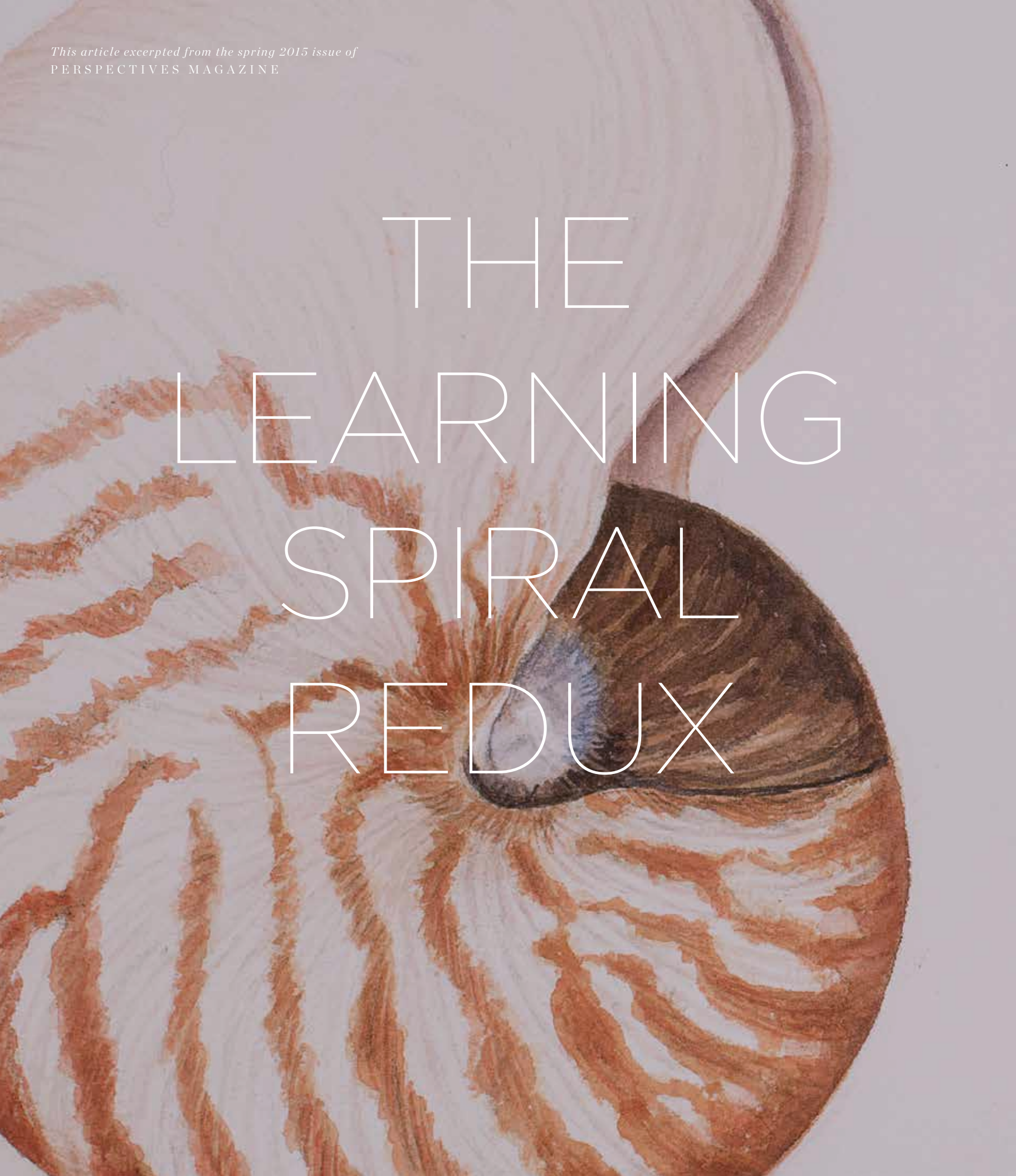


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THE LEARNING SPIRAL REDUX

Several years ago, Ashley Hall, under the guidance of our Head of School, Jill Muti, articulated a comprehensive pedagogical philosophy to guide us in shaping coherent and consistent educational programs and practices. We call this philosophy “The Learning Spiral” in recognition of the fact that the processes of childhood development are not linear but recursive—children learn by incremental repetitions.

