

Lisa Lyle 9-5-2013

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LISA LYLE INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Introduce yourself.

Lisa Lyle: Okay, I'm Lisa Lyle, I'm the head of school at MICDS and I've been living in Missouri for the last seven years, having moved here because of my job.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk a little bit about your early life: where you were born; your family; did you have siblings; where did you go to school; was there a teacher that really impressed you, anything about your early life.

Lisa Lyle: So, I don't have a lot of memory of my early life. My dad was in the military. We moved a lot. When I was three months old, we left Dallas, where I was born, and went to Crete where he was stationed. I went to 13 or 14 different schools by the time I graduated from high school. My parents had a pretty rocky marriage and were sometimes together and sometimes not, so it's an odd early part of my childhood but things settled down as I was going into high school. We moved back to the area my father had been raised in in east Texas and I attended a single high school. So those years were important for me, especially because I met a teacher named Mr. Johnson. I assume he has a first name but I don't know what it is and therefore can't Google him very well, but he asked me where I was going to college and I had no plans. No one in my family had gone to college. My dad hadn't finished 8th grade. My mother had graduated from high school but hadn't pursued any college. So his question about where I would go to college kind of opened up possibilities and in Texas, if you graduate at the top of your class, you have automatic admission to the University of Texas at Austin. So it was pretty easy to make that step, with his encouragement. I took the SAT and went on to UT. It cost \$135 a semester as long as I waived the medical fee and I put myself through college as a result of that. So it was quite the experience but it was because of the conversation with him and his insistence that I take more advanced coursework and that I just think

about life a little differently, then I began to imagine a world other than the one I had been raised in.

Blanche Touhill: And how did you like the University of Texas?

Lisa Lyle: Oh, my goodness, Blanche, it was like arriving at some interesting combination...so I was raised fundamentalist Baptist so arriving from east Texas to Austin was this incredibly eye-opening experience. Everything from the vast array of courses and disciplines I didn't even know where formalized as disciplines, to coming to understand that there were people that thought so differently than I did and were bright and hard-working and experienced in ways I couldn't imagine. So it was sort of a combination of Sodom and Gomorrah because Austin in the '70s was quite the exciting place to be and this intellectual awakening. So I took coursework and philosophy of religion and art history and I was thinking I would study chemistry. Thanks to Mr. Johnson, I'd gotten a strong score on a chemistry test, the state chemistry test and had a modest scholarship to Texas to study chemistry but there were 500 in my chemistry class and I'd come from a high school of 44 in my graduating class and there were three people in my chemistry class. So I couldn't quite find a way to hold on to that, to staying in chemistry but I found all these other things that really just blew me away. Then my dad died and it sounds like an non-sequitur but I left and went to Europe in the '70s. A lot of people did that and hitchhiked around and ended up living in France for a year. So when I returned to Texas a year later, I changed my major to French and then finished an undergraduate degree in French and went on to pursue a doctorate in French after that.

Blanche Touhill: And where did you go to get the doctorate?

Lisa Lyle: So I never finished it because I had too many babies, instead of staying focused on my dissertation but I went to the University of Pennsylvania and did that, first stint. So my undergraduate degree is in French from Texas and then my coursework on a doctorate is in French literature at the University of Pennsylvania where I received a Master's in the mid '80s and then in the mid '90s, I did another Master's in private school leadership at Columbia.

Blanche Touhill: And how was that?

Lisa Lyle: Oh, that was really such an eye-opening experience as well because I was at a boarding school in New Jersey in the '90s and we were going through a tough spot in leadership at the school and I found myself sitting around with friends at night over a glass of wine and complaining and I don't do complaining well. It's not a thing that gives me much pleasure and I began to wonder about what is demanded of leadership to support an academic community and help it thrive and I was lucky enough to be awarded a fellowship at Columbia for a year of study at the Klingenstein Center which is focused on private school leadership. There were only 11 other fellows, 12 of us in the program and it gave me an opportunity to really develop a strong theoretical understanding of models for leadership and about half my courses were taken out of the business school so it gave me everything from financial management to leading high performing teams and services marketing and I don't know what all I took, but that prepared me for future leadership roles and it was mostly just because I believed it had to be possible to have leadership that really nurtures the growth of adults and kids, for adults in independent schools really over long careers, many people find their job and stay in our communities for a long, long time. So I was trying to frame the question for myself of what was required of institutions to allow people, over the course of a long trajectory, to remain vibrant and engaged in their work and really at the edge of best practices in their discipline, in their pedagogy, in addition to remaining masters of their discipline. So that's what's really compelled me to think about leadership in independent schools.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get from the University of Pennsylvania to private education? You didn't stop in public education?

