THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM

NURI RICHARDS: THE ROOT OF A FLOURISHING WSMS FAMILY TREE

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Just as our long winter has finally transitioned into spring, this issue of *Great Beginnings* takes a fresh look at some areas that are important to us.

An article that appeared in *Great Beginnings* several years ago talked about how WSMS stretches its teachers intellectually so that they continually improve their ability to understand, support, and teach our children. In this issue we focus again on that subject. In “The Responsive Classroom,” I am joined by WSMS colleagues Melissa Freeman, Donna Longdon, and Gelsey Steinbrecher in an interview session conducted by Patricia Luciani, our Director of School Advancement. Our broad-ranging discussion covers the connections between children’s emotional well-being and their learning potential, and how we empower our faculty to gently help children be comfortable in the classroom in every way.

Our alumni article celebrates an extended family, in the sad context of the recent passing of their central member, Nuri Richards. Nuri arrived at WSMS in 1994 with her son Khaleed, and celebrated our 50th anniversary with her daughter (and WSMS parent) Davina at last year’s gala. Over the past 20 years, two sons, a granddaughter, and two step-grandsons have attended WSMS, all because of Nuri’s strong belief in finding the right start for every child. She was here for every one of them, and their academic and personal successes are a tribute to her warm support.

Finally, while we often proudly describe WSMS—and the Montessori approach—as “where to begin a lifetime of learning,” in this issue we look outside our immediate community to discover how the Montessori starts of some enterprising individuals may have had an effect on you that you might not suspect. We look at some recent coverage of the Montessori impact in the media, and name some pretty famous Montessori alumni!

As this school year closes, I want to thank all of you who contributed to our success in so many ways: volunteering, contributing to our fundraising, being there in support of the needs of our children, faculty, families, and friends. We count on you, and you never let us down.

With our very best wishes for a terrific summer,
The Responsive Classroom

The Importance of Tending to Our Students’ Emotional Health

A discussion with: Mimi Basso, Head of School; Gelsey Steinbrecher, Head Teacher, 4E; Melissa Freeman, Associate Head of School; and Donna Longdon, Head Teacher, 4W

For the past four years WSMS has invited Lesley Koplow and her team to be visiting scholars at our school*. In addition to being a best-selling author and an esteemed educator and psychotherapist, Lesley is Director of the Center of Emotionally Responsive Practice (CERP) at Bank Street College of Education, and it is in this capacity that she has been teaching our faculty how to apply core principles of emotional responsiveness in the classroom. Great Beginnings editor (and Director of School Advancement) Patricia Luciani sat down with Mimi Basso, Melissa Freeman, Donna Longdon, and Gelsey Steinbrecher to discuss the impact that their CERP training has had on their daily routines, their interactions with students, and their teaching.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: Mimi, you stand by the stairs each morning and greet children and parents as they arrive, while teachers wait to welcome them again at the classroom doors. Why have you made these routines a WSMS tradition?

MIMI: A warm and focused welcome from me, echoed by teachers at the classroom door, signals that we are both delighted and prepared to help each of our young learners have a productive day of growth and discovery. Children bring their experiences with them as they move from the family circle to school. We are eager to discern a child’s mood as he enters the classroom so that we can be responsive to and supportive of his needs.

Given that children this young do not have the language to analyze and understand the impact of their experiences, our job is to invite them to share their joys as well as their concerns in the safety of a warm and accepting community. Who hasn't seen an ebullient child arriving at school, thrilled with a new pet or scooter? On the other hand, who hasn’t seen a child arrive at school who is anxious about his grandpa being ill, or sad about the death of a pet, or ambivalent about the arrival of a new sibling? Both the joyful child and the sad child need to be encouraged to describe their feelings. A responsive community is one in which individual emotions and reactions can be expressed freely and discussed in a safe and productive classroom atmosphere. This kind of open communication helps each child to feel known and accepted, and enables her classmates to learn from her experience, to empathize, and to respond with kindness and support.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: What prompted you to invite Lesley Koplow and her team to become visiting scholars at WSMS?

