

Montessori Educational Center – 40 years old and still going strong!

By Richard Sharkey

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When Dorothy Barry opened Central Louisiana’s first Montessori school to 10 students in the fall of 1978, she had faith it would be accepted and serve the community well.

But she had no idea that the school would grow steadily and be thriving 40 years later as Montessori Educational Center in Alexandria.

“I was confident of success, knowing from experience that once parents see the beauty of children working in the environment that Montessori education provides, they would want that kind of learning atmosphere for their children,” Mrs. Barry said recently in reflecting on the school’s history.

“No one knows what the future holds, but I had the inner assurance that the school would grow. I did not envision that it would grow as it has and live to be here after 40 years.”

Montessori Educational Center now has nearly 200 students and employs 37 people in all. That growth has been fueled by the educational environment that is unique in the area and is appreciated by students, teachers and parents who are passionate about their belief in the Montessori Method and about their love for the school.

“We are a community of people – teachers, parents, board members, etc. – who are united with a common philosophy,” said Amber Voorhies, who teaches students in the 9-to-12 age group at the school. “Teachers are careful in the preparation of their classroom environments to allow for concentration and for independence. Our community feels like an extended family that does their best to support and encourage each other,” she said.

Joelle Flaherty is the head of school, which is equivalent to a principal, and she points to several key factors for the school’s success.

“I believe our growth can be attributed to the dedication of the teachers to the Montessori philosophy and to providing a quality education to each student,” Flaherty said. “I also believe that community outreach and publicity focusing on the value of a Montessori education has led more parents in the Central Louisiana area to consider our school for their children. The school’s continued success relies heavily upon the involvement of the parents. The volunteer hours and generous financial support of the parents have allowed our school to expand and thrive. We simply could not have a successful Montessori school without the dedication of both the teachers and the parents,” Flaherty added.



Since opening at 609 Lakeview St. in Pineville in September 1978 as Montessori Children’s House, the school has been on an upward arc from its humble beginnings with 10 students, some of them attending part time. The school’s name was changed to Montessori Learning Center with its move to a Beech Street location in Alexandria in 1981, and that’s when Mrs. Barry’s husband, Donald, joined the staff. The school moved to a building at the corner of Jackson Street and Bolton Avenue in Alexandria in 1989 when it was incorporated as Montessori Learning Center. By that time, the enrollment had grown to 98 students.

The school had 110 full-time students when it moved to its current site at 4209 N. Bolton Ave. in Alexandria in 1995. When Montessori Educational Center celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2003, the student body numbered 139.

The school now has 196 students – toddler program, 19 students; primary, 65 students; lower elementary, 54 students; upper elementary, 37 students; middle school, 21 students. The toddler program has openings, but all of the other classes have waiting lists.

The school, often referred to as MEC for short, has 19 full-time classroom teachers, three aides, three specialists (Spanish, music and science) and four employees in administration. Including janitorial staff and after-school workers, the school has a total of 37 employees.

The school began with classes for children ages 3 to 6, and for most of its existence, it served children ages 3 to 12. In recent years, however, it has opened classes for toddlers and for middle school students. More about the school’s setup and history can be found at www.mecalex.org/about.

In addition to its child-centered culture, MEC offers a variety of extracurricular activities. Those include Morning Mile, Love and Logic classes for parents, robotics, Lego Brickz for Kidz, yoga, karate, voice, piano and sewing.

Alexandria Mayor Jacques Roy congratulated Montessori Educational Center on its 40th anniversary. “This institution of creative self-determinism has been critical to Alexandria offering the educational panoply of opportunity all cities should have,” Mayor Roy said. “Kids and parents need choices, and this institution has offered a super-quality and individualized education for decades. I am personally and on behalf of a grateful city proud of this cornerstone of opportunity.

“Learning at their own pace, children experience many hands-on activities and numerous special extracurricular activities. Teachers instill the joy of lifelong learning and well as foster respect, kindness, and personal responsibility. Parental involvement is paramount in the school’s success — a lesson for all school models. I salute these stakeholders and wish them continued success,” Roy added.

Montessori Educational Center’s slogan is “An education as unique as your child.” Flaherty explained, “We treat each child as a unique individual and do not expect students to conform to a ‘one size fits all’ lesson plan. Lesson plans are created for individual children, and each student is allowed to progress at his own pace.”

That approach combined with the labor-of-love dedication and contributions of teachers and parents makes Montessori Educational Center an exceptional place for children to develop and prepare for the future.

Naiya Bernard, a 13-year-old, will finish her 10-year MEC career this school year when she graduates from eighth-grade next spring.