Lisa Lyle: Not at all. So, my husband, I really don't know how he got his first job in private education but he was teaching at the Hunt School in Princeton and I was commuting into Penn. It's about an hour commute, all the while having babies and finishing all my coursework and thinking about preparing for my comps and the dean of faculty at the Lawrenceville School called me and said, "I hear that you teach French and we need someone part-time," and it was one of those funny moments in time because just a day or two earlier, I had looked down at my shoes in the elevator, having gotten off of the train in the dark in the middle of winter and realized I didn't even have the same shoes on, so the center wasn't

holding very well for this commuting life and I thought teaching part-time would give me time to do more writing and more prep and it would make a lot of sense. What happened actually was that it was my first experience, interestingly because graduate school was such a rich intellectual experience. Going to Lawrenceville was the first experience I'd had of being in a community that felt like a community wholly dedicated to fostering active intellectualism among kids and among adults. So in a boarding environment like that one, you would sit at the dinner table with colleagues and argue about what you'd heard on NPR or what you were teaching in your classes and at night you'd have your pajamas on and be talking with the girls about the interpretation of a poem or helping them think through an argument for a history paper and the whole community was organized to allow that to happen and I felt really energized by that because even teaching at Penn, which I did a lot and was recognized for and all of that, it still wasn't the same kind of experience because I would see my students hopefully three days a week, hopefully four days a week. If they missed, they missed and that was that. I didn't see them outside of class, other than them coming by occasionally for extra help and it wasn't that same kind of intense relationship which I did have at Lawrenceville. You are expected, in these independent schools, to not only teach and be a master of your discipline and your pedagogy, but to engage with kids as an advisor or, in my case, a house master and to coach them in a sport or in a major activity outside. So we used the term "triple threat," but the schools are organized to ensure multiple contact points between kids and adults so that you see kids at their best at something and maybe at a less strong point and they see you in a lot of different ways as well and I loved that opportunity. So it really didn't take more than a semester of teaching, maybe it was a trimester of teaching at Lawrenceville when I got, this is what I want to do; I don't want to do that other thing anymore, and frankly, I was able to, really quickly, teach more advanced courses than I could have at Penn. I was able to pursue areas of interest and passion for me intellectually and offer electives in those courses. I had stability, a solid income, great benefits package, unlike my friends who had finished their doctorates and then were chasing tenure and really struggling financially. So it worked for me, both as a professional, and it satisfied me in lots of other ways too.

Blanche Touhill: Now, you say you were in charge of a house. What does that mean?

Lisa Lyle: So, that's the language for that particular school. Some places call them dormitories. At Lawrenceville, they were called houses and my husband and I and then eventually our three children lived in a dorm with another adult family and 30 kids. So there were 30 girls that were in my charge which was shared with an assistant and then we had other folks who came into the house to do duty and had a smaller advisory group. So, in some cases, I would have them for two years, when I was in a sophomore and junior house, I had them for two years; when I had them in a senior house, I had them for just one year. But that's a lot of kids moving through over the course of 12 years.

Blanche Touhill: Do you still keep in touch with any of them?

Lisa Lyle: There are a few that I'm Facebook friends with, that I stay in touch with. Interestingly, not as much. I don't know if it was having my own children but while there, the relationships were very intense.

Blanche Touhill: So you started part-time and then you moved into a full-time?

Lisa Lyle: The very next fall. I hadn't taught there long when they offered me a full-time position and I took that.

Blanche Touhill: Well, then, when did you decide to go to Columbia?

Lisa Lyle: In the mid '90s so I had been there for about six years and I was hired under really great leadership and the school went through kind of a low point in leadership, or at least my perception was that and I started framing questions for myself about leadership and applied to the fellowship program, was awarded this wonderful, very generous fellowship. It only lasted for...that program lasted for about 10 years. It was very expensive to maintain. They replaced my salary, they provided tuition. It was a very generous package.

Blanche Touhill: Well, at the end, did you go back to Lawrenceville?

Lisa Lyle: I went back to Lawrenceville for a few years.

Blanche Touhill: In the same position or in a different position?

Lisa Lyle: In the same position. I had been accumulating additional responsibilities. It's a pretty flat organization but I oversaw the installation of the campus-wide network and a budget of about a million-and-a-half. That was my

first major project. I oversaw professional development opportunities, a seminar series but I was not department chair, I wasn't division director or anything like that that would be normal stepping stones into the next leadership role which came in 2002. So my children got a little bit older. I had a child going into high school. It kind of made sense for me to make a move that year.

Blanche Touhill: And where did you go then?

Lisa Lyle: To Minneapolis, to the Blake School. The head of school there enjoys a national reputation as a particularly strong leader and my goal that year...and thankfully I have a husband who was good with that...was to find the best head of school I could work for and he offered me an assistant head of school job. I feel, to this day, really lucky to have gotten that position but I don't know that I had a path that should have given him confidence to offer me that position. It's one of the largest independent schools in the United States and so I was lucky to get to be offered the position and smart enough to take it and hard enough working to earn the role once I was there.

Blanche Touhill: Why was it so good?

