

High-Impact Revitalization:

New Shepherd Commons

reinterprets foundational student experience in the Upper School

BY MELANIE SHAW

A HALLMARK of Princeton Day School’s program innovation is the freshman curriculum, designed to create a shared experience that is academic, social, developmental and integrated. Now, thanks to the collaborative efforts and generosity of members throughout the School community, PDS offers a radically rebuilt physical space for freshmen that’s as innovative and impactful as the program.

The project funding and plans had been a labor of love and careful intentionality for some time before demolition and construction started in June. All summer, crews and School staff labored strenuously, completing the work on time for a spectacular “reveal” as students returned this fall.

“Perhaps the sunshine streaming from the skylight is responsible. Or maybe it is the expansive view of the garden from the new and enlarged windows across the rear of Shepherd Commons. Whatever the reason, students can’t get enough of this refreshed space that truly brings the outside in, enhancing our students’ lives in a profound and exciting way.”

– Mia Manzulli, 11th Grade Dean and Upper School English teacher

From the low-ceilinged, dark wing that years ago housed the Lower School has risen an airy, inviting cloister distinct from the rest of the Upper School. Look up, and sweeping banks of lofty skylights (and smart new interior lighting) bring abundant natural light and an atmosphere of uplifting physical and psychological space. Look across, and soft greys and blues with teal accents,



Crews worked continuously through the summer to complete the transformation

“Love the skylights and wall of windows looking out on the Lower and Middle School kids playing and in the garden.”

– new 9th grader



“Furniture that’s functional and looks great – so many places to get together and work.”

– a small 9th Grade study group working in Shepherd Commons

along with the clean, modern lines of tables, chairs and open-ended seating modules, extend that zen sensibility. A floor-to-ceiling wall of windows places the viewer in a vast tableau of playgrounds, the lovely garden, Kristy’s Meadow and the fields and trees beyond. Here, 9th graders meet with their peer groups, consult with faculty, study and socialize. Their entire grade can now gather in the much-enlarged common space, which also serves as a stunning venue for evening events, seminars, faculty meetings and more.

“In the large freshman common space, the natural light provides an inviting space, and it’s not uncommon these days to see students from across the Upper School spending time there. The new classrooms also make it easy to work with our students, from the smartboards to the desks that break apart to facilitate group work. I also love our History Department office, which is a wonderful space for collaboration with colleagues and students alike.”

– Michael Friedman, Upper School history teacher

Ringling the Commons are 10 tech-savvy Humanities English and history classrooms for all Upper School grades, re-designed for everyone’s online, acoustical and sound-buffering needs. Two can be converted to double in size for larger groups and purposes. An ingeniously re-landscaped outdoor space creates an optional outdoor classroom oasis. Glassy, renovated offices include the writing center and freshman dean’s holdfast, and a mosaic of sleek lockers are tucked discretely throughout the space.

“I love my glass-walled office. The kids think they’re watching me but I’m actually watching them!”

– Michelle Simonds, 9th Grade Dean and Upper School Spanish teacher

As Board Chair Rebecca Bushnell ’70 explains (see full letter, p. 34), the School’s leadership and the Board are constantly focused on what it takes to provide an “exceptional, all-encompassing student experience across all grades at PDS.” The challenge is to continue to do so in changing times that seem all too stressed and



“This place is insane! Why didn’t we have this when we were in freshman?” —11th grader on first day of school, 2018

jam-packed for kids—an ever-evolving environment that demands careful rethinking and implementation. Creating the best facilities that provide the “time and space to explore, invent, create, fail and try again” is critical to successful program implementation, Bushnell notes. And over the past several years, exceptional resources including Miss Fine’s Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, the STEAM Center, extensive new programming—and now the new Shepherd Commons—have greatly enhanced that ‘time and space’ thanks to generous gifts focused on evolving education.

“We have a lot of challenges to meet as we develop new programs and facilities,” Bushnell notes. “But I know it must be done, for the sake of today’s and tomorrow’s students. And I will enjoy doing so in partnership with Paul Stellato and with the support of our generous community.”

“Paul Stellato and the Board of Trustees are always rethinking how best to deliver the exceptional experience our families expect at PDS. Critical to the success of that mission are a talented faculty and staff, carefully crafted programs and our facilities. Shepherd Commons and its surrounding classrooms have now been totally renovated and reinvigorated. Modern IT and audio-video teaching equipment, skylights, an expanded footprint, upgraded mechanical systems and lighting, and reconstruction of the walls to ensure noise separation for all means that these spaces truly deliver on that exceptional PDS experience.”

—Marc Brahaney, Trustee and Chair of the Building and Grounds Committee



ANNE SHEPHERD

A Life of Devotion and Impact

A bronze bust of a woman reposes outside Shepherd Commons. Her face is suffused with a gentle and riveting sense of grace, kindness, and care—a shepherd by calling and in name. Nearby on a brick wall, a small plaque affixed 20 years ago gleams with the lustre of age. Modest in scale, the message resonates and expands upon reflection, and even we who never knew Anne Shepherd begin to appreciate the enormity of her impact on this institution, and the world, through the countless lives she touched while here for almost half a century.

ANNE BARLOW SHEPHERD
Miss Fine’s School 1949-1965
Princeton Day School 1965-1996

For nearly fifty years she inspired our students and teachers alike with her remarkable qualities of intellectual passion, selfless generosity, integrity, and fierce commitment.

October 27, 1998