Like the chambered nautilus of Oliver Wendell Holmes’ poem,

*“which as its spiral grew,
...left the past year’s dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old
no more.”*

So, too, the student moves through a succession of “chambers” each more spacious than the last, each inseparable from one another. And like the nautilus, so the student’s growth is both continuous and organic, not a series of discrete and measured (or accurately measurable) steps. Nurturing that continuity of experience is one of the principle

intentions of purposeful curriculum development and instructional methodology.

Ashley Hall is conscious of our commitment to serving the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of each student in every phase of her development and to do so in a manner consistent with our mission to “produce an educated woman who is independent, ethically responsible, and prepared to meet the challenges of society with confidence.” We have worked very deliberately to translate these philosophical principles into effective curricula methods and support programs from our Early Education Center all the way from kindergarten through twelfth grade.



“I don’t know how to draw tunes yet. I just drew some circles that are the tunes.”

ROSS EARLY EDUCATION CENTER

Inspired by the practices of early education professionals in the Italian city of Reggio-Emilia, our own Ross Early Education Center has adopted similar approaches to create what is called emergent curriculum—that is, instructors collaborate with their students to design projects or investigations based on the students’ expressed interest. In this way, the children’s innate curiosity—their natural inquisitiveness and wonder—becomes the engine of their learning. Students exposed to this approach tend to become more confident, more independent, and more capable of championing their own education, rather than relying passively on the direct instruction provided by a teacher. Even in these early years, students prove themselves increasingly capable of caring for their learning environment as well as for the needs of others, thereby taking initial steps toward becoming “ethically responsible” citizens. The instructional strategies deriving from the Reggio-Emilia approach to early childhood education necessarily require continuous monitoring and documentation of the students’ activities and discoveries. Teachers become intimately aware of each student’s contribution to the collective enterprise, encouraging collaboration while respecting individual students’ pace and performance, rather than imposing a rigid standard of prescribed competencies. The practical skills and more academic understandings students will inevitably need to succeed as they continue upward on The Learning Spiral emerge organically out of the investigations themselves. In this way, learning becomes an experience of discovery, of invention, and of wonder.



The Path to Literacy

Sometimes an investigative project in the Ross Early Education Center begins with the teachers rather than the students. Pre-kindergarten teacher, Becky Grantham, and *atelierista*, Wendy Robbins, were intrigued by their recent observations of the children's use of movement as a unique form of communication. Pulling from their respective graduate studies, Ms. Grantham and Ms. Robbins wondered together how this particular movement exercise might impact the development of the child's literacy.

This professional collaboration led to a project begun last year in the students' primary year which unexpectedly resurfaced in a new and exciting way. A child's drawing of music from this project sparked the interest of teachers. "I drew circles because I don't know how to draw tunes yet," explained the four-year-old girl, pointing to her sketch of a figure playing a horn. The teachers realized that students were in many ways creating their own system of symbols, that could easily be seen as a precursor to literacy. By presenting opportunities for children to engage thoughtfully with music and movement, the teachers then challenged them to translate sounds and gestures into written form. Much like the previous year, many of the students' interpretations were concrete in nature—for example, hands represented clapping. In time, however, their drawings became more abstract and thoughtful.

After collecting and sorting the children's representational drawings, the teachers then chose several that depicted common sounds and movements. These drawings were duplicated and made into small cards. Teachers reviewed the symbol cards with the children, later asking the children to assemble the cards in some kind of pattern. Watching intently, the teachers noticed the children's eyes followed the order of the cards, acting out each movement as they went along, much like they were reading written text. This process beautifully demonstrated the children's ability to make connections between language and print and the development of other emergent literacy skills.

Students exposed to this approach tend to become more confident, more independent, and more capable of championing their own education, rather than relying passively on the direct instruction provided by a teacher.

When girls are encouraged at an early age to feel free to pursue an interest in science or math or any other challenging endeavor, they are more likely to retain their enthusiasm and curiosity into their adult careers.