Lisa Lyle: He is an incredibly demanding supervisor so he asks great questions; he does his homework; he would know my budgets better than I did; he is a spectacular coach, so any time I was facing a choice, a decision in my areas of responsibility, he was unrelenting and his expectations around information, if I were ever under prepared for our meeting, that was immediately known and I was dismissed until I was ready to meet. He gave me authority to do my work. He came to rely on me in lots of different ways. I came to understand what I'm naturally pretty good at and to understand what it is that I need to work hard at to be good at. Those have now since become strengths but it was because I really had a boot camp in those areas: paying attention to detail, for example; not referring vaguely to things that I sort of felt were true but couldn't point to specific evidence for. He had a very strong focus on continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making. Those have since become internalized for me so I was really lucky to do that. We do not lead in the same way at all and I think there are areas that I have strengths in that he relied on me or came to rely on me and I would always sit across from him in meetings because I was able to sort of make eye contact and tell

him, let that go; you're getting too dogged with this person, or whatever. He trusted my instincts on that so I think we complimented each other well. I just learned a lot. The time then came when my youngest child was going into high school. My other children were at university and I had one year to sort of look for another job. I could easily have stayed at Blake but it was one year to look for a job. I did and I was a finalist in four searches and was really lucky enough to get my first choice. So that's how I ended up at MICDS.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about leadership, talk about your own leadership style. What do you believe a leader should do?

Lisa Lyle: I believe that our job as leaders is to see the big picture, look ahead strategically, build a shared vision through a centrifuge of conversation and holding up mirrors of what we're good at, and data analysis and then to facilitate the doing of good work by other people and we're uniquely positioned to do that, right, to ensure that they have the right resources, that the hurdles are out of the way, that we marshal PR campaigns and share positive news that helps reinforce that shared vision and then, when someone isn't able to do their work, we have the responsibility of doing the hard work of helping them find something else, either within the organization or outside the organization. So, getting people...if we use the worn out language of "getting the right people on the bus and in the right seats," I think that's also our job, to do that, and being able to recognize talent, coach people toward better performance and better realization of their hopes and dreams within their role and then, if necessary, make hard calls.

Blanche Touhill: So you came to St. Louis and you took over a school that has a long, long heritage...I'm going to say 75 years?

Lisa Lyle: Yeah, 153.

Blanche Touhill: And so they probably have ways of doing things?

Lisa Lyle: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: I'm sure they're traditional, but I'm sure also they want to meet the modern world.

Lisa Lyle: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So talk about that.

Lisa Lyle: So, I was lucky enough...although I didn't know it at the time. There were so many things I didn't understand; this is my first headship, and I'm guessing my only headship...but I didn't know at the time how important it would be to have a long legacy in an independent school of folks that really, really love the school they attended and remain committed to the school today, that's given us significant resources and the courage to make some really bold decisions. So, from a development perspective, it's just been huge. But also that ongoing stewardship of the institution: active volunteerism of board of directors really committed to the institution, all of that is part of the legacy of deep involvement in the school over generations. So that's really lucky...I didn't know to look for that but it was really lucky. I think I was an attractive candidate to them because they, too, had gone through a period of time when leadership struggled some and I got lucky. In a different time and when it's time for me to leave the school, I think the school will be positioned so that if the goal is to find someone who's led a school of a more modest size with more modest resources, they'll be in a position to attract that person. I'm not so sure, when they hired me, that they were in that position so I think it was, once again, just sheer dumb luck, for me to have the opportunity. They were interested in taking what they knew to be a good school and making it a great school so that good to great kind of language was there and they saw the areas of focus to involve teaching and learning, that they wanted to make sure that the curriculum reflected the imperatives to prepare kids for the world that they would inherit and hopefully lead in and the pedagogy to match that. Those were my areas of real strength. That was my primary focus in my assistant head role and so those were areas I could really hit the ground running on because I knew them inside and out; I love curriculum and pedagogy and faculty evaluation, for example is something we introduced my first year. We did all sorts of work on curriculum development, implemented a one-to-one laptop program, really quickly were able to make some strides. The faculty, frankly, were just chomping at the bit. They had done a lot of work in technology but hadn't had someone willing to bless that initiative and help them move forward with the one-to-one laptop program. They were doing a lot of work on project-based learning but hadn't had someone to help align that effort effectively, or to put in place responsibility. There were roles that were under realized. The department chair roles and the

dean roles, folks didn't quite understand the potential of those roles to optimize the progress for the curriculum or the work with students at various grade levels. So we put in place a lot of efforts that helped, really quickly, realize the goals of the board and people just wanted me to be successful. That was just so lucky. I didn't feel like there were tripwires. You might think, with a traditional school, that it would really drag you back. I think that, because of competition, frankly, with John Burroughs, the sense was, go for it, you need something, let's make it happen, and that's a pretty exciting opportunity. It would be much more difficult to come into an institution that was at a place feeling pretty self-satisfied and not wanting to mess things up, right? That would be really tough. So I was lucky too. I didn't know to look for that kind of school. I just didn't know.

Blanche Touhill: I understand how you really began to use the technology and use the pedagogy to make it student-centered, how one learns and children learn in different ways and you were able to implement different ways for the child to move forward in the curriculum.

Lisa Lyle: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about diversity because the whole world has changed and America, I think in particular, is opening the doors for people to go to schools like MICDS.

