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American Life



Love affairs, a marriage of convenience, and Washington power.

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CRACKING THE ADMISSIONS CODE

NINA MARKS HAS A KNACK FOR GETTING KIDS INTO TOP COLLEGES. SHE SAYS IT'S ALL ABOUT FINDING THE RIGHT HOOK.

BY MARY CLARE GLOVER

Nina Marks is a trusted adviser to some of Washington's richest and most powerful people. She charges \$700 an hour and has never advertised her services, yet some years she has needed a waiting list for would-be clients.

Marks isn't a typical Beltway power-broker—not a lawyer or lobbyist or policy maven. People come to her for guidance through one of life's most fraught and stressful processes: applying to college.

Marks was for many years the college counselor at the elite all-girls National Cathedral School in Northwest DC. When she left NCS in 2004 to open a private counseling firm, Marks Education, word quickly spread that any parent—not just those with daughters at NCS—could now benefit from the help of the person many believe is the best college counselor in Washington.

"We were three-quarters full in six weeks," Marks says. Many of her clients are from the area, but she works with students from around the country and the world. Her firm has grown to 16 employees, and

Marks spends about half her time on a nonprofit she started to help high-achieving, low-income kids get into good colleges.

she has launched a nonprofit that helps low-income kids from Montgomery County get into top colleges.

Marks says clients rarely balk at her prices—a package that in-

cludes counseling during a teen's senior year costs \$10,000; the junior-year package is \$7,000. What do they get in exchange? Access to Marks's encyclopedic knowledge about top colleges, her connections, and—perhaps most important—her insight into how to play the admissions game.

GETTING INTO A TOP COLLEGE IS HARDER than ever; colleges received record numbers of applications last year.

Thanks in part to the use of the Common Application and the ease of applying online, students are applying to more schools. And more kids are in the applicant pool—especially minorities, international students, and first-generation-to-college students.

"The number of international and minority students at a Penn or a Harvard or a Yale is now dramatically greater than it was 10 or 15 or 20 years ago," says John Bader, a counselor at Marks Education. "That means that your typical suburban white kid has to be pretty creative." It also means it's much harder for high-schoolers to get into the college their parents went to—regardless of how much money the family might have donated.

No wonder parents are frantic.

It doesn't help that Washington is home to some of the most highly educated—and competitive—parents in the country. Marks jokes that she calls the gossip mill created by parental panic the Volvo Caucus: "You only hear the horror stories—never anything good."

Many kids apply to 15 or more colleges to increase their odds of getting in. But when they spread themselves so thin, their applications can start to get messy and feel generic.

"When things get challenging, people become reactive," Marks says. "Too many people feel that if you're aspiring to a selective post-secondary opportunity, you have to take what you are given—that it's so random and so selective that there's nothing you can do."

The approach Marks takes is the opposite—the antidote to panic. It's proactive, rooted in long-term planning. It's strategic and intentional. And her clients say it works.

SITTING IN HER OFFICE IN DOWNTOWN Bethesda, Marks wears neatly pressed gray slacks and a black button-down shirt. Her dark hair is cut short in a no-nonsense style. She's warm and talkative, giving off the air of a seasoned high-school English teacher.

Born and raised in India, Marks went to boarding school in England and came to



In her last six years at NCS, the school sent 140 girls to the Ivy League.

the US to attend Harvard, where she reconnected with her now-husband, Jonathan Marks, today a corporate mediator and arbitrator based in Bethesda. She taught briefly at Sidwell Friends and the Marlborough School, an elite private school in Los Angeles, before joining NCS in 1974.

Her two children, Joshua and Nisha, went to the Cathedral schools—Beauvoir and then St. Albans and NCS—before going on to Harvard for undergraduate and graduate degrees. A pilot, Joshua now owns a Bethesda-based aviation company called Marks Systems. Nisha practiced law for several years before joining Marks Education in 2009 as a tutor and graduate-school admissions counselor.

Marks had her own first foray into the world of college admissions during the 1980s, when she volunteered to interview

Harvard applicants in Washington. She learned how one of the most selective admissions offices in the country worked.

"It was an enormously interesting time to have been involved," she says. "Colleges were moving from aggressive outreach—that was a period when it wasn't clear whether the applicant pool was all it could be—to having the floodgates open and really having to refine admission strategy."

After 18 years as an English teacher at NCS, Marks took over the college-counseling department in 1992 and turned it into one of the most respected in the country. In her last six years as director, NCS sent 140 girls to Ivy League colleges, including 31 to the University of Pennsylvania, 21 to Harvard, 19 to Columbia, and 17 to Yale. Dozens of others enrolled at top-tier schools such as Stanford, Georgetown, MIT, and the University of Virginia.

