



8 February 2024

To the admissions committee:

It is my great pleasure to recommend Iris Koltuniak's admittance to the Master in Teaching program at Evergreen. My partner and I currently employ her as an Early Childhood Development Nanny for our neurodivergent three-year-old. In my time knowing and employing Iris, she has consistently shown herself to be a remarkably attentive educator, a trustworthy and engaged caregiver, and a passionate continuing learner. She exemplifies all the best qualities needed and desired in a teacher of young children. Iris possesses an obvious joy for learning and children are clearly pulled to her nurturing and animated presence.

I've known Iris since the summer of 2023, when my son and I met her at the Blue Heron Bakery Farmer's Market stand. Every Friday for several weeks, my son (EA) and I went to her stand and purchased a cookie. After a few interactions, Iris asked our names - and remembered them. Quickly, EA and I would say, "Let's go to the market and see our friend Iris!". Every time, she was visibly excited to see us, and she always got down on EA's level to ask questions and engage with him. He is a shy kid, but he was clearly enamored with her and got more excited to see her each week. After about a month of weekly interactions, our family offered a formal childcare position to Iris - which was a very easy choice for me to make as a parent.

EA is neurodivergent and when we met Iris, he was almost completely nonverbal. Iris has developed a committed relationship with his speech pathologist (who also was a regular of hers at Blue Heron and has wonderful things to say about her!), and the two of them have worked hard to help EA develop linguistic skills and verbal confidence. Since September 2023, EA's speech has blossomed, and he is now stringing together confident sentences. I credit this incredible progress largely to Iris' slow dedication and loving patience with him every day as they read, discuss concepts, and engage in sensory activities. Iris's attention to detail is reflective of someone who has worked hard to understand what works well for child development, but she is also very adept at tailoring plans to EA's particular needs and interests.

The first time Iris came to our home for a trial run, she taught him what pine needles are while playing outside. They discussed connections between pine needles, trees, and sensory experiences. The next day, my nonverbal child confidently began excitedly showing me all the pine needles our boots had tracked in, and clearly was saying his own version of the words "pine needles". I teared up and knew immediately that hiring Iris would be the right decision for our son's education. Since she's been working with him, he went from mostly signing and nonverbal to counting to 15, able to say the ABCs, and understanding complex concepts like ice is frozen water and snow is ice.

Another incredibly notable difference attributable largely to Iris's hard work and patience is that EA's extreme sensory meltdowns have substantially decreased due to her attention to his sensory needs and slow and patient transitions throughout the day. She has also worked hard to create a rhythm throughout their days that allows for constructive and creative play outlets for his energy and engages him with music, gross motor games, yoga, deep jumps, and dancing. Iris has worked diligently to create Montessori-based sensory curriculums and preschool readiness plans with weekly themes, and she also works patiently to help teach EA emotional regulation skills like deep breathing and grounding. I have personally witnessed him get frustrated and take deep breaths - long after Iris had left for the day. She also helps our family prioritize our commitment to social justice through taking the initiative to teach him about other cultures and model/discuss age-appropriate boundaries around bodies.

I sincerely cannot emphasize enough what a gift Iris would be to your program, as I can say with confidence that she has been an incredible gift to our family. I know that Iris will make a phenomenal teacher - because I see her practicing the profession already in her daily life. Iris exemplifies everything a teacher should be, and she models joyful attention to social justice every day in my home as she teaches my son.

Most sincerely,

Emily O'Donnell-Pazderka