Lisa Lyle: That's a really exciting thing to witness. Perhaps with that real awareness of it, the school had for a long time, before I got there, made huge strides in opening the doors of the school to a more socio-economically diverse population in a country that brings with it racial diversity. So racial diversity was supported, in part, through significant investment on the financial aid side and created a community that reflected much more the diversity of St. Louis. In the last 10 years, St. Louis has also changed into a much more global community, as has MICDS. That's required less financial support in terms of financial aid, but simply a marketing of the school to a large swath. What we know is that in order to create a community that optimizes learning for all children, it needs to be a diverse community so that kids with different perspectives and life experience and different ways of viewing the world come together to grapple with important and big ideas through these different lenses so that the understanding of all children, their skills and their

understandings and perspectives are enriched by that experience. So there's a huge pedagogical argument to be made. There's, of course, a moral argument to be made as well and that is that our schools, for a long time, independent schools have been schools of privilege and the drive to create meritocracy is one that's a moral imperative as well, that those children who have the ability to contribute and benefit in significant ways from participating in our schools should have the right to come to us. I'm deeply grateful to be at a school with the financial resources to go through the admission season really essentially need-blind so that we have the ability to bring in those kids whose lives will be significantly altered and who will alter our community in important ways through their participation in the full range of activities. I think the argument to be made for families that represent the more traditional experience in our school of a more homogeneous privileged community in the western suburbs of St. Louis is to remind them...and they know this well...that the world their children will enter and compete in will be a global community and in order to learn to work across cultural difference, you have to practice and it's not always easy. So, practicing within a loving community that is united by a mission, an educational mission, means that we all bring good will to that and we can practice in a pretty safe space across cultural difference, racial difference, socio-economic difference, religious difference. So that as our children leave us and go on to college and go out into the world, they will be better prepared to not only tolerate difference, but to actually see difference as an opportunity and be effective at marshaling the skills to work with difference in ways that will give them a huge competitive advantage, I think, and, more importantly, just help them be a good world citizen.

Blanche Touhill: What are your percentages?

Lisa Lyle: So, 30% of our kids self-describe as kids of color. It's increasingly difficult to ascribe diversity to any child. So many children today, of course, choose mixed race. Our school reflects a salad that is St. Louis now so many of those 30% will be kids that come to us from India or Pakistan or the Middle East, South America, Russia. They come from all over the place and so internationally, we have 40 different languages and dialects are spoken actively in the homes of our children; 20% of the kids speak a language other than English at home; 25% of the kids received whatever demonstrated financial aid we meet. When we accept a child, we meet

100% of demonstrated financial need so that might be as much as 99% and it might be as little as a couple of thousand dollars but 25% of the kids that are in this school receive whatever demonstrated need they have.

Blanche Touhill: Is it more difficult to handle a school that starts in kindergarten and goes all the way through, or is it easier to handle the school that's just, say, middle school and the high school?

Lisa Lyle: You know, "easier" is an interesting way of phrasing it. There are different challenges at each level. The mistakes kids can make and the fears that parents bring to the table are significantly bigger and harder to grapple with at the high school level. Kids can make life-altering decisions at the high school level. Middle school is hard because parents, at that age, have to let go of some of the dreams they have for their children and re-fall in love with the kid they are now starting to realize they have and sometimes, for certain families, for certain kids, that's a pretty big transition and a pretty hard thing to grapple with and in lower school, that's probably the easiest time in terms of working in tandem with families to help raise these kids and help them realize their full potential. It's not often that you have to give up on imagining your child is going to be a great mathematician or whatever. In fourth grade, still, those things aren't quite as obvious yet and it's not as often that you get at cross-purposes with families over their hopes and dreams and aspirations and expectations for their child. So maybe that's easier, but I wouldn't say that it's easier to work with teachers. The pedagogy in lower school is so complicated. Maybe the best teaching has to take place in lower school because little kids won't put up with lousy teaching without creating their own interest and engagement. So it's really an interesting challenge but I love being in a JK-12 school and I only looked at those. So I taught university; I taught high school. I had never taught, and couldn't, below high school but I love that having a JK-12 school reminds us of what's developmentally appropriate for children and keeps us very anchored in our curriculum and in our pedagogy and our practices, in what's appropriate for kids. When you work at high school only, when I taught at Lawrenceville only and my children were still too young, I didn't know what was really reasonable to expect of a ninth grade kid, right, and it's not to dumb down, by any stretch of the imagination, a curriculum with a pedagogy, but it's to remain mindful of where kids are developmentally

so that you keep them in that zone of proximal development, of high challenge and low threat, which is optimal for learning and I don't think we would know that as well if we didn't have younger children. And, examples of great pedagogy that come to us from earlier grades, the ability to differentiate is essential at the lower school level because if you don't do that, children don't learn optimally and you can't keep them focused. At the upper school, because kids are politer and more disciplined and all of that, you could fool yourself into believing they're more homogeneous in their learning than they are and if you attend to that, then you are compelled to differentiate and many of the best strategies come to us from earlier grades.

Blanche Touhill: I know that your school is building a big science building and is going to focus, I assume...well, you've always focused on a variety of subjects but that will allow you to have a particular focus in science. Why did you decide to go down that road?