Considering that a typical class size at NCS is around 80, those numbers are staggering.

During her 12 years as head of college counseling, Marks built relationships with admissions directors around the country—she would make phone calls on behalf of every girl. Larry Griffith, a former associate director of admission at Brown who worked with Marks during her time at NCS, says she was one of the very top school counselors in the country. “I wouldn’t trust all the counselors,” he says. “But when Nina said X about a kid, you knew it was X about a kid.”

WHEN MARKS EXPLAINS HOW SHE helps kids get into college, she uses words like “pools” and “hooks” and “markers.”

Her approach is based on knowing the nuanced—but important—differences among top colleges. Her colleagues say one of her biggest strengths is her memory. “Nina is an encyclopedia that keeps updating itself every day,” says Marks Education’s director of tutoring, Nitin Sawhney. “The depth of her knowledge is incredible.”

Her team does extensive research every year to track admissions trends, which Marks

can quote off the top of her head. She knows which schools accepted a lot of students through early decision this year (Penn, Barnard, Middlebury) and which deferred more early applicants for reconsideration in the general pool (Harvard and Brown). She can rattle off which schools have shown interest in international students (Dartmouth and MIT) and which took a lot of first-generation-to-college students (Princeton and Tufts).

This information is valuable in helping students decide where they have the best chance of getting in. But Marks says the real secret is the long-term planning she does.

Marks likes to start meeting with kids in the ninth or tenth grade. She does take students in 11th but says that’s often too late: “At that point, a lot of choices have already been made.”

When she meets with students early on, she asks what classes they’re most interested in and helps them find summer internships and volunteer opportunities. They map out a four-year curriculum and talk about when to build in SAT prep and Advanced Placement courses so everything isn’t happening at once.

“A mantra we have here is ‘Bake the cake, then ice it’—get what you need to get done, and then add,” she says. “Don’t do this backwards and find that because you are doing so many things, you are sitting down to your homework at 10 at night. That’s bad planning.”

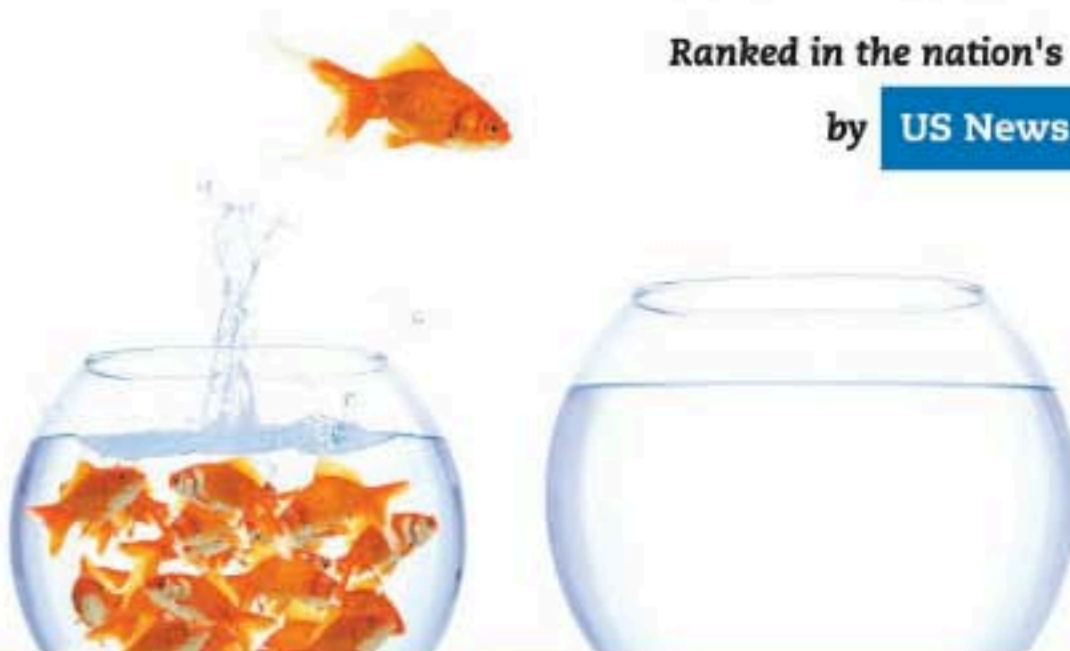
PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, MEETING with kids early gives Marks time to help them create what she calls “hooks”—areas of interest, skills, or qualities that differentiate them in the eyes of admissions officers. A hook can be an academic specialty such as engineering, a sport, or a musical instrument. For international students or kids from small towns, it can also be where they’re from. But you don’t have to be a musical prodigy or from a dot on the map in South Dakota to develop a convincing hook—it can be an interest in volunteer work that led you to start a club at your high school or a love of animals that culminated in an internship at the National Zoo.