MIMI: Traditionally, early childhood Montessori teachers are trained to focus primarily on encouraging independence while helping children build pre-literacy and pre-math skills. Certainly, early childhood Montessori teachers-in-training are taught to be on the lookout for the emotional expressions of children, and to encourage parents to tell them about any events

*The WSMS Visiting Scholar Program brings cutting-edge early childhood research and practice on-site to ensure that we are providing the best professional development for our faculty and an unparalleled early childhood education for our students.
at home that might affect the child in the classroom. That said, the Montessori approach does not provide explicit strategies to effectively address and elicit social and emotional connections in the classroom.

I was in a classroom late one afternoon, and one of the children asked if I would help him put on his coat. This was an “ahh!” moment for me. He knew how to put on his coat. I knew he could do it, and his teacher knew he could do it too. The teacher, focused on encouraging his independence, reminded him that he should do it himself. And yet this little guy wanted me to connect with him. So I helped him put on his coat, even though that was not our usual practice. He smiled, thanked me, and was on his way. This experience stayed with me. I realized that although our goal is to help children develop independence, it is equally important to connect with children and be responsive to their immediate needs. These are not “little adults”; these are children who are trying to make sense of the world around them, and sometimes they need to know that the adults in their lives are there for them.

Inspired by this experience, I began to look for ways to augment faculty skills and knowledge in the areas of social and emotional development in the classroom. My efforts were bolstered by studies in the field of neuroscience that identify a direct link between emotional well-being and success in academic learning. I knew that WSMS needed to give faculty the opportunity to learn about and tap into this emerging area of social and emotional development in early childhood education. And I knew that it had to be a school-wide effort.

Finding Lesley Koplow was the easy part: all my research pointed to her. She is a pioneer in the area of emotionally responsive practice. She is also a wonderful educator who is not only warm and caring but at the top of her game.

**Great Beginnings:** Melissa, you were a head teacher at WSMS for 10 years before you took on the Associate Head role, in which you support and mentor faculty.

**What has been your experience helping teachers learn about the principles of creating an emotionally responsive classroom?**

**Melissa:** First, we had to learn the concepts and the language. It was important for all WSMS faculty to be involved, because we wanted teachers to have a common language and a shared understanding of this need, and we wanted to ensure that all children would benefit from this new knowledge.

Lesley Koplow began with a review of child development milestones from birth to age five. We were already familiar with these milestones, but Lesley helped us see them through a new lens. She explained how children enact the social and emotional tasks inherent in each milestone. She also helped us understand our role in helping children achieve these milestones in partnership with their parents. When a milestone is not achieved within a normal developmental time frame, the child can remain “stuck” in the earlier stage. We talked about the cues that would tell us where a child is developmentally, and about what teachers could do to help a child move to the next stage.

For example, between the ages of three and four, children typically move from parallel play (playing next to another child) to cooperative and dramatic play (engaging with one other child). By age five they see themselves as part of a peer group and are able to relate to a classroom of children. If a child of five continues to be engaged in parallel play, or can only play with her “best friend,” the teacher needs to help the child move forward. The teacher can join the child’s play and model an optimum experience of playing with another child.

In this situation the child perceives the teacher as a reliable source of emotional support, and is helped to focus on and practice cooperative behaviors in a safe way. The teacher can then encourage the child to try out these new behaviors with a classmate, while the teacher keeps a watchful eye on the interaction and joins in the play if more support is required.

**Great Beginnings:** How did you help faculty apply these core principles in the classroom?

**Melissa:** Once we had a deeper understanding, we began to incorporate them into our daily routine. Teachers felt safe and secure in trying out new strategies because Felice Wegman, CSW, a key member of CERP, was in classrooms to model, to observe, and to provide support. Felice focused primarily on recognizing the behavioral clues that might indicate the existence of emotional stress in children. Upon identifying a stress indicator, she would model a strategy to address it. Here is one example:

A little boy was building in the block area. He seemed distressed, and began to abruptly dismantle his creation. Felice approached the child and asked him what he was building. The child said, “I’m building a fortress, but it’s not strong enough.” Felice asked him what was going to be inside the fortress. The child answered, “My bed and my toys.” “Tell me about that,” said Felice, and out came the child’s story: “I need to have my bed in a fortress every night because there is a monster in my closet. He wakes me up every night and I’m scared. Mommy comes to my bed, and she tells me it’s all right. But then she leaves.” This
child had recently become a big brother, and the new baby’s bassinet was in his parents’ room. The child was also dealing with his feelings of powerlessness. Felice helped him build a really strong fortress. The next day he constructed a bed and drew pictures of his favorite toys to put inside his fortress. Upon Felice’s suggestion, the teacher read him the book Go Away, Big Green Monster!, by Ed Emberley. In reading this book, the reader creates a monster, page by page: big yellow eyes, sharp teeth, etc. Once the monster is fully developed, the reader shows the monster “who’s in charge” by causing it to disappear, page by page. This child read the book over and over and, eventually, with great pride, read it aloud to his class.