Lisa Lyle: When we went into strategic planning in 2008...so I arrived in the summer of 2007 and we were overdo on a strategic plan and it was a wonderful luxury to have a year thinking with the community about our hopes and aspirations as an institution and what we saw as strength, weaknesses and real opportunity for us. Looking at the mission, it was clear to me there were certain areas of focus that we needed to adopt in order to live fully into the mission. Science and math teaching was not a part of that. We say in our mission that we develop kids that are prepared to demonstrate compassion for all the world's people and we didn't have a single international program. It's really hard to do that if you don't get kids off campus. So that was an obvious thing to me. I knew we were going to have to work on that. What didn't dawn on me until we started a series of community conversations, so we held 16 meetings, town hall forums for parents to come in and ask any questions and think with us about what they believe we should focus on. We also had a threaded conversation online and sent out questions and surveys and all sorts of stuff like that but during those conversations, there wasn't a single town hall forum where science and math didn't come up as a conversation topic. You'll remember that since about 2000, maybe the late '90s, there's been a lot in the press about (TIM?) studies, international studies on how American kids don't measure up and parents, rightfully recognized that for their kids to be well prepared,

they're going to have to have a pretty advanced understanding in science and math and in technology, really regardless of their disciplines. And so for a long time, when we were thinking about what it meant to offer a liberal arts education...and independent schools have essentially been preparational for liberal arts colleges. It would be training for nothing in preparation for everything. So good thinking skills, good reading and writing skills, the ability to grapple with what you know and recognize what you don't know in effective ways. The challenge for us today is that the skills required to do those same things before now require a much more sophisticated understanding of statistics, for example: the ability to write but not just write on paper; you have to be able to navigate, access, process and present information from a multitude of sources. And so that imperative, then, was perceived by parents and as we, at the same time, ask our teachers to design the curriculum that they believe would serve best their students, in history and art and English and all these different disciplines, we had the facilities that we needed to deliver on that. What we didn't have was the facilities to deliver on what our teachers were hoping to do in the stem disciplines. Because our understanding about what constitutes really great learning opportunities in those disciplines requires easy access to hands-on learning, lots of laboratory time, the tools to quickly process information and data and analyze and present that in really sophisticated ways, use of probes for temperature gathering and electronic microscopes so you capture information, there's been so many strides made...and French is my area, as you know...but I've come to understand there have been so many strides made in the way in a laboratory, you access information to again access, process and present, that we're able to take a lot of human error out that used to be the normal, just normal part of doing business. So, temperature measurement: you do that with a probe these days; you don't take out the thermometer, forget to let the temperature drop before you stick it back in the liquid, whatever, and so we have much greater precision in that but we want our kids to be prepared to do that work as they go off to college, and our laptop program allows for that but the facilities also have to be ample, and our teachers wanted, not only just to ensure that all students had access to laboratory space, on the math side as well as on the science side, engineering spaces, they needed robotic spaces because so much is being done in robotics and the kids are so compelled to do that work these days. They needed spaces for laboratories where

they could have ongoing research, not just the kind of lab that you do in 45 minutes or 50 or 60 minutes and put away, but the kind of lab work that has you paying attention to a population of fish over time or fast growing plants over time and our affiliation with, for example, the Zebra Fish Lab at Washington University or with some work being done at Monsanto or at Danforth Plant Science. There are these scientists that are so hungry to work with kids so we wanted to have lab space that would allow that kind of affiliation and partnership and seeing our kids exposed to real world problems causes them to want to step up in ways that are much more...to take their own learning much more seriously, to take themselves more seriously. I don't know if you perceive this here or not, but what we're seeing is kids that, they could care less how old they are; they could care less what their credentials are but if they believe they have a real viable solution to a real world problem, they want to present that and because of the easy access they have to information, they're taking on very interesting problems, continuing to pursue answers long after a class is over with, when it's caught their attention. We've had kids involved in the Stars Program, which is a summer research program, they are transformed by that experience because they see the direct connection between what they can do in the lab and the impact their research can have on whatever it is. We have one kid who's completely committed to figuring out arsenic in drinking water because of her work in Stars. Another kid who's really fascinated with a particular protein in breast cancer and it's really fascinating to see that happen but what we believe is that can happen more as kids are taking more environmental science classes, thinking about rain water runoff and contamination and indigenous species planted along the riparian, whatever, they're posing interesting questions and are able to come up with more interesting solutions.

Blanche Touhill: And when will this building be finished?

Lisa Lyle: In February of 2014 and over the month of March, teachers will move in, get their labs all set up and all of that and then, when kids return from spring break in April, it will be open. So we'll get a couple of months this year and then, of course, hit the grounding running in the fall with that.

Blanche Touhill: Discuss your link with the global world. I know you have students that speak foreign languages and all of this but talk about how you try and get them out into the world.

