

‘Visionaries’ left enduring legacy of respect, kindness at MEC

By Richard Sharkey

Jess Harris had heard so many people speak about the goodness and virtues of Montessori Educational Center founder Dorothy Barry that she absolutely had to visit her in person to see for herself.

So, on somewhat of a whim, Harris, a middle school teacher at the school, called Mrs. Barry one day early this school year and asked if she could visit her that weekend. Harris drove about 550 miles from Alexandria, La., to Perryville, Missouri, to meet the person whom others had showered with praise.

Upon meeting Mrs. Barry, Harris was impressed and amazed. “Dorothy Barry is a living saint,” Harris said.

Her visit with Mrs. Barry confirmed the reasons why those who know her speak of Mrs. Barry with awe and admiration.

Harris had heard people say of Mrs. Barry: “She could do things with children that no one else could!” “Dorothy Barry loved those children as her own.” “When Dorothy spoke, people listened.” “When Dorothy walked into a room, the energy changed.”

Now, Harris knows those compliments are well-deserved.

“Dorothy Barry is just someone you want to be near,” Mary Sharkey said.

Sharkey taught at MEC for 30 years before retiring in 2016, and both of her children attended MEC. She has kept in touch over the years with Mrs. Barry.

“She is kind and gentle and wise. She is pleasant and can be funny, and you just wanted to be close to her because you wanted to be in that realm and you knew that she was goodness,” Sharkey said of Mrs. Barry.

She too said she considers Mrs. Barry “a saint,” but also notes, “She was no pushover.”

Mrs. Barry could be firm, but she always acted in a respectful, loving manner in showing people ways to improve.

Dorothy Barry, now 93, launched Montessori Children’s House in Pineville in the fall of 1978, assisted by her niece, Marilyn Miller. While the school has undergone a few transformations, it is still flourishing 40 years later as Montessori Educational Center in Alexandria.

Mrs. Barry’s husband, Donald, had been helping behind the scenes when the school was founded, and he joined MEC as co-administrator and science teacher in 1981. The Barrys retired from MEC in May 1990 and moved back to Missouri. The school honored the Barrys during its 25th anniversary celebration in 2003. Donald passed away in April 2016 at the age of 94.

The Barrys provided a unique alternative for education in Central Louisiana and left a treasured and enduring legacy.

“Donald and Dorothy were visionaries. They gave our community a great gift in opening the school, and it is extremely gratifying to see it continue to thrive,” said Katrina

Adams, who taught primary class students at MEC from 1986 to 2009.

“They truly loved the children and teachers of the school. They were both deeply spiritual, and this colored their interactions, but they never pressed ideas on the children. It just came across in how all were accorded respect and kindness,” Adams said. “I know my children benefited from their example and today remember them with much tenderness as do I.”

Dorothy Barry modeled her educational approach and even her life philosophy on the teachings of Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educator who founded the Montessori Method and opened the first Montessori school in 1907.

“Having learned the philosophy of (Maria) Montessori, I adopted it as my way of life. My living and communication is according to her way. Listening and observing are of the essence for me,” Mrs. Barry said recently in emailed responses to questions.

“Having taught for many years in traditional schools and witnessed struggles some students face in learning and the lack of challenge others endure because of teaching methods, I was always ready for new developments in education,” Mrs. Barry said. “My first encounters with Montessori through her life story and her genius in working with children sparked a deep interest in learning the philosophy and method that brought such joy into children’s lives. We had moved to Louisiana for Donald’s teaching position at Menard. There were no Montessori schools in this area of Louisiana. I had become steeped in Montessori by then and wanted all children to experience this kind of learning environment,” she said.

The Montessori Method not only was the foundation for the Barrys' way of educating children, it also brought them together. They met when Donald was operating a community center which featured a program on the Montessori Method, and Dorothy visited the center to teach the program.

Dorothy said Donald was “active from the start” of the Montessori school in Central Louisiana, in making desks and tables, painting, cleaning and other projects.

“Being a scientist by education and desire and a magician for fun made him a natural for the school. Students of all ages relate positively with him. He was great as our science teacher, field trip leader, stargazer. Having a man among the staff was needed to round out the human family,” Dorothy said.

Mr. Barry was loved by the children for treating them fairly and for infusing in them his passion for science.

“Some of my favorite memories of Montessori are doing science experiments with Mr. Barry,” said Yuri Beck, who attended from 1984 to 1993. “His enthusiasm and love of the subject were infectious. I loved science class, and it ended up being my favorite subject.”

“Mr. Barry was always coming up with interesting things for us to do,” said Megan Sharkey Conerly, who is Mary Sharkey's daughter and who attended MEC from 1984 to 1992.

“And if you had an idea about a way to do something, he would probably let you try it out – whether it was a good idea or not!”

