

WAB20 Lianxi Special: Part One

The Founders'

'Story of WAB'

by Hilary Munro

"Are there no more 'likelies' Michael?" we asked co-founder Michael Crook. 'No, not really,' he replied, "Only this one at the No. 3 Textile Company off the Fourth Ring Road. It's probably not worth going there."

And so we nearly didn't.

We stepped from bone-cold Beijing into green humidity and banana trees with grey buildings and dusty bare trees just visible through dirty glass. For months the phones had rung off the hook for co-founders Sabina Brady and Michael, leading us into some very unlikely or awkward locations. At last, despite being a bit surreal, we knew we had found WAB!

One month earlier, on January 7, 1994, we had received permission from Li Lan Qing, Vice Premier of the State Council, responsible for Education, to found a private school for foreign nationals using a foreign curriculum, with foreign ownership. Back then, all foreign children were educated in either schools run by Diplomatic Missions under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Chinese schools using a Chinese curriculum.

As a result of China's Open Door Policy, by the '90s, the diplomatic schools main clientèle, especially those offering Western English-language curricula, were no longer the children of their missions alone, but also those of non-diplomatic foreign nationals. By 1993, the school of choice, the International School of Beijing, a school with 625 student places for ages 4 to 18, had a closed waitlist of over 215. The only alternatives were the Montessori School of Beijing for ages 2 to 8, and the



unregistered International Study Group for ages 5 to 14, both small schools with long waiting lists.

Clearly those were unprecedented times, scarcely recognisable in 21st century Beijing with its plethora of internationally accredited schools and world-class setting.

With schools bursting at the seams, companies and embassies were finding it increasingly difficult to attract the right staff, and many expatriate executives and diplomats with families refused to move to Beijing. Obviously this also impacted China's high-speed economic development.

It was clear that more officially recognised international schools were urgently needed. We felt it keenly. Sabina's and my children were lucky to be enjoying a world-class education at ISB.

We knew what we wanted: the vision and drive from the start was to set up an international English medium school following a truly international curriculum, child-centred and open to all students irrespective of passport, ability or creed. We wanted to give the children of foreign nationals a different

choice from the national curricula and pedagogy available in Beijing then (and now).

Looking back, the dream, and our complete conviction that it was achievable in less than a year, was a bit crazy. Sabina and I were just two ordinary individuals without any background in school administration. We quickly hooked in Michael, who immediately understood and shared our vision and was also fully bi-lingual, well networked in the Chinese community and a teacher to boot.

We lacked almost everything, but especially funding; a director and teachers; desks, tables, chairs, books; IT (hardware and software) – and the point of it all, students. We needed credibility from corporate backing and an international education provider. With just a bare seven months until September 1, 1994, when WAB would first open its doors for students from 3–12 years old, the clock was ticking.

On June 25, 1993, I invited the ISB Director at that time, David Eaton, to the British Chamber of Commerce to debate the Beijing expat schooling crisis and to set out the stall to hopefully attract corporate backing. By September, we had the firm backing of GE, Motorola and Royal Dutch Shell, and their corporate executives giving valuable advice on WAB's pre-board.

We targeted Li Lan Qing for permission to start the school and sought



assistance from the international diplomatic community. The response from embassies was immediate. The Head of the World Bank agreed to present our petition; Canada, Australia, Zambia, Finland, Israel, Jordan, the Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland, The United States of America and South Korea all signed. BP, Eastmann Chemicals, EG&G, First National Bank of Chicago, GE, Glaxo, HSBC, Maersk Shipping, Motorola, Northern Telecom, Shell, Walls Unilever, Xian Janssen all threw their weight behind it. In December 1993 the petition was hand delivered to the Chinese Ministry of Education and on January 7, 1994, we received written permission to found a school.

At the same time we also approached the European Council for International Schools (ECIS, later CIS), an international not-for-profit accreditation body, for assistance in recruiting a director and teachers, and advice on fundraising strategies. In early December 1993, CIS sent out an evaluation team, generously offered all assistance and recommended WAB's founding Director, Ian Rysdale, one of the founding members of the IB PYP curriculum.

For the legal framework we set up a private trust in Hong Kong – WABEF (WAB's Educational Foundation) – that allowed us to get the all-important seals in Shenzhen, to get the chop and seals in Beijing so we could open bank accounts, recruit staff and run the school.

It was not until the beginning of February that we came across those banana trees and WAB's first home. Ronan Cassidy, our Shell Representative at the time, remembers, "spending the weekends wandering around disused factory sites in the freezing Beijing winter trying to find potential sites for the school."



谨订于一九九四年九月一日(星期四)上午 10:30
在京西学校举行建校典礼。随后中午 12:00 在
南湖饭店举行便宴。

敬请

光临

北京京西学校(筹办)
学校地址: 四元桥北
北四环东路甲七号

南湖饭店地址:
北四环东路九号

请回复翁小姐, 电话: 437-5935

The Western Academy of Beijing

Cordially invites:

Hilary Munro

to attend the formal founding ceremony on September 1st, 1994
commencing at 10:30 am at the school, followed by a banquet
lunch at the Nanhu Restaurant at 12:00.

School Address: No. 7A, Beisihuan Donglu
(North of Siyuanqiao Flyover)

Restaurant Address: No. 9 Beisihuan Donglu

RSVP Ms. Weng Xiaohong 437-5935



Academy of Beijing" was born, representing our English curriculum and pedagogy with high international rigour, but without using the misused

word 'International' or indeed 'School' itself to differentiate ourselves from all the other schools in Beijing.

Our dream site was derelict. It needed plenty of imagination to see libraries, sunlit rooms, students playing football on the pitch, and a child-friendly, warm and inviting, educational environment. As Sabina Brady (co-founder) recalled, "Colin [my husband] drew the vision on poster-sized paper to show our pre-board members and later prospective parents of what WAB could become -- despite the actual reality of a worn-out factory office building, no electricity, a bumpy field full of rocks, and a long entry that went past nearly shuttered factory workshops."

The factory site required considerable conversion into a modern school. Antonio Ochoa, architect and designer of the factory site recalls that the first floor was divided into small offices with a typical corridor down the middle. Antonio asked about the structure. "Supporting walls which can't be removed," was the reply. This lack of flexibility would be a problem. He was told there were no original drawings. The second floor was almost identical to the first, but the third and fourth floors were completely empty with no furniture -- and crucially no interior walls. "The building was a columns-and-beams structure, it was the most amazing thing..." said Antonio.

Transforming the grey drab buildings resulted in a kaleidoscope of colour, "purples and blues, greens of all hues making for such a bright start to our children's lives", Ian fondly recalls.

Sometime in March 1994, during a long evening session, the name "Western

The rest, as they say, is history. We opened our doors on September 1, 1994, with 147 students. Jo Sargent, one of the founding teachers remembers, "In the first year the number of students doubled after Christmas break, so it felt like we were starting again in a way." WAB faced the familiar Beijing schooling phenomenon of high demand and growth from the start. Within six years, we had 596 students and in August 2001 we moved into our current purpose-built campus. To ensure WAB's intimate, child-centred approach, our Nursery, Elementary, Middle and High Schools were built as separate but contiguous facilities within green, shared spaces. Student numbers were, and continue to be, capped to foster a small school feel with one WAB ethos. Twenty years later, WAB has blossomed into a school with 14 grade levels and nearly 1,500 students.

(This is the first part of a two-part story)

