

Tiny Tots Invade Morningside Campus

Children Bring Refreshing Breeze To Columbia

By **BENJAMIN RYAN**
Spectator Staff Writer

As harried students barrel past, enveloped in a world of term papers, job interviews, and Saturday's lingering hangovers, Kelly sits blithely on top of the sundial, tending to more important matters.

"I like to blow bubbles," she says in a high-pitched voice, popping a few into the air with her tiny mouth. Decked out in a neon pink parka, turquoise corduroys, and Velcro shoes, this Columbia community member has uncovered the true spirit of existentialism and sits poised to become a leading philosopher of tomorrow.

Perhaps being four years old gives her an unbiased edge in her search for ultimate truth. Undaunted by the ominous names etched into Butler Library which loom far, far above her head, Kelly continues in her determined exploration of the nature of soap suds and their dubious connection to hedonism.

It's the invasion of the small child. Where in the world do they come from, these tiny anomalies?

"We come from New York," retorts Kate, an especially street smart 4-year-old who is on campus to meet up with her good buddies, Sophie and Avital, both much older at five.

In the insular adult world of academia, knee high youngsters like these flock with their parents and guardians to the Columbia campus each day, serving as a reality check for a community which values board scores and dissertations far more than peanut butter and jelly and pig tails.

Unimpressed by the volume of the libraries or which professor won the Pulitzer this year, these tots know the true importance of life—and it comes in the form of sliding down ramps, running through the grass with their friends, and games of "Duck, Duck, Goose."

Neighborhood parents see the Columbia campus as a safe open space for their children to stretch their legs. They enjoy the sundial meeting place where their children not only get a chance to see other kids, but where the adults can catch up with each other as well.

"Where else in New York can they be in a safe, enclosed space and really run around," remarks Christina Gabriel, mother to Allen John and Theo, 14 months and three and one-half years, respectively. As her husband Manfred studies law, Christine often brings the crew onto College Walk to wait for him.

Like many graduate students or faculty with children, the Gabriels live in a neighborhood with limited



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The cheerfulness and innocence of young children bring an uplifting feeling to the Columbia campus.

options for play space. Morningside Park is considered too dangerous and Riverside too far to walk, so the campus thoroughfare becomes a haven for free play.

The Columbia Greenhouse, one of Morningside Height's resident pre-schools, often carts their kids over to campus from their classrooms on 116th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Though they do have a play yard in the back of the building, the students often prefer the whirl of life within the Columbia gates.

Partly subsidized by Columbia, the school has 92 students between the ages of two and five years old, many of whom are children of Columbia affiliates. The school runs from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., with an extended day program until 4 p.m. After picking the children up, parents or baby sitters often head over to campus for an afternoon romp.

"It's a wonderful retreat for them," says Columbia Greenhouse director, Vicki Aspenberg, who stresses her appreciation for the University's relationship with the school.

Kids also enjoy the many different goings on through the quad—the Bacchanal festival, outdoor theater rehearsals, and the Ultimate Frisbee team. However, sometimes they are far too engrossed in a myopic existence to take much interest in the world around them.

As two MFA drama students perform the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene on the sundial, the kids have deaf ears to culture, and concern themselves only with tearing signs off of the ground.

Perhaps fraternizing with the "big kids," whom they aptly address as "Mister," is a bit out of their reach.

"No, we don't want to meet them," says Sophie. "Maybe when we get older." She is not particularly

impressed by the collegiate prospects of the University, and does not anticipate matriculating here.

The Columbia students who take notice of the children often enjoy the sharp contrast the youngsters offer to their own manic existences.

"They're a nice change of pace from the jaded college students... They're so oblivious. It's so refreshing," said Annie Levy, BC '01, who said that she does not interact with the students. "But they're fun to laugh at," she adds. "They're funny. They do little dances and they talk to themselves."

"I feel like it's another thing that makes Columbia different from other colleges," said Chris Thiemann, CC '02. "Most colleges don't have little kids running around."

Thiemann knows this from experience. "This used to be me. I used to run around Columbia when my dad was a student... So yes, my mom and I would play on the steps while my dad was taking classes at SEAS," he said.

But on the downside, campus life does offer one stifling challenge to Columbia's burgeoning feminist, as Avital puts quite bluntly: "It would be much funner if there were no boys."

Let the wild rumpus begin.

