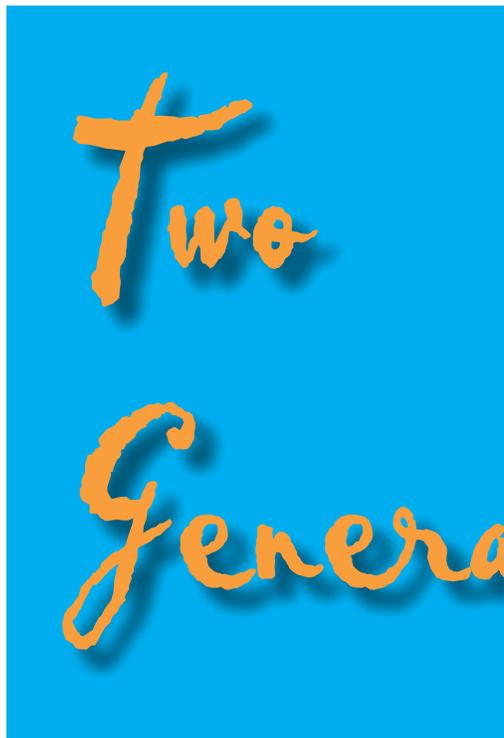


My mother and father are educators. As you can imagine, given their chosen profession, they were both thorough and particular in choosing the school where I, their only child, would begin my formal education. In the seventies, nursery schools on the Upper West Side were plentiful following the influx of new young families brave enough to seek out this neighborhood where housing was spacious and very affordable. My mom, who was then teaching at Brearley, had heard of a special kind of first school for very young students. It was called West Side Montessori School (WSMS).

Even then WSMS had a glowing reputation in the community. It was seen as more serious about the education of young children than the other schools serving the same pre-kindergarten age group. The fact that it was based on an educational philosophy distinguished it from the “caretaking” approach perceived to be operational elsewhere. WSMS was the first school on the West Side to embrace the philosophy and practices of Maria Montessori. And although the Montessori approach was not widely known back then, it was considered by those “in the know” to be at the cutting edge of early childhood education. Fast-forward to today... Montessori practices have proliferated in both public and private early childhood and elementary schools around the country and throughout the world. In addition, the Montessori philosophy has profoundly influenced the work of more recent educational thinkers and leaders. These two facts combine to demonstrate the efficacy of what was then seen as groundbreaking, or, as some might have described it, as a “hippie” approach.

I entered the warm and welcoming classrooms of WSMS in the fall of 1974. I have a distinct memory of sitting in the reading area feeling kind of upset that my mother was leaving. Knowing what I



ALEX SOUTHWELL, 1974

know now, I can imagine how a teacher expertly and caringly helped me to deal with these feelings. It might even have been Elspeth, one of the great teachers from that time whose name I still remember. The school’s mission, then as well as now, promised to involve families in the education of their children, so my mother and father found themselves in a warm learning community of interested as well as interesting adults.

When I returned to the school a few years ago for our oldest child’s inter-

view, I was struck by a strong feeling of déjà vu. I felt that I could see the school through the eyes of a child, and I liked what I saw. That feeling, combined with the rational and authentic reasons that my wife and I had articulated about why we were interested in this school, gave us a warm and confident sense that we were doing the right thing.

Now that we have had the experience of two children attending WSMS, we deeply appreciate the Montessori approach as it is practiced here. Through

friends we had come to understand the value of allowing a child to explore her own interests freely with the guidance of a team of highly trained and expert teachers, thereby gaining independence. At WSMS we saw that principle in action and were delighted at the way our children flourished. Their interests and learning styles are different, but the respect and empathy for others that have developed in them are deeply shared. These lifelong values of how to treat others and develop your own unique

abilities are modeled each and every day by their wonderful teachers/guides. And, like my parents before me, we love being part of this diverse community. We New Yorkers live in a crowded city, and yet the social interactions among its inhabitants are limited. We are grateful to be part of a group where we share interests and values with so many. Supported by faculty, administrators, and staff who partner with us in our efforts to help our children grow and develop, WSMS is a

community of learners, good citizens, committed volunteers, and wonderful friends. It truly is...where to begin. And remember to keep an eye out for the next generation of Southwells. They should begin arriving at this wonderful school in 2033 or thereabouts.

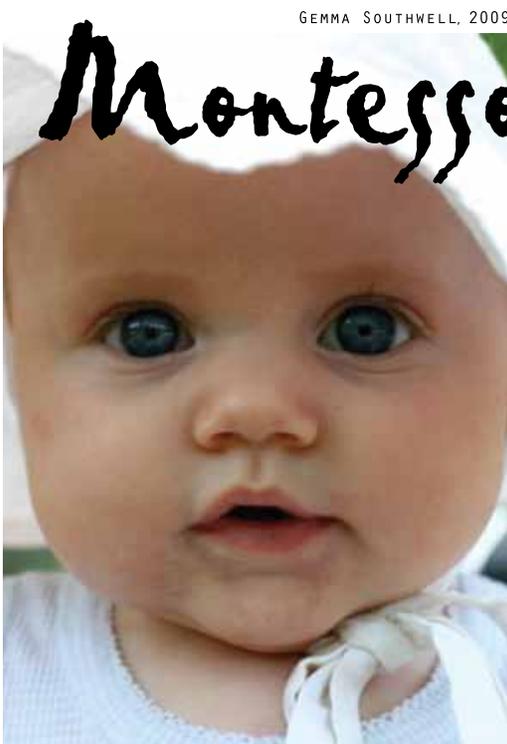
BY ALEX SOUTHWELL
Board Member



MADELINE SOUTHWELL, 2007



LUCAS SOUTHWELL, 2009



GEMMA SOUTHWELL, 2009

West Side Montessori School



... and Counting

Alex Southwell attended West Side Montessori School from September 1974 through June 1977. He is now a Trustee, serving on the Executive and Strategic Planning Committees.

Alex and his wife, Sandy, have three children. Their eldest daughter has already "graduated" from WSMS and is now attending the Trinity School, their middle child is currently enrolled at WSMS, and their youngest will be ready to continue this family tradition in the fall of 2012.

After his beginning at WSMS, Alex attended Columbia Grammar, transferring to Hunter in 7th grade. He obtained his BA at Princeton University and his JD at New York University.

Alex is a member of a large international law firm where he specializes in white collar criminal defense and internal investigations, as well as information technology and privacy matters.