**Great Beginnings: How would you describe the benefits of this program for WSMS faculty and students?**

**Melissa:** Learning from Lesley and Felice has provided all WSMS faculty with an invaluable additional layer of understanding about our students. And our students learn to be good community members. They learn to express empathy and respect for others—which in turn helps them learn to respect themselves and better understand and manage their own feelings. Thanks to CERP, our teachers have an even greater ability to make the classroom a safe place in which our students can be themselves and can authentically convey their joyous, sad, and mad feelings without fear. Their free expression comes from the security of knowing that the adults in the room can support them if needed.

**Great Beginnings: Gelsey, you came to WSMS only four years ago from a public school environment. This was the same year that Lesley and Felice began with us. How has this program helped you as a teacher?**

**Gelsey:** Personally, I have felt empowered by the information and strategies that I have learned from Lesley and Felice. I can now comfortably address issues in the classroom that I might have been uncomfortable in dealing with earlier. I’ve also become more aware of the many different ways in which children work through developmental milestones. For example, children between the ages of four and five are dealing with feelings of “power versus powerlessness.” It’s all about superheroes and princesses: who’s taller, who’s bigger, who’s stronger. Before, I might have perceived a child who wants to control not only what can be built in the block area but who can participate as being “mean” or “pushy.” Now, I recognize that this child is working to understand his sense of power and control. I can intervene and hold a discussion, or read a relevant book such as Whistle for Willie, by Ezra Jack Keats, to help the children better understand the tensions that they are feeling, and help them resolve those tensions and develop a stronger sense of well-being.

I also love the shorthand language that helps us keep the classroom atmosphere pleasant and productive while keeping track of individual children’s feelings. We have all learned to “check in” with each other—to make sure that everything is okay with an individual child, a group of children, or even a teacher.
This very simple technique enables us to acknowledge and productively address the interpersonal stresses and strains that inevitably occur in every healthy learning community. Referring to each other as “friend” is another useful practice that we’ve all learned. We might say to a child: “Come here, my friend, and tell me a little about the sad face that I see.” A person who is addressed in that way is more likely to feel invited to share his feelings rather than feel put on the spot.

Finally, all of the teachers in my classroom are completely “tuned in” to identifying stress indicators. For example, on the day after Halloween we noticed an unusually high level of energy among our students at the start of the day. Clearly we needed to address the energy and find a way to channel it productively. We invited the children to talk about what they had done the night before. Many children shared that they had gone trick-or-treating. As we talked, more in the group began to talk about the strange and scary things that they had seen. “I saw a real zombie.” “I saw a man without a head.” “I saw a lady with the face of a pig. Is she really a monster?” The class discussed these scary things, examining what was real and what was pretend. As the discussion continued, the class became calmer, and we were able to transition to the work of the day.

**Donna:** As Melissa mentions, learning the theory and innovative techniques has helped me become more sensitive to the complex inner life of children. Moreover, I now employ new practices that enable me to connect issues of student self-esteem and emotional health directly to their academic accomplishments, thereby developing the whole child—heart, mind, and body.

As a result of working with CERP I have instituted the idea of “social storytelling” in my classroom. I created a Classroom Journal and began to populate it with children’s stories and illustrations. The idea caught on with the children, and it has become a focal point for sharing.

I began by being on the lookout for the stress signals that children send out. And, since I know from experience as well as from the research that a child in stress has a much harder time focusing on work and relating to others in a constructive way, I want to respond quickly to those signals and channel them into constructive activity. Here are just two of many examples: A child was sad about his grandfather’s death. I asked the child to write (or dictate) and illustrate a story about his grandfather. We found out that the grandfather flew fighter jets, and the child loved describing and illustrating the stories that his grandfather had told him. When this child read the story aloud to the class, you could see his sense of pride and relief. Another child was dealing with her best friend’s very serious illness. Her friend was hospitalized and could not come back to school. This little girl wrote about her best friend, describing what she liked about her and their friendship in lovely detail. She ended her story with this sentence: “I wish that WSMS was a hospital so that my best friend could come to school and get her medicine here.”