PARDUE HALL

Students in Ashley Hall's Pre-kindergarten program begin the transition from Reggio-Emilia inspired instruction into a more modified approach, which will equip them for the type of environment they will encounter in kindergarten and throughout their years in Pardue Hall. Although students do receive more directed instruction in kindergarten through fourth grade, there remains a clear emphasis on other strategies consistent with emergent curriculum objectives. This is evident in our integration of academic standards into student-directed projects and more pronouncedly in our language arts instruction, which adapts techniques derived from the work of Columbia University's Teachers College expert, Lucy Calkins. Stressing the importance of each student directing the development of her own writing project, the Calkins program guides but does not govern by formal instruction and peer review. The student thus becomes the author of her own work, achieving a distinctive personal voice through an authentic process of purposeful revision.

While the academic demands of primary school do not readily admit of the adaptation of Reggio-Emilia strategies throughout the curricula, class projects—designed and developed by students in a manner similar to the investigations conducted in our EEC—do provide for a

wealth of collaboration. This allows students to realize their own discoveries and thereby continue to feel more fully engaged in their own education. Such confidence is, again, one of the crucial objectives of Ashley Hall's mission, and we constantly seek to create opportunities for students to assume responsibility for their activities, both in and out of the classroom. Moreover, these collaborations encourage cross-curricular studies that reveal to the students how seemingly disparate 'subjects' are, in fact, mutually reinforcing intellectual disciplines. This creates an understanding which lays the foundation for their future course work in humanities and the interdisciplinary Oral Defense Projects and Senior Theses in Jenkins Hall. For an example, see *The Spiral Capstone* on page 15.

There is another dimension of our interdisciplinary studies—the way in which academic studies designed to prepare students "to meet the challenges of society with confidence" also provide opportunities to develop ethical responsibility. For example, students in Ms. McCarty's science class not only learn the biology of bees, they learn as well the role humans play in sustaining these creatures so vital to the life of plants—and, therefore, to sustainable agriculture. By harvesting their own bees' honey and by promoting the sales of locally produced honey from other

beekeepers, Ashley Hall students raise funds that go directly to The Bee Cause Project, a not-for-profit undertaking that installs glass observation beehives (like the one in the Pardue lab) in schools throughout the country. These fundraising activities introduce Ashley Hall students to a culture of philanthropy and strengthen their awareness that what they learn in school reveals how they can—and should—conduct themselves as citizens of the world.

The importance of work such as this, especially in the single-gender environment at Ashley Hall, cannot be overestimated. A recent article (February 6, 2015) by Claire Cain Miller in *The New York Times* entitled “How Elementary School Teachers’ Biases Can Discourage Girls From Math and Science” highlights a new study that “points to ... how powerful a little encouragement can be. Early educational experiences have a quantifiable effect on the math and science courses the students choose later, and eventually, the jobs they get and the wages they earn. The pipeline for women to enter math and science occupations narrows at many points between kindergarten and a career choice, but elementary school seems to be a critical juncture. Reversing bias among teachers could increase the number of women who enter fields like computer science and engineering which are some of the fastest growing and highest paying.”

While such pragmatic concerns should not be the sole criteria by which to gauge the value of any curricula, it is undeniably important that we provide our students both the knowledge and the encouragement needed to succeed in these increasingly vital areas of study and—as the only all-girls independent school in South Carolina—Ashley Hall is uniquely positioned to do just that—as the profile in this issue of alumna, Leah Fisher '05, illustrates so well. When girls are encouraged at an early age to feel free to pursue an interest in science or math or any other challenging endeavor, they are more likely to retain their enthusiasm and curiosity into their adult careers.



Students explore The Bee Cause beehive in the Pardue Hall Science Lab.



Lucy Calkins Writing Workshop

Fourth grade student, Ailish Ward, was recently asked to compose a persuasive essay and chose to use her experience at Ashley Hall as the theme of her piece. Fostering lifelong writers is an essential part of the Pardue Hall curriculum which uses the innovative Lucy Calkin's Writing Workshop method with its young students. The girls are pushed to tap into their own lives to generate ideas for writing, and then are taught strategies to create powerful pieces across a variety of genres: narrative, persuasive, informational, and research-based writing. We believe all girls can be writers and, with proper guidance, their work will take flight.

Missing Your Mom? | BY AILISH WARD '23

Does your mom have special values that you miss at school? Well now you don't have to miss her values here at Ashley Hall. Ashley Hall is like a second mom because they teach me new things, they care for me, and they push me to believe in myself.

