Piper Phillips Caswell

A Champion for Every Child

Years before her father founded PHILLIPS Programs for Children & Families (PHILLIPS), a nonprofit that began as a special needs school on Old Chain Bridge Road in McLean, Virginia, Piper Phillips Caswell decided to start a school of her own. At age ten, she outfitted the small garden house in her backyard with a blackboard, bulletin board, and several small desks. She walked around the neighborhood on Saturday mornings, rounding up whatever children were willing to come. "The only admissions criteria was that you had to be a grade lower than me,"

she laughs today.

One of Piper's students happened to have cerebral palsy, another had learning a disability. She welcomed them just the same, taking responsibility of their education without question. "I've always had a passion for giving children the opportunity and encouragement that makes for a positive upbringing and a good educational experience," she "Every child deserves a

champion, and I've always been most attracted to those children with significant social, emotional, and behavioral challenges." Now the President and CEO of PHILLIPS, Piper continues to serve as that champion at the helm of an organization that has dedicated itself to the success of those very children.

Launched in 1967 as a school program serving four students of very different primary diagnoses, PHILLIPS began as a microcosm of the more expansive organization it has grown into today. At that time, there was no federal law ensuring every child the right to a free and appropriate education, regardless of disability, and the organization has been a trailblazer from the beginning.

PHILLIPS still operates according to the foundational model Piper's father charted out at the organization's inception, though some of its

services have evolved over time. When it outgrew the small house Piper's father had bought for the program's operation, he bought the house next to it. By the third year, positive referrals had grown their enrollment to seventy students. They began renting space in the basement of a church in downtown McLean, and then expanded to locations in Falls Church, Alexandria, and Springfield, Ellicott City, and Baltimore. PHILLIPS now owns two campuses in Annandale and Laurel, and in 2016 took over a program in Fairfax

to create a third campus. It also acquired a non-public career and technical education program, which allows them to teach in-demand skills to high school youth at risk of dropping out of school. PHILLIPS also provides intensive home-based services throughout Northern Virginia in their Family Partners program.

Through advocacy, education, and family services, PHILLIPS now serves over 500 youth annually, with challenges that

reflect a broad range of diverse needs. Whether Piper's team is championing a child with a disorder on the autism spectrum, a mental health issue, a trauma manifesting in a difficult way, or something else, the PHILLIPS approach is unique in that it doesn't try to fit a child into a program—rather, it fits the program around the child. "The vast majority of the time, our students are referred to us and funded by the public schools," Piper says. "The county has identified them as eligible for special education services, but lacks the resources and expertise required for their level of behavioral health needs. Our partnership allows the county to provide the whole continuum of service."

PHILLIPS now has a staff of 275 people and an operating budget of \$20 million, comprised of county, state, federal, and private fundraising dollars. While staying true to their time-tested

strategies, the organization is also pivoting to innovative approaches to career and technical education and workforce development for youth with behavioral health needs. "We currently rely on public agencies for that work," Piper says. "The results are decent, but we can do more. Today, you're two to four times more likely to be unemployed if you have a disability. That future just isn't bright enough for our youth, so we're doing something about it."

Embracing a co-op model, PHILLIPS is adding a culinary arts and urban agriculture program, including a vertical farm for growing microgreens. "Through this 'Growing Futures' program, our students can learn work skills while addressing social justice issues like food deserts," Piper notes. "We've also partnered on a 'Designing Futures' program to help youth on the autism spectrum enter the IT and cybersecurity space. And our 'Building Futures' program allows our students to build houses that we sell on the open market. I'm so proud that we're thriving after fifty years of service, and that our leadership team and board are willing to go outside our comfort zone to pursue these new avenues that will allow us to serve even more Opportunity Youth going forward."

To her core, Piper has been shaped for the unique challenges and opportunities of the PHILILPS legacy from the time she was a young girl growing up in the City of Falls Church. Her father was a behavioral psychologist and professor at George Washington University who had studied under B.F. Skinner, and Piper's views on working with children were fundamentally shaped by his philosophy. He actively pursued his wide-ranging interests, including offering a tutoring service when she was very little and running a private practice several days a week while operating the counseling center at the University. "My father always said, 'early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," she remembers. "He was humble, driven, and truly dedicated to helping other people. I don't admire anyone more than I admire him and how he lived his life."

