

SUBURBAN DIARY

The Boston Globe

## A milestone for Montessori evokes a mother's appreciation

By Deborah Gardner Walker | January 7, 2007

Montessori educators from all over the world are in Rome today, celebrating the 100th anniversary of a revolutionary act in children's education: the founding of the first Montessori school. Dr. Maria Montessori, Italy's first female physician, opened her "Casa dei Bambini" in San Lorenzo, Italy on Jan. 6, 1907.

Since then, Montessori schools, following the doctor's philosophy on nurturing and enriching the minds and spirits of children from birth to middle school, have sprung up around the globe. The region north of Boston has more than two dozen Montessori schools; our son attends one of the oldest, Harborlight Montessori in Beverly.

I still give thanks for the day, 8 1/2 years ago, that a fluke occurrence brought Cameron, then 3, to the charming campus on Essex Street near the Y.

Cam had been enrolled in another program, but we were left stressed and scrambling for a new school when it suddenly closed a week before the start of classes that September. How fortunate they found a space for us at Harborlight!

I knew we'd made a great move when Cam came home the first day singing the "Continent Song." Our jolly redhead could name each and every continent, from largest to smallest, something his mom, who had slept through geography classes, could not do!

I have always detested ethnocentrism and parochialism, and that's something you don't find in Montessori, which has an international emphasis. I love how my child has been introduced to the global community, at the same time that he's built a close-knit community in his classroom.

Cameron has enjoyed a wide range of cultural studies and celebrations, even cooking ethnic foods. He recognizes every country's flag and has sorted out the details of continents while working with pin-maps.

He began studying Spanish at age 3, which has not only patterned his brain for foreign languages but shown him the world outside of Beverly.

The first time I walked into a Montessori classroom, I was struck by the hum of happy children working independently. It was an open, light-filled space with many things to delight the eye -- the colorful hands-on Montessori materials, books, art posters, plants and living creatures cared for by the children. Big windows integrated the natural world and skylights delivered sunshine.

Everything was so orderly and inviting. Materials were neatly displayed on shelves easily accessible to the children. I took a deep breath as I recognized that Cam would not only grow in this place, but blossom.

At the time, we were signing up for preschool. What I didn't know is that this experience would be so right for Cam, we'd be there all these years later. Cameron will graduate from eighth grade in 2008, more than prepared for the challenges of high school after that.

Montessori has as its motto a small child's plea, "Help me to do it by myself." The statement encompasses not

only academics, but life skills like grace and courtesy (rarities these days), and "practical life exercises," such as pouring, dusting, sweeping, even cutting and serving cheese and crackers!

I still smile at the memory of our first "Mother's Day Tea" so long ago. Cameron's face was beaming with pride, pleasure, and confidence as he carefully poured my tea with his chubby little hand.

Cam has thrived in Montessori's "prepared environment." It has fostered self-learning and allowed him to make mistakes, as well as the chance to correct his errors.

I felt bored and stifled growing up in a classroom that taught to the middle, but not Cameron. He has been allowed to work at his own pace and developed a lifelong love of learning in the process.

Cam has learned how to think, to be curious, to go as far as his mind and imagination can take him, and this has resulted in academic excellence.

But knowledge for the sake of knowledge has never been the point. Dr. Montessori was a person of deep faith and she sought to nurture the spirit of children, to create peacemakers -- helping even 3-year-olds learn how to resolve conflicts.

Dr. Montessori had a vision of ending the horrors of the great wars forever and she saw children as our best hope for peace.

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