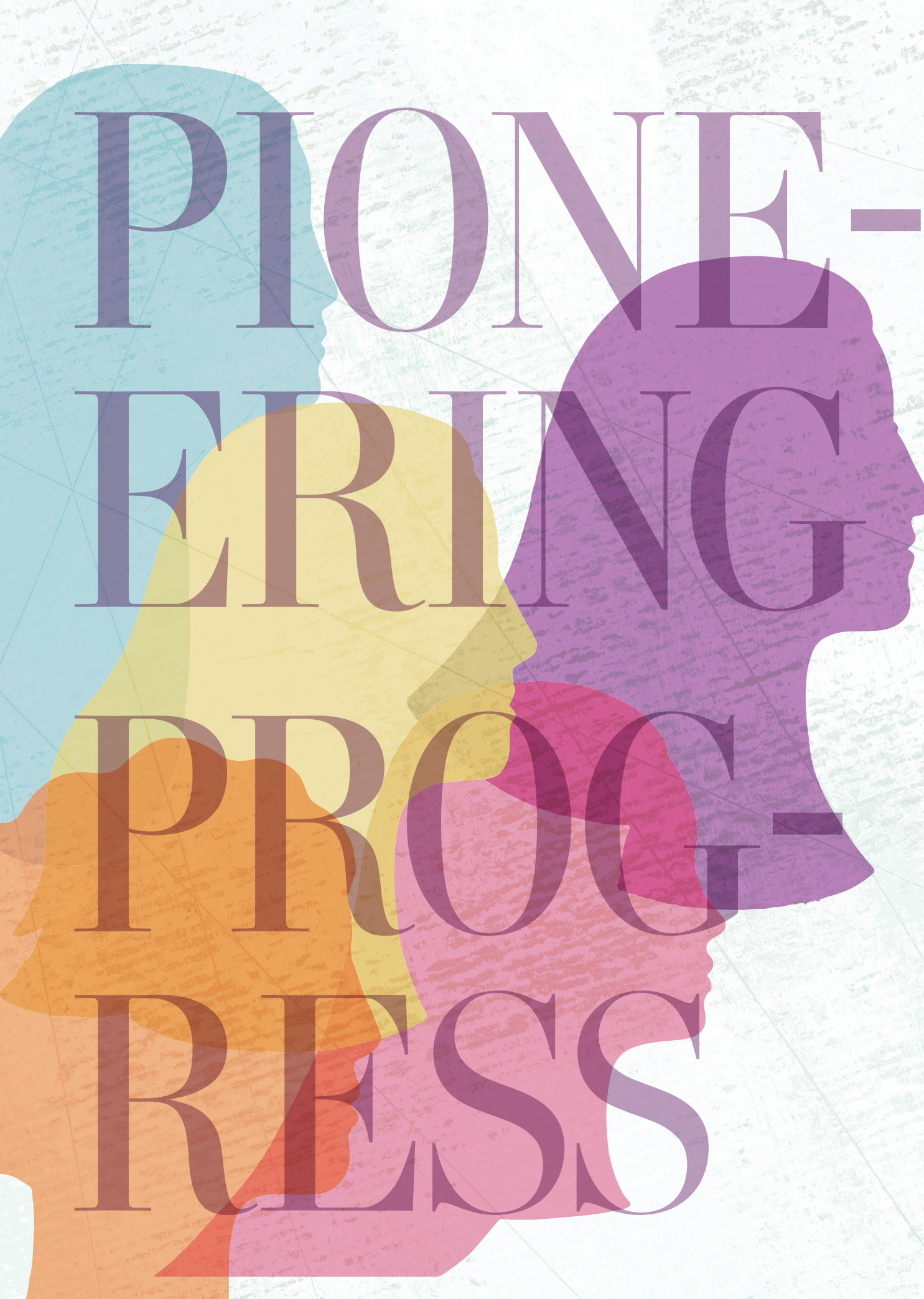




PIONEERING PROGRESS

Head of School Dr. Kelley Nicholson-Flynn leads an all-female cohort of academic heads for the first time in PDS history.

Words by Jana F. Brown Illustration by Anna Godeassi

At a summer retreat for Princeton Day School's leadership team, Kelley Nicholson-Flynn, Ph.D. asked each of the members to share their personal goals for the upcoming year. The request signaled the new head of school's immediate efforts to get everyone in sync ahead of the fall semester.