One reason why Ashley Hall is like a second mom is they teach me new things. A couple of years ago I was in Ms. Saunders room doing math. Out of the blue she shouted, "We are learning long division!" I was shocked—I was only eight! But she skidded right over and guided me how to learn long division.

Ashley Hall taught me how America got its name. Ashley Hall taught me that people in our own town go hungry every night. Ashley Hall taught me that people walk miles in bare feet and get diseases.

Not only does Ashley Hall teach me new things but they also care for me. An example of this is when I was in second grade, rolling around in a chair, and I shifted my weight backwards and tipped over. Kaboom! I was lying down on the cold hard ground. Everyone froze except Mrs. Flowers. She helped me into a chair and scanned me for bruises making me comfortable and better. She got me a cup of water. After that I felt great.

Ashley Hall cares for me when I am hurt, when I'm sad and when I am scared.

The most important reason Ashley Hall is like a second mom is Ashley Hall pushes me to believe in myself.

One time, I had to speak in morning meeting in third grade. I was shaking from head to toe and breathing rapidly. Mrs. Libaire came over and told me this, "Ailish you can dance on huge stages so I know you can speak on big stages." With that I held my chin up high and pranced on that stage. I spoke like I did this all of my life.

Ashley Hall pushes me to believe in myself by doing a full split. Ashley Hall pushes me to believe in myself to run two miles in a row. Ashley Hall pushes me to believe in myself that I could be little but make a huge difference.

What I've come to realize is Ashley Hall does this because they focus on every student. They want every student to be mentally and physically strong. Now I know Ashley Hall can really support me like my mom does.



Lane Hall students journal during Wellness Class.

The Importance of Wellness

Using The Learning Spiral as inspiration, Wellness Counselor Libby Gilbert begins her work with young Pardue Hall students on the transition from the Lower School's nurturing environment, to the more independent atmosphere of Lane Hall. She is able to proactively respond to the emotional needs of each child and seeks to guide them along a path of increased self awareness and emotional maturity. At Ashley Hall, there is significant opportunity for impact in this area due to the all girls' environment.

"We instill in the girls that they have an impact on their life by their actions. Girls can become competitive at this age so it's important to give them a positive, supportive environment," explains Gilbert. "Conflict resolution and independent problem solving are key areas of focus. Our goal is to prepare the student for the transition and demands of the Upper School academic and social environment. In addition to a girls' academic success, Ashley Hall is committed to her emotional well-being. Not all schools are able to do that."

LANE HALL

Perhaps nowhere along The Learning Spiral is the challenge to help our students acquire the skills they will need “to meet the challenges of society with confidence” more acute than in Lane Hall. For girls, the ages between ten and fourteen are especially crucial to their physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Social concerns begin to occupy more of the students’ time and attention while

Because these years are so transformative for our girls, we have taken pains to build a dedicated team of teachers who work closely with one another to coordinate their respective course contents.

their academic duties become more and more demanding. Physiological changes can add to the cognitive dissonance the girls are experiencing. Recognizing all of these factors, we have designed a two-year sequence of instruction for the fifth and sixth grades that emphasizes the Ashley Hall Hallmarks of compassion, discernment, collaboration, intelligence, creativity, purposefulness and worldliness. For example, when discussing discernment, a Wellness Class might focus on problem solving or how to become more empathetic.

Because these years are so transformative for our girls, we have taken pains to build a dedicated team of teachers

who work closely with one another to coordinate their respective course contents. Each individual student is given the proper guidance she needs to make the transition from Intermediate School to the academic and social environment of Jenkins Hall (grades seven through twelve).

JENKINS HALL

As students enter Upper School in Jenkins Hall, they experience a quickening pulse in every aspect of their lives. All of the preparation they have undergone in preceding years now begins to bear fruit in more sophisticated applications of their acquired skills and understandings. Humanities classes conducted as student-directed conversations around a Harkness table encourage each student to participate on equal terms with her classmates in a manner reminiscent of the investigations she enjoyed as a child in the Early Education Center. The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) used to assess her fluency in French or Spanish reinforces her understanding of these languages as instruments with which to unlock the doors to other cultures and other climates of opinion and, at the same time, gives her confidence to be a more fully contributing citizen of the world.