Lisa Lyle: So, we've initiated a number of sister school exchanges. In each of the modern spoken languages we teach, there are sister school exchanges that provide students with opportunities, both to host guests from countries that speak the target language, as well as themselves, get out and participate in programs. But beyond world languages, which, of course, is one area and an obvious need, we've also had programs that have taken kids to do service in a medical clinic in Peru; we've had kids do field research in the Cayman Islands to look at water toxicology and so we've wanted to, both in terms of real world experience and first person experience, get kids physically off campus and we've done that through a variety of opportunities which include financial aid so that it's not a privileged experience that can only be shared by a few, but all kids, but our technology has allowed us also to have widespread collaborations around the world. So when we have middle school kids thinking about World War II, they interview friends, pals in Poland and in Germany and in Japan to ask them how they think about World War II and are surprised to see different languages used, different perspectives are held around a single global event and it gives them a different experience. So they practice collaboration, electronically facilitated collaboration and it deepens their understanding about perspectives. But that starts happening in our youngest grades and goes all the way through and sometimes it's to access data and information experts that are around the world on different subjects. We've had a collaboration with a videographer who was in Sudan providing real time footage as she was exploring refugee camps and helping our students here come to understand that experience as an example of people in crisis and what contributes to that, what solutions are available, what can we do, how generalizable that example challenges to other under developed developing countries, third world countries and all. I think what we're trying to do through the international experience is develop both a skill set and an appetite and interest level, but also an understanding of personal agency.

Blanche Touhill: I think that you're a woman who is passionate about education. Do you know why that developed?

Lisa Lyle: I don't exactly know why that developed other than to say that personally, had it not been for a single teacher in high school, I don't know what my life would have become. I don't know of anybody else in my high school that went on to a four-year college. I see the striking difference between the life my sister led and the one that I lead and the only real difference, as far as I can tell, is educational opportunities that I was afforded and that I took advantage of. So for me, personally, it's been transformative. I believe deeply in meritocracy and that all children should have the opportunities to achieve their potential. We, as a society, must facilitate that. I've been in privileged communities of independent schools. Each one has had a public purpose and a commitment to providing access to a lot of kids and I hope we continue that in lots of different ways beyond just by producing kids that share that. I suppose it's personal experience, in a large part. It's also just exciting. It's a field that has changed dramatically and it's an interesting organizational challenge and so I like that. I've been invited to apply for jobs in the corporate world. It doesn't interest me at all. The idea of being in a not-for-profit organization with a board is a really interesting organizational challenge so I think it's interesting just intellectually as well. I've just been lucky, I think, to find my way here.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your other life. What else do you do?

Lisa Lyle: Well, I have three children. They're between 21 and 26 now, all travel the world with great zest and interest so we've been lucky there. They don't all pursue educational opportunities with equal zest so that's been an interesting challenge for me personally and a great professional development opportunity. My husband and I have been together since 1980 so we are so lucky to have now 33 years of companionship and love and it's really been he who's made it possible to have such a strong investment in my own career. So I'm really, really lucky there. And I have interesting passions. So I was lucky enough to get to live in Europe a lot to work on my language skills and to travel a lot, so how lucky that's been! My mother was a great cook and she passed that on to me so I love the kitchen and friends around a table of bountiful, delicious food and I've just been fortunate to have those kinds of opportunities. So I have a rich life outside of work.

Blanche Touhill: And where do you like to travel?

Lisa Lyle: Anywhere. We'll go to Brazil in the fall. We spent time in Latin America and Central America and Europe. I spent the most time in France. I've spent about four of my adult years in France teaching at university and traveling and studying. I would really go anywhere in a heartbeat. So those folks that say they'll never retire, I don't understand, because, even though I don't want to stop learning and thinking and contributing organizationally, I would love to have chunks of time to be able to do that more.

Blanche Touhill: Now, how did you get into the International Women's Forum?

Lisa Lyle: Oh, I think because I had an angel in Betty Sims who said, "Oh, you absolutely have to meet these women." There are not many of us in education in the Forum. Most, of course, women have established themselves in industry and done really remarkable things so I must admit, I look around the room and feel both lucky to be there and wowed by what others have accomplished. It's really a remarkable group of women and I feel like I learn so much. I love that it involves women over lots of different age groups so the conversation, life experience is really different; industry interests are very different, and I'm energized by those conversations, and I love the networking opportunities too. I've had some great opportunity with Betty Schwarz to think about some collaborations that might benefit kids and I think, I would never have met this wonderful woman had it not been for the International Women's Forum.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think that your life would have been different in...I'm always talking about the women's revolution, and you were really moving through the educational institutions at that time and then teaching. Did it affect your life or would your life have been the same if you had been born 50 years earlier?