"We are deeply engaged in one another's success, and that's a direct function of Kelley's leadership," says Head of Middle School Renée Price, who also serves as assistant head of school for academic life. "We were all asked to send each other a note to respond to something in our goals, which demonstrates how we are intertwined, holding each other accountable, and also supporting one another. That's phenomenal; I've never seen that practice."

While the school has long been thriving, the arrival of Nicholson-Flynn ushers in with it an opportunity for a refreshed perspective and a chance to build on the strong foundation laid by the leadership of her predecessor, Paul Stellato. As she shepherds the school into its next chapter, Nicholson-Flynn will partner with the longest-tenured member of the academic leadership team, Associate Head of School Lisa Surace, who has a doctorate in school psychology and has been at PDS since 2009; Price, who arrived in 2015; Head of Lower School Sandy Wang, who has a doctorate in education and was appointed in 2019; and Katie O'Shaughnessey, who joined the faculty in July as head of the Upper School.

Though the group members represent a diversity of background, identity, and experience, in addition to sharing

a common goal of executing the PDS mission and creating a culture of belonging, they share something else: for the first time in school history, the head of school and each of the four academic heads are women.

"Should it be a big deal?" Nicholson-Flynn asks. "No. And also it kind of is a big deal. But more interesting than having five women in leadership roles is that we are five women who have different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds — that's exciting to me. Even with one identifier being similar among us, we're different in other ways and we're definitely different in terms of our life experiences, so it's still an incredibly diverse group."

This dynamic is nothing new for Nicholson-Flynn, whose deans were an all-female cohort when she was head of the Upper School at Riverdale Country School (2012-20). Most recently, Nicholson-Flynn served as assistant head of school for operations at the Bronx-based PreK-12 institution. In that role, she added to her list of skills a better understanding of the business, advancement, facilities, and other functions that support the work of the students, faculty, and staff. Prior to that, Nicholson-Flynn spent fourteen years at The Lawrenceville School, where she was chair of the Science Department and coordinator of Teaching and Learning Programs, among other roles.

"What is a big deal to me," Head of Upper School O'Shaughnessey says, "is that our head of school is this amazingly well-qualified woman."

FINDING JOY

No matter their qualifications, Nicholson-Flynn, O'Shaughnessey, Price, Surace, and Wang acknowledge that the administrative structure ahead of the 2023-24 academic year at PDS is still somewhat of an anomaly. In a summer 2022 article for Independent School, author Kelley King addressed gender equity in schools, noting that "women make up 78% of the teaching force yet only 27% of public school superintendents and 33% of independent heads of school, according to U.S. Census data." Although Nicholson-Flynn is a data-informed scientist with a Ph.D. in cell and developmental biology, she notes that those numbers don't tell the whole story.

"We need to all be able to look at the diversity of people in our community and recognize that talent is everywhere — in all genders, all races, all ethnicities," she says. "It's just a probabilistic event to end up with five women in charge here; it shouldn't surprise us. I'm a female scientist. When I was in school, I was in an underrepresented group. How I continued to progress despite that, in science and at independent schools, was because of a lot of people who believed in me."

While Nicholson-Flynn and her academic team members followed individual paths to education, each woman easily summons the word "joy" when talking about the work of an educator, tying into the PDS mission of discovering the joy of learning through creative and critical thought. After a career that included work as a programmer and a professional actor, O'Shaughnessey,

who received her M.Ed. in secondary education from Chestnut Hill College, found education to be the perfect bridge between her distinct interests. To make a living while pursuing her life in theater, she tutored students at independent schools in New York City and quickly realized, “I’m supposed to be an educator.”

“The thing I didn’t like about computer science was the distance between me and the user,” explains O’Shaughnessey, who began her educational path in Teach for America and most recently served as Upper School assistant principal at Rye Country Day School. “Being an actor didn’t feed my brain, but it fed the human need. I found teaching, and it brought these two seemingly disparate threads of who I am fundamentally together in all the right ways.”

Filled with infectious enthusiasm, O’Shaughnessey believes one of her strengths is “bringing a little lightness to heavy situations without diminishing the importance of them.” In addition to being a strong female role model for her students, O’Shaughnessey has many identifiers outside of her gender, including being a gay woman and a mother. She and her wife are the parents of three children (Finn, Mac ’27, and Maeve), one of whom has autism.

