

## STAYING CONNECTED: WHERE THREE FORMER TEACHERS ARE NOW

Over our 50+ year history, WSMS has forged long relationships with families; many of the alumni family donors in our annual report have children who were here twenty-plus years ago! We have a number of teachers who have been here for a long time, too, as well as teachers who left but have stayed connected. This article is an opportunity for our readers to re-connect with a few of our favorite teachers.



### MELISSA VALLO FREEMAN

**Melissa Vallo Freeman, who is currently Early Childhood Practicum Coordinator and Administrator Practicum Coordinator for WSMS-TEP, originally came to WSMS through WSMS-TEP. After earning her Early Childhood credential in 2001, she became a head teacher in the Garden, 2W and 2E, then took on roles as an instructor and field consultant for WSMS-TEP. She left the WSMS classroom in 2009 for administrative positions in the school, then took on full-time responsibilities in WSMS-TEP. So, she remains very connected to WSMS!**

Growing up, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, and eight years in the WSMS classrooms brought me joy and fulfillment. In my fourth year at WSMS, Marlene Barron recruited me to TEP—it was a weekend gig—and I loved knowing I was supporting the development of more highly-skilled Montessori teachers. With Mimi's arrival, I became responsible for faculty support/professional development, then Associate Head of School, and married Josh in 2012!

After Mia was born in 2015, I returned to 2W as head teacher, moving to 2E in 2016. Our twins, Bryn and Cadence, were born in 2017. After a brief break, I was delighted to re-join WSMS-TEP. The weekend classes, and ability to work remotely, meant that I could negotiate the complexities of childcare, and kept me connected to the school where my academic career began.

Although I am no longer in an early childhood classroom, I am still a teacher: during the academic year, I teach Early



Childhood Sensorial and Classroom Leadership courses (via Zoom) and the Curriculum Course for the Administrator program, co-teach/facilitate History and Foundations online courses for the Montessori Inclusion Endorsement program, and present the Montessori Foundations course to non-credentialed teachers, parents, etc.

I also organize and support interns with their Practicum placements, coordinate and monitor field consultants, do field observations, and collaborate with the TEP administrative team at every level. And, in the summer, I coordinate TEP classes for courses in the Early Childhood and Administrator credentials.

Having young children makes me even more aware of how important a child's first start in education is. The relationship between adults and children fostered in a Montessori classroom creates a foundation for the trust, caring, openness and respect that carries through their lifetimes. In my 10 years in early childhood classrooms, I influenced over 200 children. And in my ongoing career teaching teachers, that number will grow exponentially!

## NANCI GUARTOFIERO

**Nanci Quartifierro started in 4E as an intern (now called a student teacher) in 1994 and, in a few years, was head teacher in 3W. After an “educational leave” as a teaching principal in New Zealand, she was head teacher in 3E, then 2E and 1W. She also taught cultural studies in WSMS-TEP, and served as field consultant and program administrator.**

After the 2010-11 school year, I moved to the Big Island of Hawaii and got married, barefoot on the beach! We lived there until 2017. It was a big change from living in New York. I traded taking the subway to museums and Broadway shows, to having to drive to explore the island and all it had to offer. (*Actually my husband drove me around, I still don't drive!*) We went hiking on lava, camping and stargazing. We saw rainbows in waterfalls, and went to beaches, snorkeling and swimming with manta rays.

Our plan was to buy a plot of land in the rainforest, build a house, and live off the grid—and that's what we did! We moved in when it was half built; we had to cook outside while the construction continued. As a city girl, I felt like we were “in the middle of nowhere,” driving on a dirt road to our house. My husband built our house pretty much on his own, doing all the construction, electrical, plumbing, etc., himself, despite not having any formal training.

Usually, the sun would be out during the day enough to charge our solar panels, and it would rain at night to fill up the water tank. It was pitch black at night, because we lived in an area where there weren't any street lamps off the main highway. My husband grew up on a dairy farm in MI and had to teach this city girl some country ways; it was very “Green Acres”!



We collected eggs from chickens, planted fruit trees and vegetables. During that time, we also welcomed our daughter, Diana, who was born in May 2014.