It’s crucial, says Marks, that the hook be authentic: “I deeply believe if you twist a young person into a pretzel, sooner or later

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they untwist. They need to be themselves."

Although Marks might not put it this way, she's essentially teaching kids how to market themselves—helping them create a narrative they can tell to admissions officers.

Colleges don't want well-rounded students—they want well-rounded classes full of students with different backgrounds, interests, and talents. So it's a waste of energy for students to play three varsity sports, take part in school government, perform 100 hours of community service, and load their schedule with AP classes. Instead, Marks encourages them to find something that genuinely captivates them and pursue it with passion.

Once a student finds her hook, Marks and her team design an application strategy. To be a top candidate, the student must offer what the college values or needs—and that's where knowing each school and understanding the changing dynamics of admissions comes in.

"Most savvy adults understand that when you're making a significant and maybe expensive choice, you study the landscape carefully," says Marks. "You look at comparables. You differentiate each opportunity. We tell kids that this is also the way to think about college."

AS FREQUENTLY HAPPENS, NINA MARKS is rattling off the names of top colleges: "Barnard, Boston College, Brown, Columbia, Carnegie Mellon, Dartmouth...."

She's speaking to a roomful of affluent Washingtonians at the Willard hotel. But she's not here to tout the accomplishments of her Marks Education clients. She's wearing her other hat, as president of Collegiate Directions, a nonprofit she started with her husband in 2005. And she's naming schools that accepted Collegiate Directions scholars last year.

Marks says part of the reason she left NCS and went out on her own was so she could offer counseling to students at the other end of the economic spectrum. Now she splits her time evenly between Marks Education and Collegiate Directions.

Each year Collegiate Directions partners with six Montgomery County public schools—Wheaton, Walter Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Springbrook, Paint Branch, and Einstein—to find about 25 high-achieving, low-income kids who would be the first in their families to go to college. Marks and her colleagues work with the students for about six years, from junior year of high school through college graduation, offering

everything from college counseling and help negotiating aid packages to guidance about courses to take.

With help from Marks Education tutors, Collegiate Directions scholars see their SAT scores improve by an average of 203 points. This year, each student was awarded an average of \$30,000 in grants and scholarships—not loans—for freshman year. Ninety-eight percent are on track to graduate from college in six years or less, compared with the national average of 11 percent for low-income, first-generation-to-college students.

Marks drew on her connections—especially those from NCS—to launch the non-profit. “It was extraordinary,” she says. “We raised a couple of hundred thousand dollars in a couple of months.”

The program for this year’s benefit at the Willard included such connected Washingtonians as Nancy and Robert Carr of the real-estate family, businessman Robert Haft, philanthropist Katherine Bradley, and former World Bank vice president Armeane Choksi. Washington Post Company chairman Donald Graham delivered the keynote. Nancy Carr, who chairs the board and

whose two daughters went to NCS, calls it a “no-brainer” that people who know and have worked with Marks would rally around her cause. Says Carr: “She’s a legend.”

MARKS URGES STUDENTS TO TRY NEW things and step outside their comfort zones, a lesson she learned when her parents sent her to boarding school in England at age 12. “Difficult as it was,” she says, “it’s a decision and an opportunity for which I have blessed my parents ever since.”

After high school, she was headed for Oxford, where her father had studied, but she decided to take a year off first. During that year, she met Margaret Clapp, the former president of Wellesley College, who was working in India.

“It’s wonderful to follow in your family’s footsteps,” Clapp said to Marks, “but have you thought about doing something different?” With Clapp’s encouragement, Marks applied to Wellesley and Harvard and was accepted at both.

“That process,” she says, “reinforced for me how important it is to own your own decisions.”

And that’s something that’s gotten lost in today’s frenzied and high-stakes college admissions, she says—fewer kids today take risks or try something different because they’re afraid of failure, of marring their transcripts. Instead of pursuing what genuinely interests them, they do what they think college-admissions officers want. And it backfires. “We see kids who are just overwhelmed,” Marks says. “They begin to feel like a gerbil on a treadmill.”

Helping them slow down and think strategically—understand their options, ignore their peers, and spend time doing what they’re good at and passionate about—is the secret of Marks’s success.

She often reminds students that she’s not getting them into college—they get themselves in. “There’s very little magic in college admissions,” she says. “Don’t ever confuse getting the right support with not having done it yourself.” **W**

Features editor Mary Clare Glover (mglover@washingtonian.com) graduated from Wake Forest University in 2003.



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