**Great Beginnings:** Donna, you are a seasoned teacher who has taught more than 440 students over the past 20 years. How has this program helped you?
Great Beginnings: How would you describe the benefits of CERP for you and for your students?

Donna: I have been helped in finding more ways to understand what's going on for children during this critical developmental period of their lives. Growth is happening so fast that we cannot afford to have them lose time out of their day feeling stuck or worried. We have the responsibility for channeling those feelings in productive and creative ways. The storytelling has not only helped the children learn writing, reading, and creative expression, it has also helped them to feel validated, to learn how to share parts of themselves with others, and to feel the empathy and understanding of the adults and children in the room.

Great Beginnings: Mimi, after four years of having Lesley and her team as WSMS Visiting Scholars, it seems that the CERP program has become well established in WSMS practices. What are the benefits, from your perspective?

Mimi: It has always been my strong belief that a classroom needs to be a place where children feel safe and secure with the adults and the other children in the classroom community—not just physically, but on an interpersonal level. When we enroll a student, we make a promise to ensure that each child in the school feels significant, knows that her work is valued, and deeply understands that she is a capable human being. Our work with Lesley, Felice, and CERP has given us new skills with which to deliver on this promise. Teacher education has traditionally relegated the emotional realm to psychotherapists and social workers. In light of recent brain research that demonstrates the link between emotional well-being and learning potential in children, we now clearly understand that social and emotional development must factor heavily into the design of early childhood curriculum. I am proud to say that WSMS is in the forefront of this effort.
West Side Montessori School lost a dear friend when Judy (better known as Nuri) Richards died of cancer in August of 2013. Nuri was a longtime supporter of WSMS, but more than that she was an inspiration to all of us in the passion and dedication with which she upheld her lifelong belief in the importance of early childhood education, of family, and of giving back to one’s community. The legacy of this remarkable woman lives on in her children and in her grandchildren, and in the choices they have made in their lives. WSMS is honored to have been one of those choices for five members of Nuri’s extended family.

Nuri came to New York in the mid-1970s in pursuit of a career in entertainment after being named Miss Bermuda. David Harris remembers spotting her walking on Columbus Avenue: “I just went up to her and said, ‘You are the most beautiful girl walking on Earth.’” She laughed, and they soon discovered common goals and interests (David was then beginning his career in film, theater, and television). They were married and had one child together, daughter Davina. Although Nuri and David later divorced, they remained close friends. David is a devoted father and grandfather, and, thanks to Nuri, is close to her subsequent partner, Jim Alston, and her sons by him as well.

Nuri first became a familiar face at WSMS during the mid-’90s as the mother of her two sons, Khaleed (’94) and Kareem (’96). The boys’ father, Jim Alston, recalls, “Nobody could work as hard as Nuri did, identifying quality educational opportunities for our children, attending meetings, getting to know the community personally.” Nuri and Jim were both active members of the Parents Association; those of us who were there at the time will fondly remember Jim for the great fried chicken he regularly provided at the Spring Fair.

As someone with a more traditional academic background, Jim was surprised that what appeared to be minimal structure in the Montessori classroom was so effective for Khaleed and Kareem: “The boys have done extraordinarily well. I can’t imagine them having a better start. Their time at WSMS fostered independence, encouraged them to try.”

Nuri was also a student at the time, at Columbia Teachers College, and her studies made her even more appreciative of her sons’ experiences at WSMS. After receiving her master’s, she taught in the Bronx for a few years. Then, to allow for flexibility in supporting her three children’s academic pursuits, she took on a part-time schedule as a substitute teacher/proctor at Hunter Elementary (where Kareem started kindergarten) and at various independent schools (including Dalton, which both boys attended). She was thrilled to return to WSMS in 2008 as the step-grandmother of Max Alston (’10), then as the grandmother of Lila Harris Franks (’12), and as the step-grandmother of Henry Alston (4W).

