

# Community Influencer Sarah Sultman

Sarah Sultman is a co-founder of Gesher School. She started her professional life in the city for 12 years in the field of asset management. Sarah then went on to establish an art business before going on the path that led her to Gesher. She has always been involved communally from being a madricha in youth movements to being involved in charity committees and her local shul. Sarah is one of four sisters who were brought up to believe that feminism, community and welfare are all very important.



## What was your path to doing what you do?

The inspiration for me was most definitely my son. Prior to his arrival in the world I knew nothing about special needs, developmental delay or autism. His diagnosis sent me on a journey and totally changed my life. At the time I was building an art business but as I learnt more about the huge need for quality education and early intervention for children with SEN I changed track and set about researching the need for Gesher.

## Who helped you along the way?

So many people it would almost be impossible to answer. I believe a lot in serendipity or karma - meeting people at a time in your life when you might not

realise you need them. I went on a Norwood trek when my son was a year old to take some time out and regroup my thoughts. Through that trek I was introduced to a child psychologist called Tracy Stevens who worked with Professor Feurstein in Israel for many years. Meeting her was a game changer for me and my son. In terms of Gesher, I think a man called James Wetz was probably one of the most influential people I met along the way. He is an educationalist and took Ali and I seriously from the outset never doubting us or belittling our idea. He inspired us to keep moving forward. And Rabbi David Meyer from Pajes who despite the community naysayers (and there was more than one) championed us whilst maintaining that the community needed a school like Gesher.

## What have you learned along the way?

I have learned a vast amount. I used to apologise for not being an expert in SEN and I would doubt myself but actually over the past 7 years I have read, studied, observed and learnt. I'm not saying I am an expert now but I feel confident in my knowledge and understanding of SEN and education. I have also learned that there are some remarkable people out there doing wonderful work in the field of SEN. The Gesher journey has been life affirming in many ways as Ali and I have had the privilege to meet some wonderful teachers, educationalists and philanthropists who all want to make the world a better place for vulnerable children who need people to advocate for them. But perhaps the thing I have learned most is to have patience. Patience that I never knew I was capable of, both on a personal level with my son and professionally with the Gesher project.

## Tell us an anecdote

I'm useless at board games - I get bored half way through and have been known to tip up a scrabble or risk board. Is that an anecdote? probably not!

## Name a book film boxset or play you found inspiring?

Film: Lion

Book: Neurotribes

Play: The pianist of Willesden Green

Boxset: I always lose patience by episode 6 - other than Fauda which was brilliant and gripped me I don't think I ever get to the end of any box set!

## What are you most proud of, professionally?

We had an inset/ team day at the end of our first year at Gesher where all the staff talked about the year and the how the children have settled, they regaled stories and anecdotes and told of the progress the pupils had made over the past 10 months, and for the first time since this whole project began I couldn't control the tears. It finally felt real to me and I finally felt very proud; of both Ali and I and what we created together.

## Do you have a plan or ambition for the future?

We are currently investigating the need for a Gesher secondary school. I would like for there to be a clear continuum of care for parents of children with SEN so that they can plan a primary and secondary school followed by college, assisted living and employment. The same plans we make for our neurotypical children.

## How do you unwind?

Turmeric tea and hot yoga, a night out dancing till I can't feel my feet and once a year I take myself off for a few days and go a climb a mountain somewhere.

## What hobby would you like to take up if you had the time?

Painting and collage. I would love to study art.

## If you ruled the world for a day, what would you change?

I would make a lot of changes!!!! but I think top of my list would be an outright ban on single use plastic (I'm as guilty as the rest that's why I think it needs banning so it forces us not to use it), I would also make legal assisted suicide, and put world protection orders on vulnerable environments that ban industrial mining anywhere near them! I would also ban cigarette butts and chewing gum

on beaches and I would regulate smart phones and social media for youths .... shall I go on? I've got a whole manifesto!

## **What would you say to someone who has just found out their child has special needs?**

Every parent has to go through their own process of coping. My first instinct was to find a 'cure', then I had to go through a period of lamenting what 'wouldn't or couldn't be', then there was blame that it was somehow my fault.... but these emotions all have to be ridden to get to the other side which is not just acceptance but actually being able to celebrate and love your child for who he or she is whole heartedly. There is always someone out there to talk to who understands and is a step ahead of you - find those people because their advice and shoulder can be invaluable. My own child has surprised me every step of the way and enriched my life in ways I never thought possible. I don't understand the parents who pretend there is nothing there or who don't want to talk about it because they just postpone a whole layer of more complicated problems further down the line. In my view it is always better to be open, honest and upfront with yourself and your child.

## **Who do you most admire and why?**

I can't think of a single person that I admire most - generally I admire those who through determination become masters of their game - a brilliant pianist, an Olympian gymnast, an amazing chess player or artist. I am in awe of people who can stay totally focused and know that they don't just want to be good but want to be the best at what they do because that takes a certain type of mind.

Written by: Sarah Sultman