



*(Photo by Linda Arntzenius)*

**"This is the job, I've been looking for. When people ask me if I have children I say: yes, one hundred." — Pamela Elmi**

## **Profiles in Education**

### ***Pamela Elmi***

#### **Linda Arntzenius**

Sometimes it takes time and a little luck for the right person to find the right niche. Pamela Elmi believes she's found hers as the new full-time executive director of Princeton Young Achievers. "I hope to be with PYA for a long time," she said.

Today is Ms. Elmi's first day on the job that has also (at last) presented her with the opportunity for a little closet clearing. As one of those rare supra-organized individuals — she admits to having not a single messy junk drawer in her home — Ms. Elmi is delighted to be able to put to good use a collection of puppets and puppet theaters she's been holding onto for the past seven years, since her days as education coordinator at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta. Confident that one day she'd find just the right place, Ms. Elmi hopes to introduce puppetry to her kids, as she already thinks of the 100 kindergarten through fifth grade students who will be in her care at PYA's three after-school centers: the Hank Pannell Learning Center on Witherspoon Street, and Learning Centers at Princeton Community Village and Redding Circle.

The chance to make a difference in young lives is the main attraction for Ms. Elmi, who at 38, said she is ready for the challenge. "I'm in love with the children already," she said.

A 7-year resident of Princeton, Ms. Elmi lives in the Witherspoon neighborhood with her terriers Skully and Guinness. Born and raised in Edison, she moved to Atlanta for a period before returning to New Jersey in 2000. In Atlanta, she worked as an Outreach Art Instructor for the Metro-Atlanta YMCA After School Program. It was her first job after school — she is licensed in New Jersey as an art teacher for grades k-12 and has a BA from The College of New Jersey — and her first true inner-city experience. She loved the job from which she learned much that informed her work with inner-city teens in a year-long puppetry performance project she directed. The goal was to address teen social issues in a positive way through an art medium.

After returning to New Jersey, where her parents Arnold and Margaret Csipo are a continuing influence on her life, as is her younger brother, Kenneth, who served for five years in the military with several deployments out of Fort Bragg's 82nd Airborne Division, Ms. Elmi joined the YWCA Princeton. She began as enrichment coordinator seven years ago, and was quickly promoted to Assistant Director for After School Programs and then to Director of Program Development and Facilities Manager in 2004.

## Does what kind of org you work for affect how you use our info?

At the YWCA, she was involved in racial justice programs and conferences. "I have always lived my life advocating for social justice and peace. This work comes very naturally to me." Also active in the community, Ms. Elmi got to know PYA as a board member of the Princeton Community Housing for two years. She's also been on the board of Princeton Community Works 2006, Planning Committee of Princeton University, and on the YWCA Princeton's Tribute To Women 2006, 2007 Planning Committee, as well as a member of the Advisory Committee of The Sustainable Business Network of Greater Princeton.

### *Young Achievers*

Founded in 1993, Princeton Young Achievers provides academically oriented after-school programs for children in kindergarten through fifth grade from Princeton's low- and moderate-income communities. As executive director, Ms. Elmi expects to wear many hats: running after-school programs, overseeing curriculum development, supervising staff and volunteers, managing finances, and nurturing PYA's relationships with the community. As a Trustee of Princeton Community Housing, she has a keen sense of the challenge and said that her sleeves are rolled up to meet the high goals that have already been established by her predecessor Rebecca White-Johnson who announced her retirement earlier this year.

"PYA already has a solid academic foundation and so my initial goal will be to tap into existing community resources, primarily volunteers, to draw upon the rich knowledge, expertise, and talent that Princeton residents have in the sciences, music, art, reading, not to mention health," said Ms. Elmi, who believes that good exchanges with the community will be rewarding for young achievers and volunteers alike. She will look to add to programs such as those run with groups like the School of Engineering at Princeton University, and the Arts Council of Princeton which currently runs a Creative Fridays program.

She'd like PYA to be the focus of more outreach programs by the likes of the Princeton Public Library, Princeton High School, Princeton Healthcare, as well as local businesses, gyms, and so on. "And we are always looking for book donations."

Ms. White-Johnson has offered to be on hand to help the new director ease into place. "We've had lunch meetings and have established a nice relationship," said Ms. Elmi who is prepared to enlist friends and connections in fund-raising efforts. "I have quite a little army behind me which, I'm sure, will be ready to step to the front."

One immediate goal is to have the program go through mid-June to the end of the school year rather than end as it does now in May, because of lack of funding.

One of her Princeton role models is Anne Reeves, and she hopes to lead the way for others to follow. Everybody has a talent they can share. The trick is to bring it to the fore. Her office will be in the Valley Road building thanks to a partnership with Princeton Regional Schools, which donates the space. "We work with the same kids, so it's a natural academic partnership," she said.

### *Goulash*

In addition to puppetry, Ms. Elmi plans to teach Princeton's young achievers the art of making Hungarian-style dumplings. "I love to cook all the time and wherever I work, people get to know that my family is Hungarian in origin and I love to prepare traditional Hungarian spicy dishes using paprika." Having managed a cooking school in Atlanta where she would prep for the chefs, Ms. Elmi has been privy to some five-star culinary secrets. Beside cooking at gourmet level, she collects Hungarian cookbooks and enjoys gardening, Yoga, Tai Chi, and the Jersey Shore.

Having moved from a secure position with an international organization to a very small bare bones local operation, Ms. Elmi is sanguine about the job-change that some of her friends have described as risky. PYA's strong board underlies her confidence. "Everything is a risk today but I don't worry about it because my heart is in this work. This is so much more than a job, it's my dream job."

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