

Why does JMU plant roots in a local child care center?

Engaging with the world starts at home for JMU President and Mrs. Alger BY BETSY HAY

It was a magical celebration that would have impressed even the *The Cat in the Hat*. Fifteen energetic 4-year-olds were celebrating “Dr. Seuss Day” at Harrisonburg’s Roberta Webb Child Care Center, and they were anxiously awaiting special guests.

When JMU President Jonathan R. Alger and JMU First Lady Mary Ann Alger arrived, the excitement overflowed. They settled into tiny preschool chairs and began an animated reading of the children’s favorite book: *The Cat in the Hat*. Within moments, the Algers were building curiosity and a love of reading within some of our community’s more vulnerable children.

But at the story’s happy conclusion, President and Mrs. Alger didn’t slip off to a meeting or a public event. Instead, they slipped off their suit jackets, rolled up their sleeves, and painted the feet of the excited children for a *The Cat in the Hat* art project. Then together, they helped each tiny painted foot land just right on the art paper.

And that’s when the real magic happened. With each page of the storybook and each careful placement of tiny feet, President and Mrs. Alger were sending a message that too many children in our community never hear: “You matter.”

It was this message that the Algers shared throughout JMU’s 2013 Day of Service. As a local nonprofit executive, it was my privilege to arrange their tour and escort them for the day. And it is this message that continues to describe how President Alger and his family embrace our local community. By word and deed, they radiate a sense of service and gratitude. They reach out to others in ways that say “you matter.”

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– PRESIDENT JONATHAN ALGER

President Alger describes it best: “Our community is an essential part of who we are as a family and also an essential part of JMU’s identity. A community in which institutions, organizations and individuals collaborate to solve problems is a great place to live, work and learn. It is important for me to participate actively to show that we put our dreams into action — starting in our own backyard.”

Under President Alger’s first two years of leadership, the JMU Board of Visitors adopted a new strategic plan that reflects and reinforces the importance of community engagement. JMU’s new vision statement calls for the university to be the national model of the Engaged University, engaged with ideas and the world. For President Alger, the world begins in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

Community engagement comes easily to Mary Ann Alger, as well. “I am thrilled to be part of a cohesive community and am committed to the health and vibrancy of the Harrisonburg area,” she says. The JMU first lady volunteers and serves on several local committees including the City of Harrisonburg Economic Development Committee and the Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center Advisory Board.

For Mrs. Alger, a key factor in the health of a community is the quality of public education. She has a passion for student success, knowing that early learning opportunities for preschool children lead to reading proficiency and on-time high school graduation. She serves on the Harrisonburg Education Foundation board and chairs the “We Read to Succeed” early literacy initiative of the United Way of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

Community involvement is integral to the Algers’ life with their daughter, Eleanor. “We are modeling for Eleanor what it means to be a citizen. We are teaching her to commit to give back with gratitude,” explains Mrs. Alger. As a freshman at Harrisonburg High School, Eleanor shares her time and talents as a student in the new Fine Arts Academy and as a member of the Shenandoah Valley Children’s Choir.

It has been my great honor to mentor Eleanor throughout her confirmation class experience at Massanutten Presbyterian Church. I have come to recognize that giving back with gratitude is integral to the Algers because it is rooted and nurtured in their faith. Whether reading a Dr. Seuss book to preschoolers or empowering JMU students to engage the world, the Algers bring a special brand of magic that extends beyond the campus to the community they now call home. And everywhere their message is the same: “You matter!” M

About the Author Betsy Hay has worked closely with the Alger family in their first two years in the local community. Hay is vice president for wellness and community based services for the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community.



President and Mrs. Jonathan R. Alger and Betsy Hay at the Roberta Webb Child Care Center in Harrisonburg.