Shortly before retiring in 1990, Donald said observing children is a little like a science lab. “Not in the sense that you are experimenting, but you’re watching things develop,” he explained.

“It’s wonderful to see how a child’s mind opens up and works,” Dorothy Barry said as her retirement approached.

In recent written comments, she said a Montessori education is “totally CHILD-CENTERED. A true Montessorian calls forth the best in each child always. Cooperation, not competition, is a key. Respect for the self, the other and the work of one’s hands forms the base for growth and learning.”

Asked what was her own personal philosophy that she instilled in the school, Mrs. Barry wrote, “Being a woman of faith, I walk in the Lord and attempt to live out the two great commandments. I am mindful of Jesus’ love for children and try to call them forth even as He did. I hoped that the teachers in our school would imitate the Lord in His love and gentleness with children. In the logo of the school, I attempted to express the search in all education for the True, the Good, the Beautiful. Love signified by the flame was to set the world ablaze. I am still trying to do that, set the world ablaze with love.”

Joelle Flaherty, MEC’s head of school, said the Barrys left a special legacy for which Montessori Educational Center is truly grateful.

“Their portrait hangs in our front office! We could never possibly thank them enough for bringing Montessori to Central Louisiana,” Flaherty said.

Elaine Beck, whose children attended MEC in the 1980s and 1990s and who taught science and other classes at the

school for nearly two decades before retiring in 2009, paid tribute to the Barrys' legacy.

“Donald and Dorothy Barry planted the seeds 40 years ago. They introduced a whole new philosophy of education to Central Louisiana. The parents and teachers who were drawn to this philosophy had and do have a different mindset than those who are not. They are willing to put their trust in the children,” Elaine Beck said. “They are willing to let the child ‘do it themselves,’ to learn by trial, and to make mistakes and learn from them. The evidence that this method works is in the children themselves. This is the reason that MEC has thrived for 40 years.”

As administrator of the school, Mrs. Barry every morning greeted each student as they walked in the door and made each one feel personally welcome.

Mrs. Barry would look each child in the eye, shake the child's hand, say “Good morning,” and treat each one “as a valued person, with kindness and dignity and respect,” Sharkey said. “That set the tone for each child the rest of the day.”

The Barrys set also set the tone for the educational atmosphere that still lives on at the school today, Sharkey said.

“I think she (Mrs. Barry) embodied the spirit of Maria Montessori. She just brought Montessori to a higher level,” she said.

Those type of comments led Harris to want to experience the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Barry in person. Harris had gotten a glimpse of Mrs. Barry's nature through MEC middle school students interviewing Mrs. Barry by phone, mail or email

each year to learn about the history of the school. But that is not the same as meeting her in person.

Also, having heard some teachers and parents speak of Mrs. Barry in reverent tones, Harris wrote recently, “I thought to myself, ‘Could a person really possess such a character?’ And if so ... I would love nothing more than to sit down with such a person and have the conversation that has eluded me for 41 years. You know? The one in which someone tells you what life is REALLY about?”

“... I woke up one morning and felt: I want to meet Dorothy Barry and future planning will not work. I must do it now if I will ever do it at all,” Harris wrote.

She drove to Missouri to meet Mrs. Barry in person. “At first, we talked of MEC, the history of the school and children in general. Then the conversation gave way to mutual interests – shared books we have on our bookshelves, reading and writing poetry, trees, rocks, life and death, the meaning of it all. And so, I think I can say, ... I did have that conversation that has eluded me for 41 years. I guess the drive was worth it.”

Harris’ 6-year-old daughter,” Evangeline attends MEC. She wrote a journal entry about her first week of the school year. “Her journal entry was very touching. It was how much she loved her school. I made a copy of it and gave it to Mrs. Barry. She was very moved,” Harris noted.

The success of the school and the achievements of so many of its students are a great source of pride and joy for Mrs. Barry.

“I’ve grown to be 93 rejoicing that children in Alexandria are experiencing joyfully Maria Montessori’s legacy, the result of

a seed sown in faith, nurtured by loving parents and dedicated teachers who have brought fruition. MEC is now what caring parents, devoted teachers and wise leadership have made it,” Mrs. Barry said.

“Eternal gratitude goes to eyes that have seen the value of Montessori education, to hands that have labored to bring it completion and to hearts that keep it growing and glowing. I rejoice beyond telling when I hear from teachers and students alike.”

She is thankful that Montessori Educational Center is still a special place for children to get an education.

“Isn’t it a place where one can live, learn, grow, love, serve and reach for the stars? Isn’t the cosmos our learning space? A Montessori learning environment has no limits,” Mrs. Barry said. “Continued blessings are my hope for MEC for now and for many more years to follow.”

For more information about MEC’s 40th anniversary celebration, visit www.mecalex.org.

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