Piper also developed an early interest in activism through the influence of her mother, a member of the League of Women Voters who regularly took Piper along when she handed out leaflets. Growing up in the 1960s near Washington, DC, some of the nation's most momentous inflection points were defining moments in her

own life. She was in third grade when her elementary school desegregated, and she remembers her parents' instructions over dinner to be friendly and welcoming to the new children who joined her class. "They told us what a good thing it was," she says. "Later, after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and the riots that ensued, they took us into DC to see the aftermath of the riots and the subsequent building of Resurrection City on the Mall. Those kinds of experiences set the stage for my social activism and advocacy, which has been a defining aspect of my life."

As the second of four children, Piper enjoyed roller skating, bicycling, climbing trees, and exploring the woods around her home. The family ate dinner together every night at 6:45, where they would listen to the news. An avid reader, she loved elementary school. "I've always been my father's daughter in that we shared similar interests," she reflects. "I've also always been a doer, like starting my own school and setting up carnivals in our backyard to fundraise for muscular dystrophy."

By all accounts, Piper's childhood was idyllic, but her early exposure to a string of untimely deaths taught her how fragile and unexpected life can me. One of her best friends, a young boy named Davey who lived down the street, went to the school nurse one day complaining of a headache. He was rushed to the hospital and passed away two days later of a brain hemorrhage. "We were only in fourth grade, and it was a defining moment in realizing that you never really know if someone's going to be here tomorrow," she reflects. President Kennedy was assassinated that same year, and Piper still remembers her parents taking the children into DC for the funeral march.

A year and a half later, Davey's mother died of the same ailment, and several years after that, her older brother's girlfriend passed away. "Those experiences had a big impact on me, creating this sense of urgency that touches everything I do," she says. "My parents were Midwesterners who taught us to always save for a rainy day. But for me, it's equally important to seize the moment and enjoy life now because tomorrow might not come."

Amidst these traumas, life went on. When Piper was in middle school, her father bought the first PHILLIPS house, and all four children would pitch in on Sunday mornings as janitors and cleaners—work rewarded by a trip out for ice cream. In middle school, the family moved to Oakton, which was decidedly more rural and conservative than Falls Church. When Piper missed a day of Spanish class during her sophomore year to protest the Kent State shooting, her teacher dropped her grade by a full letter—a move that infuriated her parents. When she returned home that fall after a summer living in Mexico with a group led by a Unitarian minister, she finished her junior and senior years at a different school. "For my parents, activism was so much more than just dinner table talk," she says.

In Oakton, Piper became more active in the Unitarian Church and joined a group called the Liberal Religious Youth, which she helped rename the Liberal Rebellious Youth. They dove into the most pressing issues of the day, including Vietnam War protests and advocacy for farmworkers. "It was an important time where I truly grasped that we each have a voice," she recounts. "We have a responsibility as citizens to be engaged in what's going on and to make our voices heard. It's one of those fundamental rights that was enshrined at the very founding of our country."

Piper's activism was matched by her volunteerism—something her parents also encouraged. In middle school, she spent her summers working with underprivileged youth, and in high school she volunteered with PHILLIPS three days a week while helping out every Sunday at her church. "The importance of volunteering is something I try to instill in my own children now," she says. "You can do whatever kind of service you like, as long as you find a way to give back."

When she graduated from high school, Piper enrolled at Peabody College in Nashville, only to find that freshman girls had curfews while the boys did not. Busy with her work on the McGovern presidential campaign, she ignored the rules and had to go before disciplinary boards. After her first semester, she transferred to George Washington University, which allowed her to intern at PHILLIPS. She began working there as a floating substitute assistant teacher in her sophomore year, and when the school needed a full-time floating sub, Piper took the job and finished her bachelors degree part-time through evening and summer classes.

When she graduated with a degree in education, Piper was able to move into a full

teaching position at PHILLIPS while getting her masters in special education at Johns Hopkins University. When she completed that program in 1980, she decided she needed a break from the education field. She began volunteering for Ted Kennedy's presidential campaign, where she landed a job until he lost the Democratic nomination to Jimmy Carter. After helping to close down the campaign, she worked several more years in politics before resuming her career in special education.

