

# Touch of Life Upon Life

An Interview with Dr. Tara Christie Kinsey, Head of School, The Hewitt School

**EDITORS' NOTE** In July 2015, Tara Christie Kinsey was appointed the eighth head of school at Hewitt. Kinsey is a teacher and scholar of modern and contemporary British and Irish literature. She began her teaching career at Peddie School and has taught at Emory University, Oxford University, Georgetown University, and Princeton University. Prior to her appointment at Hewitt, Kinsey served as associate dean in the Office of the Dean of the College and the Office of the Vice President



Dr. Tara Christie Kinsey

for Campus Life at Princeton University, where she worked closely with students to help them realize their full potential through advising and programs such as the Princeton Perspective Project and the Princeton Women's Mentorship Program. As chair of Princeton's Advisory Committee on Women's Leadership, Kinsey was the recipient of two awards: the Nannerl O. Keohane Women's Mentor Award, given to "the member of the Princeton University community who has done the most to mentor Princeton women students for leadership," and the Marvin Bressler Award, given to "the member of the Princeton family who through heartfelt support of the University's student-athletes and coaches, embodies a belief in the lifelong lessons taught by competition and athletics as a complement to the overall educational mission." Prior to her work as an associate dean, Kinsey partnered with faculty, senior administrators, and the university president on Princeton's \$1.88 billion *Aspire* fundraising campaign. Kinsey received her AB in English from Princeton University, where she was a varsity athlete, and her PhD in English from Emory University.

**INSTITUTIONAL BRIEF** The Hewitt School ([hewittschool.org](http://hewittschool.org)) is a K-12 girls' school located on New York City's Upper East Side. The Hewitt School inspires girls and young women to become game changers and ethical leaders who forge an equitable, sustainable, and joyous future.

## How do you describe The Hewitt School's mission?

Rewriting the school's mission was one of the priorities I undertook as Head of School in 2018-19 in collaboration with the Board of Trustees and a committee involving a diverse

cross-section of our school community. I believe that a strong mission statement should clarify who you are – and, importantly, who you are not – as well as what you most care about. Our mission statement sounds different because it is different. It's allowed us to make incredible hires and to attract mission-aligned students and families who care about the same things that we as a school care about. What is Hewitt's mission? It is to inspire girls and young women to become game changers and ethical leaders who forge an equitable,

sustainable, and joyous future. Some school mission statements live on the wall, but ours is an active mission, cited every day by students, faculty, and parents as we work side by side and make decisions about what's most important.

## What have been the keys to The Hewitt School's leadership and how do you define the Hewitt difference?

In leading The Hewitt School, I have endeavored, as best I can, in both word and deed, to walk the talk of our founder, Caroline D. Hewitt, who beautifully stated that "it is the touch of life upon life that matters most in a school." My office is right there when you walk inside the schoolhouse. My office door – a glass door – is often open, with students, teachers, staff members, parents, alumnae, and visitors dropping in to say hi and check in, ask a question, or share a story. I believe that effective leaders need to be willing to do what they are asking others to do, and I've been focused on modeling how the "touch of life upon life" is a defining element of our school and workplace culture.

In fact, the concept of the "touch of life upon life" brings us to one element of the Hewitt difference. At Hewitt, we are building and nurturing a school and workplace that imbues its members with a sense of meaningful and purposeful work and a sense of personally mattering within a community – not just because of what they achieve or can contribute, but because of who they are. I imagine you'd be hard-pressed to find a leader who says they don't want that. But the real question is whether or not leaders are designing environments optimized for purposeful work and a sense of personally mattering within a community. A lot of private schools claim to know each student, but at Hewitt, our students and families tell us that they "feel" it. It's not just our small size.

It's not just that I know every girl's name. It is our collective commitment to making sure that every student and family who sets foot in our school feels good, feels known, feels seen, and experiences that "touch of life upon life." This foundational aspect of our school makes people feel that they matter.

When we choose to join an organization, be a part of a community, or purchase a product, we are – whether we realize it or not – weighing its functional and emotional benefits to us. At Hewitt, we have both at high levels. We have the traditional measures of success that some might say are more of the "functional benefits" – we have excellent teachers, academic rigor, and high levels of intellectual engagement; we have grades, test scores, and impressive college lists. The Hewitt difference is that we are also asking and caring about additional measures of success – How would you assess the quality of your closest relationships in your life? How is your mental, physical, and spiritual health? Do you have regular opportunities to experience joy and a sense of fulfillment in how you spend your time? Do you feel that what you are working on matters and that you genuinely care about it? Elevating these questions alongside the more traditional ones counteracts the achievement pressure so many high-achieving girls and young women face by opening up and expanding an otherwise very narrow definition of success. We know that success is so much more than grades, test scores, and college lists, and at Hewitt we visibly celebrate a much more holistic picture of achievement – one that makes an attempt to balance how achievement looks on paper and how it feels on the inside.