Although O’Shaughnessey and Nicholson-Flynn are both new to the school, they have known one another for a decade. “When I first met her, I thought, ‘What an incredibly smart and thoughtful person who will not just do the same thing over and over again but will change to make things better,’” Nicholson-Flynn says of O’Shaughnessey.

Associate Head of School Lisa Surace, an academic and former Princeton University soccer player who returned to the area when her husband became the head coach of the Princeton football team, fell in love with PDS through the eyes of a parent. Daughter Alison ’22 is a PDS graduate, while son AJ is a high school senior who attended the school from PreK–8. When Surace was head of Lower School from 2011 to 2015, she was the lone female academic head on the leadership team. In addition to her vast institutional knowledge, she is described as “grounded” and is appreciated by her colleagues for her calm demeanor and warmth. Surace approaches her vocation from her training in psychology (she earned her Ph.D. from New York University). She considers

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— Dr. Kelley Nicholson-Flynn

herself a lifelong learner and her work “a passion, not a job.”

“I love the intellectual [pursuits] at PDS and I love the diversity of academia, the people, the programs, and the opportunities,” Surace says. “I also love the engaging and collaborative environment and being in a place of learning every day.”

The personal mission of Surace is to offer students access to an education that expands their confidence, capacities, and sense of purpose in the world. It’s about empowering them to find their promise, she explains. With Nicholson-Flynn and the others, Surace shares the PDS focus on a student-centered approach, and praises the new head of school for her intentional cultivation of a welcoming and connected community.

“She brings this passion for teaching and learning, and it’s contagious,” Surace says of Nicholson-Flynn, “and she also brings a warmth and sense of excellence. The school is coming from a place of strength, and I am grateful to have been part of building that foundation.”

From the onset of her career, Surace has embraced the energy of schools, the sense of community they provide, the enduring relationships she has been able to build with students and their families, and the bonds she has formed with her treasured colleagues. She strives to help create a setting in which students feel loved and

supported, and delights in the role she plays in fueling that positive atmosphere.

“Lisa is so smart and knows everything about PDS,” Nicholson-Flynn lauds. “There is not a single thing that I have asked, ‘Hey, what’s going on with this?’ that she didn’t tell me something important, thoughtful, and wise. I have appreciated that so much.”

A UNIFIED APPROACH

Still, it’s a time of new beginnings, while honoring the school’s previous leaders and the legacy of those who remember with pride Princeton Country Day School and Miss Fine’s School before their 1965 merger.

The three academic divisions of PDS are led by a trio of dynamic women, with O’Shaughnessey in the Upper School, Price in the Middle School, and Wang in the Lower School. All three women note that Nicholson-Flynn has quickly created a team atmosphere that encourages coordination and cooperation between the academic leaders who oversee the educational journeys of students from ages four to 18. They also model a diversity and representation within their group that is important for students to see.

Born in Taiwan but educated in America, Wang is an Asian woman who describes herself as someone with “something to say, even though I’m not the loudest voice in the room.” She has appreciated Nicholson-Flynn’s ‘we above me’ approach and the similar philosophies she shares with O’Shaughnessey and Price in terms of helping kids thrive in a nurturing environment.

“What I appreciate about Sandy is how well she can get into the mind of a Lower Schooler,” Nicholson-Flynn says. “When I asked her what I should look for on my visit to the Lower School, she was sharing hardcore information about the curriculum



Photos from top left: Sandy Wang, Kelley Nicholson-Flynn, Lisa Surace, Renée Price and Katie O’Shaughnessey.

and then paused and said, 'Look for joy.' She has such a wonderful spirit."

A psychology major, Wang fell into her profession as an undergraduate teaching assistant at the Barnard College Toddler Center. She has spent her career in independent schools and holds a master's in early childhood education from NYU and an Ed.D. in educational leadership from the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University, where, coincidentally, Nicholson-Flynn taught at the organization's Summer Institute for Early-Career Teachers from 2004 to 2012.

Wang says it was her fascination with people that led her to teaching. She believes that education is really about human connection and fostering personal growth. After serving in a variety of leadership roles at independent schools in Manhattan since 1993, Wang (who is also an Olympic-certified weightlifter and proud dog mom), was drawn to PDS by the people. In fact, she withdrew her name from consideration for comparable roles at other schools after visiting campus.

