped down from his post as CEO of MonoGen, a Chicago-based medical diagnostics company.

A little more than a year later, on his 60th birthday, Pressman received a phone call from a New Jersey Department of Education representative. The voice on the other end of the line informed him that his application to open a charter school in memory of Ellen, who spent her career in education, much of it in administrative posts throughout North Jersey, had been approved. It was one of six successful submissions in a pool of 25 applicants

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

By MARK SPIVEY • Staff Writer • November 23, 2008

(a charter school is a public school open to all students on a space-available basis that is funded by taxpayers but operates independently of district boards of education, under a charter granted by the state). That was two months ago, and Pressman, now shuttling back and forth between his Chicago home and Plainfield on a regular basis, is ready to launch a moving tribute to his sister, having started accepting applications for the school that will open next September, bearing her name.

"Education was extremely important to my sister, and education for all. She really cared about making sure everybody — rich, poor, of any background — had equal opportunity to get an excellent education," Pressman said. "I want this to be a beautiful legacy for her, but it's not just to build a monument in her name. It's to actually create something that represents what was so dear to her heart."

Crash course

Pressman admitted that a State Department of Education representative was among the first to ask him a question he's heard countless times since announcing his intention to embark on a brand new career in education at an age when many are considering retirement.

The question: what makes you think, with no experience of any kind in this field, that you can be successful doing this?

"I've worked in many different environments in my life, and what I've learned is that when you're faced with a multidisciplinary problem, what you need to do is create a SWAT team," Pressman explained. "So that's what I did. You round up experts, each in their own areas, and then you cross-fertilize."

Pressman explained that today, with nearly a year to go before the school opens, he has in place teams to direct the curriculum, administration, finance and other aspects of the new facility. Pressman said he is also

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

By MARK SPIVEY • Staff Writer • November 23, 2008

working with David Apy, the Princeton-based attorney who in 2004 won the State Department of Education's Unsung Hero Award for his work in the legal advocacy of charter schools.

Among the most key members of his newly created educational network, Pressman said, is Harry L. Powers, a longtime colleague of his late sister who has an ample amount of precisely the type of experience Pressman was seeking. Powers and Ellen Pressman left long careers in public education behind several years prior to her death to help private groups

establish more than a dozen charter schools around the state.

"Her theme was always that it all comes down to learning — whatever you do, the child needs to make progress, needs to learn, needs to see a result," Powers said of Ellen Pressman. "And that meshed very well with what I believed in."

The perfect fit

Pressman's selection process that tabbed the Queen City as the location he settled on to found his school was as simple, and democratic, as it gets.

"We looked at a lot of different cities, a lot of towns, and I literally came here and walked around with Harry through the different streets," Pressman explained. "We stopped people randomly and said, "Hey, I'm thinking of starting a charter school.""

Within two days, Pressman said, he had a petition in support of the proposed school with dozens of signatures on it. Charter schools are no stranger to the city, as its three (Queen City Academy; Union County Technology, Engineering, Architecture, Math, and Science (TEAMS) Charter School; and Ce School) represent the only three in Union County.

New Plainfield Public Schools Superintendent Steve Gallon III has effectively

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

By MARK SPIVEY • Staff Writer • November 23, 2008

declared open season on such schools since taking over the district's helm in July. When asked about them earlier this week, despite calling himself an "idealist" in believing such schools' directors were "not openly challenging the district," Gallon referred to charter schools as representing a challenge and claimed that they were incapable of providing the same quality education as the public schools.

"They can't compete," Gallon said, "with what we have to offer."

Still, public response in support of a fourth was so overwhelming,

Pressman said, that it seemed the perfect fit.

"There was so much spirit here, and it just seemed like the people wanted a choice," Pressman said.

Interest in the school since those early visits has not waned, Pressman added, saying that he has been bombarded with inquiries regarding available space.

"I cleared out my iPhone messages when I left a day ago driving here from Chicago; we brought a lot of materials with us and my wife and I had a day together to talk," Pressman explained earlier this week. "We had a really nice trip," he added, "but I got over 100 e-mail messages in the 24 hours we were driving."

Looking ahead

The Ellen G. Pressman Charter School, according to its newly established mission statement, will provide a middle school learning environment that "integrates music with academic excellence," although its founder is quick to note that musical aptitude is not a prerequisite for admission. Admission will be determined via a blind lottery with Plainfield residents being given priority. Approximately 160 students in grades 6-7 are

Chicagoan to open new charter school in Plainfield in September 2009

By MARK SPIVEY • Staff Writer • November 23, 2008

expected to attend for the 2009-10 school year, and 240 students in grades 6-8 are expected for 2010-11.

Pressman said interviews to find a director for the school have begun, and said the selection process for teachers is also under way. Monday, Nov. 17 saw the school's first public information meeting held at Plainfield Public Library, and a series of additional meetings will continue at the library tomorrow. Nov. 24.

But this, Pressman added, represents just the beginning of a much larger plan.

"I'm looking at this as a pilot program," he explained. "I'm forming the Ellen G. Pressman Charter Schools of America Foundation so that we

can take what works and clone it in other geographic locations."

Pressman said his long-term plans are to not only expand the Plainfield facility to a K-12 program, but to ultimately see 10,000 students enrolled at schools around the country within 10 years. It's an expansion of a vision Ellen Pressman had before she was stricken with cancer, officials said, as Powers noted no matter how wide the scope proves to be, her fingerprints will still be all over every school.

"She helped write much of the curriculum," Powers noted. "It's like we're all continuing working with her. We still see her as part of the process."

Mark Spivey: 908-707-3144; mspivey@MyCentralJersey.com.