Over the next several decades, Piper worked with a wide range of populations in an array of capacities. Through her late twenties, as the de-institutionalization movement swept the region and clients were moved out into the community, she ran a new program in DC and began setting up community-based group homes for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She then worked for a Community Services Board, and at that time, Fairfax County regulations required that she hold a meeting to essentially secure permission for such homes from the surrounding neighborhood. "The people who showed up did not understand the concept and opposed it because they were afraid," she remembers. "But we can't decide who else moves into our neighborhood, so why should people with disabilities be treated any differently? That regulation has since changed, but it was disheartening at the time, and reinforced my resolve to be an advocate."

Under a tremendous amount of pressure, Piper learned how to hire, train, and manage staff, rent houses, apply for Community Development Block Grant funding, and manage real estate. She served as Director of Residential Services for the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Institute, where she cemented her leadership skills as she helped expand the program. Some of the educational and community based experiences still color the way she looks at the judicial system. "It was shocking to see how many youth, who have disabilities, end up in the school to prison pipeline," she recalls.

When she wasn't working, Piper nurtured another passion, baking. She earned several certificates and trained as a pastry chef at L'Academie de Cuisine. For a number of years, she operated a catering business on the side and sold her carrot cakes to CF Folks in DC, a bakery near the Washington Cathedral and a gourmet grocery store by the State Department. "Starting that

business informed her on the courage and tenacity one needs to start a small business," she recalls. "I learned a lot about what not to do, and would likely do it differently now." Piper pursued her entrepreneurial drive further in 2003 when, after searching for school programs that matched the particular needs of some youth, she established a private school which was approved by MSDE. While she chose not to continue its operation, developing the program and shepherding it through the approval process inspired another program to establish a school operating where her program did formerly. Both of these endeavors inspire her now as PHILLIPS' vision develops.

When Piper's father passed away in 1994, she joined the board of trustees for PHILLIPS, where she served for fourteen years while holding positions at several non-public special education schools. Also through that time, Piper and her husband, Phil, adopted two children. And though both children came with their unique needs, Piper wouldn't change a thing. "From the moment I met them, I was totally in love," she says. "They brought something into my life that nothing else ever had. They are both great kids, and as a special educator, it was life-defining for me to also experience this world from the side of a parent. I've lived it, and that informs me in a very different way than a lot of people in the profession."

Through her career in human services and special education, Piper had chosen not to ascend to a top executive role because the needs of her children had required her to be fully present. But when the long-time CEO of PHILLIPS retired after over forty years with the organization, Piper threw her hat in the ring amidst a national search for a successor, and was selected to fill the role in 2013. "My son had graduated from high school by then, so I thought, now is the time," she recounts. "I loved PHILLIPS because it has such a strong culture, which shaped me at the very beginning of my career. And I loved that it wasn't just about the Monday-through-Friday educational piece. I knew it would allow me to grow our services to meet the needs that are so prevalent."

Now, as a leader, Piper is oriented around mentoring and guiding her team members toward success. "This is not a one-person endeavor," she affirms. "I couldn't push any of these programs forward without our incredible team, and without the help of outside organizations who have been

willing to partner with us. And I couldn't have done it without the people who have mentored and encouraged me along the way, serving as examples for how to succeed."

Piper treasures the help, growth, and support of others in her personal life as well. While the love and counsel of her childhood best friend have been irreplaceable, she also credits her husband for his partnership and care along the way. "Phil is laid-back, solid, and reliable," she says. "He has always been supportive of what I want to do. Through the emotional, psychological, and financial challenges of raising our kids, we've helped to hold each other up and make it through. That's a very special thing."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Piper underscores the importance of courage and action. "Just go for it," she says. "It's okay to make mistakes and for things to not work out, because you learn a lot from failure. I see so many people who play it safe and miss out. Don't be afraid to brush yourself off, analyze what went wrong, and try again. If I hadn't, I certainly wouldn't have my dream job today."

Beyond that, Piper's story is an homage to lifetime legacies and true callings. In the vision of her father, empowered by her own innate affinity for special needs children, she has found a way to magnify her impact and advocate better for those who really need her. "There isn't a child out there I don't adore," she affirms. "No matter how tough they are. Most people don't want to work with the most complex kids, so for those of us who are drawn to such challenges, it's important that we pursue them. There have to be champions for every kind of child, and PHILLIPS youth are it for me."

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