From the beginning Nuri recognized the impact that a quality early education can have on children—and on their parents. In recent years she dreamed of opening a school for low-income inner-city kids. She knew that a well-rounded and supportive environment encourages children to try their best. And she recognized that every child is different. She encouraged her own children to find their roles in life, and she was proud of their choices.
Davina Harris went to Morningside Montessori School, then to the Chapin School. An alumna of Wesleyan University and the University of Michigan Law School, she is now a child welfare attorney working on abuse and neglect cases in the Bronx. Her mother was pleased that she chose to use her law degree in public service.

Davina sent her daughter, Lila Harris Franks, to WSMS in 2010. Davina found WSMS to be “empowering” for her daughter: “Lila has a passion for math and reading, and WSMS gave her a strong foundation, a love of learning, and the confidence to pursue her own interests.”

Lila started in the Garden classroom, and Nuri loved to pick up her granddaughter from school and see so many familiar faces in the ever-improving building. So did David Harris: semi-retired, he was often Lila’s after-school companion, and he came to know the school well. Already a fan of the Montessori approach (having sent Davina to Morningside and picked up Khaleed and Kareem at WSMS from time to time), he was impressed by the diversity at WSMS and the enthusiasm of the teachers. As he says, “Parents are engaged with what the faculty are achieving. You can always get feedback, even about difficult subjects. It’s a unique, closely-knit family.” David has embraced his role as WSMS grandfather with enthusiasm: he even appeared in this magazine, grilling hot dogs at last year’s Spring Fair.

Lila left WSMS for a Catholic school, then transferred this year to Upper West Success Academy on West 84th Street. Davina says she looked at a variety of schools for Lila and was generally attracted to progressive schools. She had reservations about Success Academy because of its reputation for being rigid. But Nuri told her, “I’ve watched my children and grandchildren as they grow, and I know that Lila is bright and curious. The Success environment is committed to challenging children. They look at a child’s potential, what she can absorb.” Her advice was well taken: Lila is flourishing and was recently promoted—mid-year—from first to second grade.
Khaleed Alston graduated from Morehouse College and was pursuing a master's in Industrial Psychology at New York University when he began to have misgivings about his long-term commitment. Nuri, though already fighting cancer, had plans to attend a teaching job fair, and encouraged him to come with her. Intrigued by the opportunities he encountered there, Khaleed began interviewing with schools. He is now in his second year as a fourth-grade teacher at Grace Church School.

Khaleed has found his calling. He loves that “the kids are still young and energetic, the environment is fun, and what they do is constantly changing—children at this age are much more interesting than adults!” He has fond memories of making “bug juice” at WSMS and going to the park. As Lila's uncle, he often helped Davina with pickup. Seeing the school now, through the eyes of a teacher, he was impressed. “The gym is much cooler than I remember it, and the classrooms, too,” he remarks.

Kareem Alston is currently a senior at Stanford University. He reflects his family heritage as head of the Arts & Education Committee at Stanford’s Institute for Diversity in the Arts, an interdisciplinary program in the humanities that involves students in the study of culture, identity, and diversity through artistic expression. Of his WSMS days, Kareem remembers sitting on the classroom steps and singing; eating kiwis; and attempting to attach Thomas the Tank Engine to a hat he was making out of purple felt. And he remembers going to the Spring Fair, carefully removing his shoes to jump in the inflated castle, and seeing his mom watch him, a cup of coffee in her hand, chatting happily with her many friends.

Nuri encouraged her children to explore their interests, and Kareem is no exception. He has danced with Alvin Alley American Dance Theater and Urban Bush Women; spent time in Botswana; and worked with the Tertiary School in Business Administration in Cape Town, South Africa. He returned to Cape Town last summer to do independent research on local hip-hop culture and how it impacts social activism and perceptions of identity in a post-apartheid context. He is currently working on a senior capstone thesis and a documentary. Kareem’s dad describes him as “a quiet storm.” He will begin a master's program in African Studies at Stanford this fall.

Nuri’s family has another WSMS connection. Jim Alston had two sons before meeting Nuri: James and Jeff. Max ('12) and Henry (4W) Alston are the children of Jeff and his wife, Robin. Nuri played an instrumental role in steering her step-grandsons toward WSMS.