When I moved to Hawaii, the public schools were starting to put preschool classrooms on their campuses. I opened and ran one of these classrooms for 6 years, following Montessori philosophy within the parameters set by a public school. I was fortunate to receive very generous funding, and able to purchase Montessori materials for the children. It was very different than working at WSMS, and I learned a lot about how systems work in the public sector. I took advantage of professional development opportunities to learn about Hawaiian culture, history, music, and language, becoming more informed and experienced about things like hula, poi pounding, and flora and fauna.

In June 2017, we returned to the mainland to Grand Rapids, MI. I am back in a Montessori school that serves infants through middle school. My daughter attends the school, and is in the classroom next door to me. We are able to see our relatives more regularly now.

Even though the school I work at now is an independent Montessori school, nothing can compare to the support and resources that exist at a school like WSMS! Working at other schools, and seeing other Montessori schools as a member of AMS on-site accreditation visiting teams, I have learned how unique WSMS really is.

While I lived in Hawaii, I connected with the only Montessori Teacher Education Program in the state at Chaminade University of Honolulu. I still work as an instructor in the program during the summer, and my daughter gets to come along with me. It keeps us bonded to Hawaii. Diana loves to go to the beach, read books about Hawaii, listen to Hawaiian music, and “dance” the hula. We also return to New York every summer to visit my family. And, of course, we stop by WSMS to see everyone, too!

## SUSANNE PEEBLES

**Susanne Peebles arrived at WSMS in 1983 as an Associate Teacher in 2E. At the time, she was completing her MA in Early Childhood Education at NYU, specializing in Montessori education, and training under Marlene Barron, Mimi’s predecessor as head of WSMS.**



**She soon became Head Teacher in 1Wpm, then moved to 2E and 4E. She took on the role of Mentor Teacher in 1990, added office projects to her responsibilities, and became Associate Head of School in 1992. One of her biggest challenges at WSMS was overseeing the summer 1995 renovation of the Garden and first floors while Marlene was teaching in England. Keeping the architect and construction crew on deadline was very different from her multiple academic tasks!**

I left WSMS in April 1996. After six months at Jacobi Medical Center, as a classroom teacher with four- and five-year-olds in their day care center for children with HIV, I became Direc-

tor of Preschool Admissions at Brooklyn Heights Montessori School (BHMS).

Much like WSMS, BHMS was started in the mid-1960’s by parents, and initially served 20 three-to-five-year-olds in a church basement classroom. Over time the school expanded its program, and the first class of eighth graders graduated in 2001. After several moves, space acquisitions and renovations, the school now serves approximately 270 students, and has a library, a learning kitchen, a state-of-the-art performance space, an expanded terrace garden, a common space for community gatherings, roof play space for the Lower School, an outdoor classroom and a large turf-covered outdoor space for all grades.

I became Director of the Preschool (2s and 3-6 programs) in 1999, while continuing my role in Admissions. Director of Financial Aid was added to my responsibilities in 2000. My admissions and financial aid roles were passed along to the newly established Admissions Office in 2002.

In 2013 the school underwent a major reorganization of responsibilities, and I was appointed Head of the Lower School, with responsibility for the 2s, 3-6, and 6-9 programs.

I learned so much from my experiences at WSMS and put every aspect of it into my different roles at BHMS, including how to register the school for a BEDS [NYS Basic Educational Data System] number in order to support the transition from classroom-based libraries to the establishment of a school library, establishing the toddler (2s) program, developing a Mentor Program for new employees, establishing bi-weekly meetings with all teaching teams, and so much more.

I have fond memories of WSMS, and still have many precious photos and letters from families and children. I loved the teaching staff. Many of my closest friends are former and current WSMS people, including Marlene, Barbara Myszak, Barbara Reilly, Windy Wellington, Ron Sopyla, Susan Flexner, Judy Ralston, Lynn Vogel, and Elspeth MacDonald (I still see her once in a while!). I run into Joan Shisler, Melissa and Margot Mack, and Marcia Polanco at conferences, and keep tabs on Barbara Grant and Patricia Dawkins via social media. WSMS truly shaped my life and prepared me well for all the things I have done since.