



Nissa Booker: WSMS Mom Becomes WSMS-TEP Student

In the corporate world, the human resources (HR) department plays a critical role in shaping a business. By identifying and hiring promising individuals, then nurturing their development in the company through its various programs, employee benefits, and professional development opportunities, the HR division helps to ensure a company's success. These days, Nissa Booker, mother of WSMS alumna Dalyn and incoming student Aiden, is discovering that the skills and interests that make someone a good HR professional transfer readily to the classroom.

Nissa has been a student in WSMS-TEP, our Montessori teacher education program, since last summer. At the same time she works full-time for AOL, recruiting personnel for their new PATCH initiative (creating localized news programming); parents her two children; volunteers enthusiastically at WSMS and at Dalyn's current school; and even manages to grab the occasional dinner and a movie with her husband, Courtney.

The daughter of a military officer, Nissa and her family lived in five places before settling in Fort Washington, Maryland, where Nissa finished high school. After graduating from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, she worked for ABC News in Washington, D.C., then transferred to a position in their New York bureau, where she eventually transitioned to the Talent Recruitment department. She says she was surprised to discover that many of the “best and the brightest”—graduates of prestigious colleges and universities—lacked skills essential for success: basic academic skills like writing, but also psycho-emotional skills such as creativity, collaboration, and the ability to be flexible and to problem solve.

When Dalyn began at WSMS, Nissa felt a “pull” to the Montessori culture. She watched her daughter develop “critical thinking” and learned how even a very young child can “make and execute a plan,” and how the teacher is trained to “meet the child” instead of imposing a plan on the child. Nissa praises Melissa Vallo, who was then the head teacher in 2W, for identifying a receptive language issue that, left untreated, could have affected Dalyn's future academic accomplishments. This attention to Dalyn and her learning patterns was a pivotal factor that steered Nissa closer to making the decision to switch careers.

Nissa discovered the information about WSMS-TEP on the school's website and casually mentioned it to Mimi during an early exmissions consultation; Mimi was very supportive of the inquiry. After spending more time with Dalyn in the classroom and with other WSMS parents as a PA volunteer, Nissa became even more fascinated by the opportunities presented by a career in Montessori education. She came to see teaching small children as a way to foster the very capabilities she sometimes found lacking in the workforce, as well as a chance to use her skills at identifying the talents and interests of individuals and helping them find the best uses for them.

In the summer of 2010, Nissa dove in with eyes open. She took a three-week leave from AOL to participate in the first phase of WSMS-TEP, and over the past year she has spent at least one Sunday each month in a WSMS classroom. She reports that WSMS-TEP offers in-depth training in all areas of Montessori education (e.g., practical life, sensorial, cultural, language, math,



“I've learned that children have ‘sensitive periods’ and that there really are developmentally appropriate times when they will be ready for certain skills and concepts, and by trusting that knowledge I will better prepare my children by allowing them to explore and follow their interests.”

—Nissa Booker

art) as well as practical training (e.g., how to behave like a Montessori teacher, especially in interacting with children and with their parents). The program also focuses on various aspects of child development, on recognizing what is going on, and on creating alternative approaches where necessary or appropriate. Nissa has learned how important it is for a teacher to trust a child to take the lead, and to know how to help the child do so in a developmentally suitable and successful way.



Nissa says she was surprised by how much knowledge, education, training, and experience it takes to be a good Montessori teacher. Beyond the standard academic documents, WSMS faculty are required to earn the American Montessori Society (AMS) Early Childhood Credential. WSMS-TEP offers 300+ hours of academic preparation—as well as assistance in obtaining student teaching positions—to individuals interested in pursuing the credential.

Going to school while working full-time has been a juggling act, but a rewarding one. Nissa says, “The volume of work is huge, but it is gratifying to be learning something that I chose to learn.” Asked if what she has studied at WSMS-TEP has application to her success as a parent, she smiles, then replies, “I’ve learned that children have ‘sensitive periods’ and that there really are developmentally appropriate times when they will be ready for certain skills and concepts, and by trusting that knowledge I will better prepare my children by allowing them to explore and follow their interests.” Although Nissa will be taking a hiatus from WSMS-TEP for the next school year, she looks forward to completing the program down the road. In the meantime, next fall she will be taking Aiden to school for the first time. Whichever hat she’s wearing—that of WSMS parent or of WSMS-TEP student—she will always find tremendous satisfaction in exploring the many ways in which the Montessori approach nurtures great beginnings.

Parents who become Montessori teachers

WSMS-TEP’s origins lie in a program designed to help parents become partners in their children’s education, so it is no surprise that it continues to attract parents who, like Nissa, feel drawn to the Montessori methodology and the promise it holds for transforming the ways children learn and interact with each other and with the adults in their lives. Current students include Ema Sato-Warga (mom of Aiden Warga, 2Wpm, and Kai Warga, who will enter in September) and Nandita Sood (mom of Armaan Bidani, 2Wpm).

At WSMS, parents of currently enrolled students aren’t the only ones who have pursued teaching in response to their children’s experiences. Head of School Mimi Basso became a teacher after her oldest son attended a Montessori school, as did Maiko Ishii (currently a student teacher in 3Wam). Many parents of WSMS alums have graduated from WSMS-TEP (or its predecessors, CHAMP and NYU-MTES) and gone on to teach at WSMS and other Montessori schools. They include Mary Ann Gioeli (NYU), Johnna Murray Camp (NYU), Marcia Polanco (CHAMP), Lisa Kohl (NYU), Barbara Reilly (CHAMP), Grace Shavers (CHAMP), Pamela Buchan (WSMS-TEP), Juliana LaBattaglia (WSMS-TEP), and Leandre Sampson (WSMS-TEP). Longtime WSMS staff member Barbara Grant, who graduated from CHAMP, has grandchildren who attended WSMS.