

## **“WHY WESTMOUNT?”**

**– an address by Monica, one of the grade 12 valedictorians, to new applicants to Westmount, February 2008.**

Westmount Charter School may not seem like much on the outside. It's small, close-knit, and unassuming. But on the inside, it has a very big soul.

People who have never been a part of Westmount often ask if there is something that defines the school, something special that holds it together and, ultimately, that makes it worthwhile. Well, I can admit – as a Westmount student, and after years of careful and partially subjective observation – that yes, there is certainly something special here.

Some may describe it as experimental, or unorthodox. But ask any Westmount student, and they will simply smile fondly and utter that typical, notorious adage: *“only at Westmount”*.

Strange, it might seem. But if you do choose to become a part of the school community, trust me when I say those three words will carry more weight than any other chant or school-assembly mantra that you will encounter anywhere else. You may even discover that after several semesters, that inconspicuous little phrase will likely introduce or conclude every re-telling of events in your recent memory: *“only at Westmount.”*

Because, in reality, that “special something” that people often ask about is ambiguous and unique to every student that comes here. (The best part is that you don't have to go looking for it, because sometime in between learning integration theory with Ms. Martens and natural selection with Ms. Hunter, it'll probably hit you.) Underneath all the necessary and mechanical rituals of writing exams, paying attention in class, and finishing your homework, there is something undeniably profound here. You will find that more often than not, the minuscule fragments of knowledge that you gather day after day will have a tendency to stick longer than expected. Try forgetting the military strategies of World War I after building a trench in Ms. Mac's classroom, or Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith after Mr. Doyle introduces economics with an impromptu game of Pictionary.

What most other educational institutions don't realize is that there IS life beyond the course outline... beyond the uninspiring tediousness of studying day-after-day... beyond the glossy finish of textbook pages and any format of standardized examination. At Westmount, you will immediately discover that these so-called “life lessons” take centre stage, right next to linear algebra and diatomic elements.

Even upon entering the building for your first day, you'll be hard-pressed not to find a friendly face in the crowd, especially with Ms. Lai doling out cheerful “good mornings” and Mr. Green standing outside the doors to the band room with an everlasting air of friendly sarcasm. If you're early, you might even catch a brief “hello” from the English teacher, before she disappears into her classroom with a bag of disposable cutlery that she plans to use for a multicultural potluck that afternoon. While you may be surprised at first by the outward show of friendliness, sooner rather than later you'll learn to chirp “good morning” right back. Even on Mondays. (Believe it or not, the all-important social ritual of the morning greeting is a life lesson, in it's own small way.)

Simply look closer, and you will find that

- being a part of Westmount means learning teamwork on a fishing boat off the west coast;
- being a part of Westmount means learning the value of accomplishment after reaching the summit of Nahani ridge, with a compass group that –a moth ago- you couldn't even get along with;
- being a part of Westmount means learning art by painting storybook characters on the walls of a daycare, or creative problem-solving by designing a 15<sup>th</sup> century trebuchet;
- if you can believe it, being a part of Westmount means learning to appreciate life, after risking it to wake up your classmates at the crack of dawn, during spring break, just so that you can watch *Forrest Gump* with Spanish subtitles together from your hotel room in South America.

If you do ever become a Westmount student, exposed to the new macrocosm of opportunity that the school has to offer, take my advice: don't waste it. Even if you're scared, or unsure about yourself, just TRY. Take on a challenge that you're determined to overcome. Because the simple truth is that – *only at Westmount* – you won't be left floundering by yourself. All the support you need will forever be within reach.

Beside that, I simply advise you to *walk, not run* during a fire drill. Return your library books at the end of the year for a free gumball and – if you're fortunate enough to have Mr. Dziuba for a teacher – hang on to every word he says. He probably has more street smarts than anyone you've ever met. And, perhaps most importantly, step outside for a breath of fresh air at least once a week. It really clears the mind, even when you're worried about studying for that Calculus test next period.

Surely, after years of careful and partially subjective observation, I have to say, put in that extra effort on your next essay if the topic moves you. Spend an extra hour on that art project. Play an extra set of scales on that instrument before band rehearsal. Push to spring that extra lap around the gym before the buzzer rings.

Have you heard that intimidating and disgustingly over-used catchphrase "change the world"? Well - after several years at Westmount – you probably can. At Westmount, anyone can dare to be brilliant.

And it means something. That simple freedom is something I think you'll be thankful for, for the rest of your life.