"The commitment to the school and the community I saw," Wang recalls, "and the interesting balance between tradition and innovation at PDS was how I knew this was where I wanted to be." The connectedness of which Wang speaks is integral to her ambitions for the Lower School. "One is helping the school and the community see the Lower School as part of an academic institution. It is warm and inviting, but our goal is to create scholars."

Colleague Renée Price brings that same vision to her post as head of Middle School, where she offers a continuity of program and philosophy for students who come from the Lower School. According to stories O'Shaughnessey has heard, Price is the most likely to "dance with students as they pass her in the hall or sing an impromptu song about their name." Like O'Shaughnessey, Price began her livelihood on a different track, and discovered teaching while studying for the LSAT in preparation for a legal career. "What drew me to academia is pure joy," says Price, who earned her Ed.M. from Teachers College at Columbia University. "Once I started teaching, I knew there was no turning back to a job where the laughter of children was not a part of my everyday experience."

Price was attracted to PDS in 2015 by the diversity of the school community. She

knew PDS was a good fit professionally when she realized its values also lined up with her priorities as a mother. Price, who is Black and from the South, has two children (Carter '27 and Caroline '29) enrolled at PDS, and wanted that multicultural environment for them as well.

During Price's tenure, enrollment in the Middle School has increased by about 5%, while becoming increasingly proactive in its support of students' emotional, social, and academic needs and by providing ongoing professional development to the faculty. Price is also proud that the Middle School has augmented the number of faculty of color significantly "to try to mirror the diversity in the student body."

Hailed by Nicholson-Flynn as a "master of organizational structure," Price says she's looking forward to working with the 12th head of PDS. She declares Nicholson-Flynn "more prepared than any first-time head of school" she has seen in her 23 years in academia. She credits Nicholson-Flynn for her ability to manage people effectively, along with an admirable vulnerability and openness as a leader.

"Any time you have a change in the head of school, it's an opportunity for new beginnings," Price says. "Everything we do in the Middle School starts with the question, 'What's in the best interest of the student?' Kelley's student-centered approach will enhance our efforts to keep them at the core of the conversation when we design programs. Her understanding of a PreK–12 school at every level exceeds anything I've ever seen."

PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION

For her part, Nicholson-Flynn says she'll spend her first year at the helm asking questions, a direct reflection of her colleagues' description of her as an outstanding listener. The 2023–24 session will also represent the first time she has not taught a class since she launched her career teaching lab sciences at Lawrenceville School in 1998 (for many years, she also taught bioethics, a course at the intersection of science and philosophy). Nicholson-Flynn credits her mentor there, Kevin Mattingly, for changing the course of her life by investing heavily in her desire to become a teacher. Now a seasoned veteran, her students-first method indicates not only Nicholson-Flynn's innate understanding of what it means to be an

educator, but also the experiences she has held dear for her two children, Mira (23), and Jillian (15), a tenth grader at PDS.

In the midst of the head-of-school search process, Nicholson-Flynn identified a well-roundedness and wholeheartedness at PDS that matched her educational ideals. Those standards involve paying close attention to the intellectual pursuits of students, but also to the social-emotional learning, inclusion work, and preparation for global citizenship that is integral to the PDS mission.

When describing her own hopes for the work ahead, Nicholson-Flynn references the PDS summer reading book, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*, by psychologist Geoffrey L. Cohen. The author, she says, explores what it means to be a citizen of the country and the world and how communities can create belonging. Nicholson-Flynn connects the book's themes to the question of purpose, which she has previously examined.

"Bill Damon is another researcher who has done a lot of work on purpose," she adds. "He says people who have strong purpose are happier, healthier, and more successful. That's part of our mission; to help students find purpose in this high-challenge, high-support environment."

During her years of teaching at the Klingenstein Center, Nicholson-Flynn had the opportunity to dig into the idea of how students learn and what educators should be doing to best contribute to their development. Among the many rewarding aspects of her role, one that remains constant is the opportunity to witness students in her charge doing what makes them most fulfilled. She revels in observing theatrical and musical performances and athletic contests, sharing, "I love watching kids be their best." That sentiment aligns perfectly with the school's promise — and that of her colleagues — of an opportunity-rich learning community that champions self-discovery and personal growth.

"If you can create the environment, create the structure, create the calendar, and provide the resources, kids will blow you away," Nicholson-Flynn says. "They will never cease to amaze us with what they can accomplish. My job — all of our jobs — is to unlock that for the students in whatever way makes sense to them." ♡