

# TEACHER TALK

## INTERVIEWS: Karen Deinzer & Robyn Mernick

Premiering in this issue is a column entitled Teacher Talk, in which members of the WSMS faculty share with readers their background, their interests, and their perspectives on Montessori education.

### KAREN DEINZER HEAD TEACHER, TWO'S PROGRAM

The second pilot year of the Two's Program at WSMS is underway, and head teacher Karen Deinzer is, if anything, even more excited and enthusiastic than she was a year ago. Karen has more than 30 years of experience working with infants and toddlers. In addition to heading the Two's Program, she is one of four teachers in WSMS-TEP's Infant & Toddler Program, which is also in its second year. Here, Karen discusses her experiences with the Two's Program thus far, and with the Montessori approach in general.

#### How did the first year of the Two's Program go?

It was amazing! The children grew so much, and so did the assistant teachers. We had 25 kids in all, and it was incredible to see how far they had come by the end of the year. From the beginning they trusted us and were so relaxed and happy in the classroom. As the year progressed they started to really look out for one another, help each other, and work together. The assistant teachers were great from day one, but over the course of the year they learned so much about working with this age group, and the patience it requires. We're all going to really miss the kids from last year, but we're looking forward to working with this year's group.

#### Can you describe this patience in greater detail?

In the [WSMS-TEP] Infant & Toddler Program we talk to our students a lot about the importance of letting children be who they are, and not being controlling. That's why we prepare the environment the way we do, so the kids can choose what they want, when they want. Two-year-olds will be loud; they



Karen Deinzer reading with WSMS 1W students.

will yell and scream and run around. We tell our students, "Relax, be happy, that's who they are." You really have to stop and think: What are the children doing? What are they learning and discovering by doing whatever it is that they're doing? It's crucial that we not rush in and "correct," that we allow kids to use their imagination, to move, to create things, to problem-solve, without the intervention of adults.

#### Can you give an example of a situation that you handle differently for two-year-olds than for older children?

One of the activities our kids like to do is to visit the kitchen at WSMS, to say hi to the chef and watch the food being prepared. Sometimes one child will suggest visiting the kitchen, and then more and more of the kids want to do it too. We don't tell a two-year-old, "You can't go now, because it's not your turn." Instead, we say, "Let's all go see the chef!" Another thing to remember about children this age is that there's such a broad range of what's age-appropriate, and you have to anticipate that. It's about role modeling. The kids watch, and eventually they do, but not because I told them to do it. By the end of the year they know what's right and what's wrong.

#### What advice do you have for parents dealing with the infamous "terrible two's"?

I don't consider the two's terrible! The most important thing is to know your child: take the time to sit back and observe her/him. Remember that children at this age can be unpredictable. Never assume that just because they do something one way today that they'll do it the same way tomorrow.

Language is important. Pay attention to your tone of voice and your volume; you can get a point across without yelling. Children listen, and they watch everything you do. We recognize that it's hard being a parent, and we're here to help. Parents are always welcome to come into the classroom to observe, and when they do, they tell us, "I never knew that. That's a great way to handle that situation." It's a partnership: we're all here for their children.

#### What, if anything, about the program will be different this year?

In addition to our existing programs (two three-hour mornings a week, three three-hour mornings a week, five full days), we now offer an extended day option, until 6:00 p.m. To help us with the extended days, WSMS has hired two additional teachers, Puja Panchal and Mija Lee.

#### What brought you to teaching, and to the Montessori approach?

When my daughter was two and a half she was in Mimi's classroom [at the Village School in Ridgewood, New Jersey], and she would always come home so happy. I was the type of parent who was very curious, and I always wanted to see what was going on in the classroom. I was amazed by how intuitive and natural the approach was. All my daughter wanted to do was paint, and now she's 30 years old and she's just opened her own art gallery. I always tell her, "You are who you are because of Montessori. You understand how to respect people. It doesn't matter what you're made of; respect is everything." In this world, more people need to learn to accept people for what they are.

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### What keeps you inspired?

WSMS-TEP always shows me a different side of what goes on in the classroom. It's so rewarding to see these people coming in new and eager to learn how to work with infants and toddlers. The kids in the Two's Program are a steady source of inspiration. They truly accept us teachers for who we are, regardless of age, etc. And then there's WSMS. Mimi has such a fabulous way of supporting her teachers. I feel a real sense of belonging here. I love being in the classroom and watching the children thrive.