With each succeeding year, students in Jenkins Hall discover more and more opportunities to exercise their critical thinking through interdisciplinary studies such as those required by the Oral Defense Project (ODP), the Senior Thesis, and the Senior Project. Each of these activities include a public presentation at which students demonstrate their command of multiple disciplines as they pertain to a single essential question, thereby demonstrating their acquired authority in those fields of study.

As students in the Upper School prepare to venture out into the world beyond Ashley Hall’s physical boundaries, so too does that world come to our campus. The international boarding students who live in the Rutledge House for Global Studies enrich the intellectual and cultural life of our community in countless ways.



With the student featured prominently at its center, The Learning Spiral provides a lens through which our school purposefully considers our individual and collective contributions to the fulfillment of its founding mission.

Their presence is a daily reminder that Ashley Hall exists in a network—not virtual but an actual worldwide web—of social, political, economic, and cultural communities. And students exit this level of the life-long learning spiral mindful of their obligations to those communities.

With the student featured prominently at its center, The Learning Spiral provides a lens through which our school purposefully considers our individual and collective contributions to the fulfillment of its founding mission. It shapes every aspect of our students’ matriculation and provides a solid foundation on which a personalized educational experience can be built.

As a nautilus continues its chambered growth throughout its life, the proof of our mission’s fulfillment is realized each year through our senior class as they create their final “chamber” which we will be privileged to directly impact. At this point their chambers include all the experiences that have contributed to their becoming educated women who are independent, ethically responsible, and prepared to face their futures with confidence. As they begin their next journey—and new experiences in college and beyond shape the growth of their next chambers—they will always be able to reach inside and access the gifts that they have built through their time as students at Ashley Hall.

The Spiral Capstone: Caitlyn Jennings '15 Senior Project

In only a few brief minutes of conversation, one can easily sense the maturity, depth and passion behind senior Caitlyn Jennings. Her drive seems to radiate from within. She has attended Ashley Hall since pre-kindergarten and is a shining example of The Learning Spiral at its best. Through the twists and turns of her time on campus, Caitlyn has always been encouraged to customize her educational experience both inside and outside the classroom. Now, in her final year as an Ashley Hall girl, the journey is fully being realized, particularly through her Senior Project work. This year-long, self-directed class has always been a synthesis of intense research, critical thinking, and targeted community service for its participants. In Caitlyn's case it has morphed into something much larger with wonderful program implications within the school's signature Global Studies Program.

Inspired by a recent trip to Bolivia and her experience at a single-gender school, Caitlyn's Senior Project, entitled *Redefining the Rules*, explores the dire need of educating young girls in developing countries and the barriers in place that compromise these efforts. "During my research," says Caitlyn, "I started looking closely at child marriage and human trafficking, both of which are hugely prevalent in many third world countries. These unusual cultural norms are detrimental to the empowerment and success of young women in these countries. How does this happen, and what can I do to help change it?"

The beauty of the Senior Project process is the organic development of ideas and approaches similarly used in The Learning Spiral. Structure and specific objectives are in place, however there is no limit to the project's final destination. For example, when meeting with her advisor, humanities faculty member, Jill Harper, to discuss the community service aspect of her project, the idea of organizing an Ashley Hall sponsored service abroad trip to a country with still developing areas was presented as a hopeful "what if" scenario by Caitlyn and eventually embraced by staff and Ashley Hall students. This biennial trip will feature a partnership with a US-based organization that promotes female education and job training through organized service trips. After much discussion, India was chosen as the program's inaugural destination. The discrimination against women in many parts of India has long been documented and offers a valid and true face for Caitlyn's project. "Because of the classical emphasis of Ashley Hall's curriculum, most of the school's travel abroad opportunities have been centered in Europe. This will be a great opportunity to expand our girls' horizons with a service-centered travel experience," explains Ms. Harper.

The trip itself is the end result of a year-long class that will fully prepare the students for their journey. Selected students will attend—on top of their current course load—additional classes on the history and social justice issues of India, as well as cultural awareness. "I had no idea my project would come together like this, and that I would be spearheading a new program," said Caitlyn. "But after all, that's what Ashley Hall is all about!"

Both The Learning Spiral and Senior Project imply transformative learning through personal experience—the life lessons gained from fully immersing yourself in your passions and interests are invaluable. Caitlyn Jennings, along with her fellow senior class members, are proof that the Spiral does indeed work.