Lisa Lyle: I can't imagine it would have been the same if I had been born 50 years earlier, not in my station in life. I think that I was born at a time when, through sheer hard work, I could have access to opportunities, despite the fact that my own family hadn't focused on education. Most women I know that are 30 years older than I am were fortunate to have been into families that emphasized education and invested in education and my own mother was a very bright woman but her education came from National Geographic and Reader's Digest and it didn't come from any educational experience and she didn't see that as something she should

have pursued until after I had and I suppose she saw, "Oh, I could do this," but she, herself, didn't do that. So I didn't have models of women that were accomplished in my life. I didn't have models, really, of men that were accomplished either, professionally accomplished, I mean. When I got to Austin in 1977, from a fundamentalist background, many women didn't wear make-up; they didn't dance. It was a pretty limited world view of what women should and could be and when I first got to Austin...and, really, the feminist movement was in full swing...it was confusing to me. I couldn't imagine what these women were so irate about at first and it didn't take long before I began looking at my own personal experience and opportunities and those of women I saw around me, before I began to question power structure and opportunity and distribution of wealth and all those kinds of things. So it was a really fertile time and when I think of the eye-opening experience at UT, it wasn't just within my classes; it was within Austin in the '70s and Austin was an oasis for Texas in the '70s because you didn't have to get very far outside of Austin before attitudes were quite restrained. So it was just a lucky time. It was a lucky place to end up. I could have ended up at Texas A&M, for example, and not had that same experience. So it was really just luck, and to go on to college, to have opportunities, I really, frankly, have never felt that my own gender got in the way of very much. University had opportunity for graduate school. I looked around me, there were as many women as men, both as professors as well as...or almost as many as professors but almost. There were certainly models and in my career choices since, there hasn't been a shortage of women.

Blanche Touhill: But aren't you the first female head of MICDS?

Lisa Lyle: I am. There was a woman that was the interim head before me for a year. I'm the first female head of MICDS and, frankly, there weren't very many women even on the Mary Institute side. The most revered head on the Mary Institute side was male as well and Country Day certainly never had a female head. There are not many women today...so I haven't perceived barriers but the reality is, there are not very many women today leading K-12 large independent schools. There are many women that lead elementary schools or elementary-middle schools. There are far fewer that lead high schools and there are...I'm in a cohort of schools that are JK-12 with more than 750 kids, so kind of the largest independent schools in the United States, and out of the 54 schools, I think there are 5 heads

that are women. So 10%, maybe there are a few more that don't come regularly to meetings, but there are not a lot.

Blanche Touhill: Let me go back to when you went to Austin, a whole world opened to you. Why, ultimately, did you go into teaching? You could have gone into something else. You went into French, but you used the French in the teaching profession.

Lisa Lyle: Yes. So, as I was writing my honors thesis as an undergraduate and thinking about what to do next, I had professors who encouraged me to apply to graduate schools. So I applied to Princeton, Stanford and Penn. To tell you the truth, at that time, I had no idea that Penn was an Ivy League college. I didn't even know what that meant. I had so little experience with higher education that I didn't have the separation of hierarchies. I didn't realize that I applied to the three most difficult schools to get into in French and I was lucky to get into two of the three and I got comparable rides. I have no idea how I ended up at Penn. I thought it would be less expensive than California, I think was my thinking. I couldn't afford to go visit either school so I really made the choices blind but when I got to Penn and I started teaching, I found that what I really loved was the teaching and that I was effective at it and so that was very satisfying. There was a strong teaching assistant program there; of course, I was required to teach for my fellowship but more than being required to, I just loved it.

Blanche Touhill: And so that's the answer: you had the ability and it became a passion.

Lisa Lyle: It became a passion, yes, and I was discouraged by my major professor to focus on my teaching. I had received the dean's award for teaching excellence in my first year as a teaching associate, as a TA and my major professor said, "I don't know what you're doing but you're clearly spending too much time on your teaching," and so, of course in one of those big universities like that, the value is not in your teaching and that, too, helped me understand, when it was so appreciated in an independent school and at such odds with everything else I would have been expected to do if I'd pursued tenure at some...

Blanche Touhill: Might you have ended up in public education, because it was the invitation from Lawrenceville that got you into private education?

Lisa Lyle: I think if I hadn't been invited to Lawrenceville, I either would have gone ahead and finished, which I think I probably would have done, my dissertation, then I think I would have looked...you know, I was already presenting papers at the MLA and all of that so I was on track to look for a university job. I think that's what I would have done, yes. I think I would have done that.

Blanche Touhill: And you went to the Lawrenceville and that solidified your desire to keep going?

Lisa Lyle: I didn't even know these schools existed. In east Texas, the kids that got sent away to school were girls that got pregnant or boys that had to go to military school because they were getting kicked out of public school. It would not have been the school of choice, right, and so I didn't know that these schools...that families would sacrifice so much to ensure their children had opportunities like that and I think once I experienced independent school education, I was really spoiled. I wish all schools had the opportunity for small classes and for the teachers to make so many of their own decisions about what happens in their classroom, for them to be able to develop curricula that they believe really serves children well. I wish that were true for all schools and it's just not, but it is true in independent schools and so, while I don't only want to serve privileged children, I do want to serve in an environment where teachers can focus on their teaching.

Blanche Touhill: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Lisa Lyle: Gosh, no, this has been so much fun. I can't think of a single thing that I wish we had been able to talk about, other than believing that, for people to succeed and to overcome whatever, the barriers that we all experience in life and they take all sorts of different forms, that it requires optimism, a real belief that the world can be better and that we can have that impact on the world and not only can we, but we really have that obligation. So I hope that education instills both that optimism, as well as that sense of agency. I believe that about leadership and I believe that about schools, in general, and they don't seem so very different for me. I think that's it. I think so. Anything else you can think of? Are we good?