Jeff had been living in Atlanta, where he was a successful banker specializing in international trade finance. When he decided to pursue his interest in creative arts, New York seemed the obvious place to do that, and living there would give him the opportunity to spend more time with his half-brothers, Khaleed and Kareem. Upon moving, Jeff founded the management and production company Rebel Soul Music, while Robin moved into a key role as Director of Legal and Business Affairs at A&E Television Networks. Though they were living up on West 142nd Street, Nuri insisted that they apply to WSMS for Max. She chaperoned their first visit. As Jeff says, “It was clear that this school was head and shoulders above the rest. We agreed that if Max got in, we'd make it work.”

Jeff’s family has an impressive historical commitment to education. His mother's grandfather served as president of Howard University from 1926-1960, and successive generations of his family have made high-caliber academics a priority. So Nuri’s encouragement was entirely consistent with family precedents.

Max thrived at WSMS, and Jeff credits Head of School Mimi Basso, together with Max’s teachers, for recognizing who he was and helping identify the right next school for him. As Robin says, “[Mimi] knew Max’s strengths and weaknesses, and when she talked about whether a school was right or wrong for him, she would say, ‘because…’”

Robin loves the way children at WSMS have fun while learning. She remembers peeking through the classroom door at pickup time, watching Max laughing with his friends. Henry's favorite activity this year in 4W is building 3-D structures; he doesn't realize he's learning math. Max is now a happy third grader at the Cathedral School, and he looks forward eagerly to welcoming his brother in the fall. Robin, meanwhile, is sadly contemplating Henry's final days on 92nd Street.
Nuri Richards and Davina Harris were among the guests at WSMS’s 50th Anniversary Celebration in February 2013. Few of us knew then that Nuri was battling cancer; it was the last time many of us saw her. That night, Nuri reconnected with other alumni parents, as well as members of the faculty and administration stretching back to her sons’ days.

Jeff Alston sums up what drew Nuri—indeed, what draws so many of us—to WSMS:

“Manhattan is a challenging place to grow up, ... you don’t have the familiarity of a small town. But WSMS is really about community: regardless of your socioeconomic background, everyone is there for the same reason. It’s all about the children.”

In light of Nuri’s multiple connections to WSMS, along with her demonstrated commitment to the education not only of her own family but of so many others, we mourn her passing but celebrate her legacy.
Margot Mack on Nuri Richards:

I have had the privilege and pleasure of working with Nuri's sons, Kareem and Khaleed Alston, as well as her grandchildren, Lila Harris Franks and Maxwell and Henry Alston. I will remember all the smiles they have shared throughout their time at WSMS, and I will remember Nuri and her legacy of love and learning.

Nuri Richards was a person who modeled directly the importance of education, to her children and to everyone she came in contact with. She always asked questions and often shared information on things that she had read or a class that she might take. I remember that she was very clear that each one of her children had their own individual interests and way of learning: what was good for one may not be what the others required, each child was unique. Her boys were delightful, kindhearted children—the fruit not falling far from the tree. When it was her granddaughter Lila's turn to attend WSMS, Nuri was present at conferences and always at hand to help out with whatever might be needed.

By encouraging her grandchildren to attend WSMS, Nuri was sharing an educational setting that she thought to be special, But, in actuality, Nuri was sharing something quite special with us: a dynamic extended family with enthusiastic, knowledgeable learners.
Montessori: Where to Begin a Lifetime of Learning... and a Future of Innovative Success

By Mimi Basso

Parents decide to send their children to WSMS for many reasons, but probably not because the Wall Street Journal or Forbes told them it might be a good idea.
One of the primary reasons that parents choose WSMS is that they share the school’s belief that the Montessori approach—particularly as practiced at WSMS—is “where to begin” their children’s lifetime of learning. “Lifetime of learning” is a phrase of which we never tire. When Maria Montessori opened her first school in 1906, she recognized the importance of each child’s early experiences as the foundation of a healthy, fully realized adulthood. She charged her teachers with the thoughtful preparation of learning environments in which children could develop not only physical, social, and intellectual competencies, but a positive self-image and a positive disposition toward learning.

Given this history, it should, perhaps, be not all that surprising that the Montessori approach has been drawing an increasing amount of attention and admiration lately from various business media outlets. The general observation running throughout these think pieces and blog posts is that children who have been encouraged to explore their environments grow up to have more intuitive and successful experiences in their academic and working careers. While I agree with this assessment, I am fascinated by this intersection of the Montessori and business worlds, and wanted to share what I’ve learned about it.