## How is The Hewitt School's motto, "By Faith and Courage," ingrained in the culture and values of the school?

Our motto – "By Faith and Courage" – comes directly from our founder, Caroline D. Hewitt. It was her personal motto, and it lives on in the everyday here at our school. Where most high-achieving girls are socialized to be perfect and play it safe, Hewitt girls learn to have faith in themselves and have the courage to take risks and bounce back from failures. Where most high-achieving girls are asked to focus exclusively on curating the perfect resume, the Hewitt girl is hard at work on her inner resume as she achieves academically. At Hewitt, faith and courage form the very backbone for empowering the next generation of



*The Hewitt School on New York City's Upper East Side*

women leaders, one at a time – from the inside out. Every parent wants their daughter to be confident in herself and trust her abilities, and to be brave, to take risks, speak truth to power, and make positive change, and at Hewitt, that's what living a life by faith and courage means.

If we transition for just a moment from the individual to the societal level, we can make the argument that we've never lived through a time when faith and courage were more necessary. Our society faces a dizzying array of challenges and opportunities, both locally and globally, including poverty, lack of water and food security, inequality, climate change, social and political discord, and the uncertainty of employment and economic prosperity in light of emerging technologies and globalization. These extraordinary times require extraordinary women who have developed the faith in themselves and the courage to put their knowledge and skills to use to become leading entrepreneurs, innovators, business leaders, policy-makers, scholars, artists, and activists. Through our student-led and purpose-driven academic program, Hewitt girls and young women are learning how to rise to these and other challenges and provide the kind of ethical leadership that will shape our world for the better.

**Will you highlight The Hewitt School's commitment to research?**

Hewitt's commitment to research is another element of the Hewitt difference. Unlike the vast majority of heads of girls' schools, I never attended or worked at a girls' school before leading one. It was actually research – and specifically the absence of research in everyday practice – that inspired me to lead a girls' school in the first place. So let me tell you a little about that.

Prior to coming to Hewitt, I was a dean and lecturer in the English department at Princeton University. The university's first and to this day only female president, Shirley Tilghman, noticed that the vast majority of student leaders were men, and she commissioned a study to understand why. This is what we found: Women in their first year of college are significantly less confident than men, and they are less likely to identify themselves as leaders. When surveyed again halfway through their first year of college, women's confidence dropped more than that of the men, with two notable exceptions: women athletes and women who had attended girls' schools. Following that study, I was asked to launch a women's mentorship and leadership program at Princeton, which significantly improved the status of women's leadership on campus.

One of the reasons I came to Hewitt was because I saw a tremendous gap between what the research shows girls and young women need to realize their full potential and how we – the adults: the teachers, parents, mentors, and managers – are showing up for girls and young women every day in the classroom, at home, and in the workplace. At Hewitt, we see that gap as an extraordinary opportunity to use research to build a new and stronger bridge between what we teach girls and young women in schools, what universities want, what employers crave, and what society needs.

Hewitt is the only independent school in the country with a research team dedicated to improving girls' lives and outcomes through research connected to programming. Over the last several years, The Hewitt School has become a convening space for preeminent scholars who think about girls, education, and teaching. In

October 2022, Hewitt launched The Center for Gender and Ethical Leadership in Society, and with it, five distinct projects designed to inspire Hewitt girls and young women to forge a more gender equitable society.

Here is just one example of the Center's work in action: We know that from childhood, girls are taught to be nurturing and pleasant, to refrain from speaking up when they disagree, and to please others – often at their own expense. The Girls' Index, a large-scale national survey designed to develop a deeper understanding of teenage girls throughout the United States, found that 46 percent of girls reported that they don't say what they are thinking or disagree with others because of a fear that they won't be liked. That percentage rises to 62 percent for girls with a G.P.A. above 4.0, indicating that, using traditional measures of success, the highest achieving girls in the U.S. are the most concerned with the outside approval of others. Pressed to choose between having a voice or having relationships, many girls stay silent, going along to get along with a crowd whose behavior, beliefs, and values may not align with their own.

Many schools say that they honor their students' voices, but the Hewitt difference is that we actually put girls' voices at the center of our decision-making at the leadership level. Through a group called the Hewitt Action Research Collaborative, we train our students on how to analyze our student survey data and make concrete recommendations to school leaders on how to improve their school experience as a result. We invite girls to go beyond their "cover voice" to access their "authentic voice," the voice that shares how educators and parents can show up better for them. We ask girls to speak up and know that when they do, the adults are paying attention to them. The question they asked this year is: what does success mean at The Hewitt School? Our own students are asking hard questions about achievement pressure and success and how it's defined within and beyond the school. I see it as a sign of health that our students are asking these questions in their own work.

**How do you describe your management style?**

Given my training as an athlete in a team sport that required both individual performance as well as teamwork, I often find myself thinking of my leadership style in a twofold capacity: sometimes I am the captain of a team, and sometimes I am the coach. When captain of the team, I am on the field performing and leading in an active and very visible way. Other times, as the coach, I am watching and analyzing just off the field, taking in the full field view, and coaching others to play their best. But whether I am on or off the field, it is about the team – not me – and about what we collectively are trying to achieve. And you can't do that unless you are genuinely and authentically connected with the members of your team, and they to each other. You cannot have a close relationship with every employee at an organization with over 100 employees, but you can – and must – have a close relationship with everyone who reports to you. Leadership is about relationships. ●