Blanche Touhill: I think we're good.

Lisa Lyle: Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity. I appreciate it.

Blanche Touhill: How do you prepare your children to meet problems and failure and disaster?

Lisa Lyle: Oh, goodness! It's a huge challenge for us today, I think a growing challenge for us as a school. For most of us, when we were in school, we better not get in trouble in school because we'd get in far more trouble at home and our parents didn't know much about what was going on at school, frankly, certainly weren't present at every single opportunity to see a child in a play or in a sports event or anything like that. Today it's quite different. It's a normal thing for parents to be deeply aware of everything that's happening in their child's life and there are so many factors that contribute to it, but there's a real fear on the part of parents, I think, that their child's opportunities will be compromised and the expectations for who or what their child will become are huge. That's especially true of more affluent families and so the expectations for the child are huge and the fears on the part of the parents are really significant and that means that anytime the child encounters a normal setback: not making the varsity team; getting a low grade; forgetting a homework assignment, any of those things, the parent rushes in to both help the child avoid making those mistakes, whether it's getting a private coach so they don't get cut from the team, or running home during the lunch hour to try to get the child's homework back to school, or whatever it is, so help avoid the experience of defeat or setback or frustration but then intervene when there are natural consequences to that. So maybe the parent didn't realize the homework was forgotten but when the child receives a lower mark, to intervene on that and say, "Oh, no, no, no, it was my fault; I should have gotten the homework there" or "My child clearly should have a chance to make this up" or "You're undermining my child's..." ...whatever, and there are not a lot of parents like that but I think most parents today feel compelled to try to protect their child from setbacks and to ensure all sorts of opportunities and, as a result, I don't think our children get much practice at becoming comfortable with setbacks and frustrations and develop the habit of resilience and, really, what we know about developing resilience in children is for them to face real challenges with the real prospect of failure and to overcome the hurdles and to, over time, develop the skills necessary to be successful. It doesn't come from artificial success and getting trophies for everybody.

Kids kind of recognize when something's a legitimate and when it's not and so, helping children develop a really important skill set of resilience would require that we allow them to stumble and struggle more than they do and it's very difficult to get parents to let that happen. I see in my own life, there were huge hurdles. Both of my parents were alcoholics. Neither had a strong education. We were raised in real poverty. Their marriage was unstable and somehow I was really lucky that despite all of that, to have adults that were interested in me and opportunities for success and in these children who have so much, maybe my own children included, I realize that the expectations weren't very high for me and so whatever happened, I significantly exceeded expectations. When expectations are so high and parents are so successful already, it's really hard for children to imagine a toe hold that will allow them to make their place in the world. So I worry a lot about that, you know, depression rates among affluent children are higher; it's more difficult for them to find their place in life. I worry about that. In fact...you know, you asked earlier about diversity, some of our kids that come to us from families who have had fewer opportunities actually better seize the opportunities they have, they work through adversity much better and they really feel very successful and legitimately so. And I would want that kind of opportunity for all kids. I think it serves them well but it's harder to provide.

Blanche Touhill: Would you comment briefly then on the relationship of the school to the metropolitan St. Louis area?

Lisa Lyle: Oh, you know, if I think selfishly, just as head of a single school, we're really lucky to be in a community that values independent education so much and is so aware of independent school education and where there is so much competition because that gives us not only the obligation to have clarity about our mission, but it forces us to be on our toes and each and every year earn the re-enrollment of children and families. So I love that opportunity as a head of school because it helps us work really hard institutionally to understand what we're about and get better at it every year. Beyond that, this particular school has had a long-standing commitment to the larger community, both by having parents who were leaders within the community and therefore expected that we would produce leaders for the community, a real investment in St. Louis. We have a very high rate of our students returning to St. Louis in leadership

roles and as members of the community, higher than some other schools that monitor those kinds of things, other independent schools that monitor those kinds of things. So we're plugged into St. Louis and the long-standing commitment to significant financial aid, 15% of our tuition goes towards financial aid; it's about four million dollars this year, means that there's an investment back in St. Louis to ensure that the children of St. Louis have opportunities and our commitment to public purpose of private schooling means that our children pay attention to the needs of St. Louis and hopefully work to satisfy some of those needs. I hope we're going to develop even more programs but we've had lots of partnerships with Matthew Dickey's for use of the campus and facilities and making sure our campus is open to the community. The library often holds speaker series there. We want to see ourselves as part of the community and we do see ourselves as part of the community and I hope our investment in the community will continue and deepen as well as our partnership.

Blanche Touhill: Can you tell me, what is your mission?

Lisa Lyle: Yeah. I can't quote it word-for-word because I have a terrible memory but let me tell you what the mission is. It seeks to develop children for lives of purpose and service, able to demonstrate compassion for all the world's people, prepared with confidence to meet the challenges of the world in recognition that the need of the world for responsible people prepared to do what is good and right is ever increasing and it's our job as a school to develop them.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.

Lisa Lyle: Thank you; thank you so much, thank you both.