In an article for the Wall Street Journal in 2011, journalist Peter Sims identifies a connection shared by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the late master chef Julia Child, and rapper/entrepreneur Sean “Diddy” Combs, among others: they are/were all innovators in their fields, and they all had a Montessori education. The article cites a study in which many of the 500 innovative entrepreneurs interviewed turn out to have attended Montessori schools, “where they learned to follow their curiosity.” Sims concludes by exhorting his readers to try to “change the way we’ve been trained to think. That begins in small, achievable ways, with increased experimentation and inquisitiveness. … Questions are the new answers.”

Perhaps so, but, as Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry points out in a blog post for Forbes.com from this past January, “There is nothing ‘new’ about this teaching method: let kids figure things out on their own, and they’ll not only learn better but be more passionate.” That post is titled, fittingly, “The Future of Education Was Invented in 1906.” Along the same lines, in a blog post for Forbes.com from 2011, Steve Denning writes, “The idea that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel [is] striking. The example of thousands of Montessori schools is before us. Montessori puts the student at the center. It is proven to work. … The world is finally catching up with Maria Montessori’s insights.”

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry offers a possible explanation as to why the Montessori approach has withstood the test of time:

Montessori education was so groundbreaking because it was the first (and, to my knowledge), scientific education method. … Maria Montessori, a doctor and a researcher … experimented with methods and, based on the results, built up a theory of the child, which she then tested and refined through experiment… It’s because of this scientific character of Montessori education that it produces such excellent results, results that are validated again and again.

Montessori schools have been yielding these “excellent results” for more than 100 years; WSMS, for the past 50. Certainly, the post-WSMS experiences of our graduates contribute to the ongoing validation of Dr. Montessori’s vision. Upon leaving WSMS, our students move on to schools with a broad variety of educational philosophies. But these children have learned to be receptive and inquiring, and even in the most structured
environment they can and do benefit from this mindset. As they continue through the higher grades, into college, and on to their careers, their educational foundation holds fast: if the first attempt doesn’t work, they regroup and take a different approach.

It is that lifelong “joy of discovery” that is the true measure of success, and it is what all of us at WSMS strive every day to sustain in our students.
FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Chef, author, and restaurateur Alice Waters is another example of someone whose Montessori background is helping her change our world. Many know her as the proprietor of the legendary restaurant Chez Panisse, but Waters was also once a Montessori teacher. She cites the latter experience as instrumental in her creation of the Edible Schoolyard Project (ESY), which integrates the creation and use of organic gardens into the curriculum and food program of urban public schools. ESY is currently implemented in some 2,000 schools in 50 states and 29 countries.

In an interview published on the American Montessori Society’s website, Waters explains, “When students come into the garden-classroom for their math class, they are measuring the vegetable beds—they are doing math by osmosis, effortlessly absorbing their lessons. This is the beauty of a sensory education—which is, at its core, a Montessori education: the way all the doors into your mind are thrown wide open at once.”

For more information about ESY, visit: http://edibleschoolyard.org/

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS
Two short, fast-paced “321 Fast Draw” videos on YouTube argue with charm and insight for the Montessori approach.

One is by Daniel Petter-Lipstein, a lawyer and the parent of two Montessori students, who relates the following anecdote (quoted here from a written version posted on un-schooled.net):

My daughter’s lower elementary teacher (Montessori classes are typically multi-age, lower elementary is grades 1-3 together) recently told me that a few kids in her classroom were learning about the triangle and they asked, “Can a triangle have more or less than 180 degrees?” In classic Montessori style, the teacher turned the question back on them and said, “Use the hands-on geometric materials and try and make an actual triangle that is more or less than 180 degrees.” So the children have their question honored and arrive at the proper answer by themselves. This story also highlights the role of a teacher in a Montessori classroom as being a “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage.”

The other video is by Trevor Eissler, a pilot/flight instructor and the parent of three Montessori students, who observes:

Children are naturally interested in learning. ...Montessori schools stoke that by flame by promoting hands-on, self-paced, collaborative, challenging and joyful learning. They encourage divergent thinking instead of convergent thinking, innovation instead of standardization.


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