## ROBYN MERNICK HEAD TEACHER, 4Eam; HEAD TEACHER, WSMS-TEP

*Children and adults alike have benefitted from the superb teaching of Robyn Mernick, who is currently in her 10th year as a Montessori teacher. Robyn came to WSMS in 2009, both as an Early Childhood teacher and as a WSMS-TEP teacher. She is quick to point out that she learns just as much as her students in both environments. Here, she traces the path of her "Montessori journey" up to the present, but it is clear that this path continues far into the future.*

### What brought you to Montessori?

My entry into the world of Montessori was a bit of a happy accident. After graduating with a BA in Psychology, I knew I wanted to

work with children, but I wasn't certain about the capacity in which I would do this. I applied for an after-school teaching position at a school that happened to be Montessori-affiliated, and they offered me a full-time teaching job instead! I had the good fortune to be mentored there by a wonderful Montessorian named Mary Rockett. Her practice was truly inspirational: her interactions with children, her language, and her manner were exceptional. I found that the way that I believed children should be treated and taught had a name: Montessori! I was encouraged to take my training through Northeast Montessori Institute in Massachusetts, and here I was taught by a group of lifelong Montessori educators whose words and lessons still remain in my mind daily. I feel so fortunate to have begun my Montessori journey with them.

### What brought you to WSMS?

Six years ago I planned to move to New York from Maine in order to be closer to friends and family. I was directed to look into West Side Montessori School by a number of colleagues, one of whom, Megan Cahill, was working there at the time. When I went for

my interview, I was delighted by the faculty and the facilities. It was a beautiful space, and it was obvious from the start that children were taught with tremendous love and care. It didn't take long for me to make my decision to join the WSMS community!

### What keeps you inspired?

I stay connected to the ideas and people that inspire me. This comes in various forms: catching up with friends I trained with, or past or present colleagues at WSMS; or reading excerpts from Maria Montessori, Rachel Carson, or Catherine McTamaney. I try to keep my practice fresh by attending workshops and conferences, but I take out the notebook I filled during training when I feel like I need to get back to what was, and remains, most important to me. And, of course, the community of unique children with whom I spend my days is a constant source of inspiration!

### What have been some of your particular successes with students?

Every day there are hundreds of tiny successes. Some are academic: the child who struggled with writing her name mere





Robyn Mernick

months before now representing each letter clearly, or a third-year student composing a springtime poem on the chalkboard. Others are perhaps less noticeable, though no less profound or meaningful: the child who spills a drop of milk and, without reminder, retrieves a towel and cleans his space; the comfort an older child offers to a new student who is crying for her parent; the ushering of an ant to safety outdoors; the care and creativity placed into a small flower arrangement to decorate the classroom. While I take great pride in all of the children's academic accomplishments, observed moments of kindness, wonder, curiosity, and independence are, to me, greater successes.

**As a head teacher, you have had the opportunity to mentor student teachers. What are the ways in which you benefit from this role?**

The relationship between supervising teacher and student teacher is so much more reciprocal than one might imagine! The student teachers I have had the opportunity to work with have been so motivated and inspired, and I have certainly gained from them an equal or greater quantity than what I offered! Their energy, despite going through what is truly a grueling training process, is

absolutely infectious, both for the children in the classroom and for the team of teachers with whom they work. It's wonderful to be a part of an institution like WSMS that is so deeply involved with the training of future Montessorians.

**Has the experience of teaching in WSMS-TEP changed your perspective and/or your practice? If so, how?**

It's been such a wonderful part of my own Montessori journey to work in the training of new Montessori teachers. I began teaching five years ago in the Language component, and I also designed and implemented a Peace Education workshop that was added to the Philosophy component. My own understanding of the philosophy and practice has become so much deeper in the years that I have been involved with TEP. It has also been highly motivating to gain a deeper understanding of language and literacy development in the young child, leading me to classes and workshops that presented strategies foreign to the Montessori language approach. How much richer my teaching of both children and adults has become for this expanded perspective!

## MINGMA UKYAB: REFLECTIONS AFTER 14 YEARS



*The WSMS community bids a fond farewell to our beloved teacher Mingma Ukyab, who has moved back to her long-time home in Nepal. Here, she reflects on her lifelong commitment to Montessori education.*

After graduating from college in my native country, India, I saw an advertisement for Montessori teacher training. Although I wasn't familiar with Montessori, I was intrigued, so I signed on for the course. I have been a Montessori teacher for almost 30 years, including 14 at WSMS.

Montessori training changed my life! Every day is an inspiration because I am continually learning—from the children and from my colleagues. Montessori teachers are guides, not content experts focused on rote learning. We use our knowledge of child development, our skills of observation, and the proven materials developed by Maria Montessori to help our students experience the joy of understanding and the sense of competence associated with acquiring new skills, absorbing new concepts, and gaining factual knowledge. We encourage questions, foster independence, and emphasize that there are many ways to learn and to solve a problem.

Now that I am back home in Nepal, I plan to continue working in Montessori education. I have visited more than a dozen schools here that call themselves Montessori, but they lack the proper training and materials. I'm hoping to collaborate with Mimi and WSMS-TEP to bring some seasoned Montessori faculty to Nepal to help raise the standard here. I love WSMS; it is an outstanding school for children, for faculty, and for families. I want to retain my connection with the WSMS community for the rest of my life.