“I have really enjoyed my time here. I think that this school has not only helped me to learn as much as possible, but it has also helped me to be my own person and helped me to be independent and proactive,” Naiya said. MEC “really lets you be who you are ... and also pushes you to be the best that you can be,” Naiya added.

“My time at Montessori instilled a love of learning which helped me and inspired me to become a teacher,” said Megan Sharkey Conerly, who attended MEC from 1984 to 1993. “There was always a focus on kindness and accepting others for who they are. This is a great lesson for everyone to carry into their adult lives,” she said.

“I think Montessori is special because it is truly like a family,” said Sara C. Stokes, who attended from 1987 to 1996. “The teachers there truly care about the children and are invested in their growth and development,” Stokes said. “I also think it is a special place because it not only allows children to be unique, but it encourages children to be unique.”

MEC’s approach is based on the educational philosophy developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor and educator who opened the first Montessori school in Rome in 1907.

The American Montessori Society describes the “Montessori Method” of education as “a view of the child as one who is naturally eager for knowledge and capable of initiating learning in a supportive, thoughtfully prepared learning environment. It is an approach that values the human spirit and the development of the whole child — physical, social, emotional, cognitive.”

MEC teachers past and present say the Montessori Method is a wonderful way for kids to learn and to develop in a myriad of ways.

“I think the main difference in Montessori versus a regular education is the ability to meet a child where they are and take into consideration their strengths and needs. Each child develops and learns at a different pace and we could work at all levels from very high-functioning students to those who needed a bit more time and maturity,” said Katrina Adams, who taught 3- to 5-year-olds at MEC from 1986 to 2009. Her children, Dan, Elizabeth and John, all attended MEC.

Mary Sharkey, who taught 3- to 5-year-olds at the school for 30 years before retiring in 2016, said she never ceased to appreciate “how the children responded to the way Montessori was set up, how the teachers presented the materials and that the children were free to explore them and use them” to grow at their own paces. Not only does the school’s environment help kids become independent learners and become more responsible, Sharkey said, “there is a sense of community, kindness and respect.”

Her children, Megan and Will, both attended MEC.

“What makes MEC and a Montessori education so special is that the focus is on nurturing the love of learning and natural curiosity of children,” wrote Camille Robison. She served as interim head of school for the 1999-2000 school year and over the years served in various capacities on the MEC board and a parents’ group.



Montessori focuses on guided discovery to teach children.

“My children LOVED to go to school. I’m sure there are days I don’t remember, where they were unhappy, but what I remember is that my kids WANTED to be at school. What parent doesn’t want that for their child?” Robison wrote.

Elaine Beck, a longtime Montessori teacher who retired in 2009 and is now on the MEC board of directors, said, “You have to challenge students. When they have accomplished what they did not think was possible for them to do, they believe in themselves and gain confidence.” Much of her MEC career involved teaching science. “The only way to learn is to do. Trust the child. Give the child the proper guidance, then let them discover. This is called guided discovery. Science is not nomenclature, it is a way of thinking,” Beck said. “All children are born loving science. Think of the questions they ask: Why is the sky blue? Why does my throat hurt? etc. Our job as teachers is to keep this love alive.” Beck’s sons Joe II and Yuri attended MEC, and she now has four grandchildren attending there.

Yuri Beck is among the many students on whom MEC has had a profound, positive impact. “Montessori is special because they didn’t simply give me information to memorize and then test on it,” said Yuri, who attended MEC from 1983 to 1992. “The teachers kindled a love of learning and a thirst for knowledge that remains with me to this day.”

Anne Kathryn Hunter, who attended from 1992 to 2002, said MEC taught her how to manage her time and how to prioritize tasks. “It also taught me to remain open-minded to new ideas and different viewpoints,” she said. “Montessori was some of the best years of my life, and I honestly attribute a lot of my educational and professional success to being a Montessori child.”

Camille Jackson, president of the MEC board, said the keys to such success include the environment, materials and Montessori Method, “but the reason that MEC is special is our teachers.” She noted that in addition to earning college degrees – including some with master’s degrees and at least one with a Ph.D. – MEC teachers take classes to become certified to teach Montessori methods. “These methods are what set us apart from all other schools in the area – including other Montessori schools (in the public-school system). Our teachers focus on teaching children to reach their full potential cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. Our teachers are growing the whole person so that they are prepared not just for the next grade level or for college but for their entire lives,” Jackson said. “It is the teachers’ dedication to the Montessori method and to MEC which have led to its success for 40 years. Without them, MEC would simply not exist.”

Jackson, whose daughter Claire attends MEC, said teachers credit parental participation with laying the groundwork for the school prospering. “But for our parents’ belief in MEC, we would not have accomplished the growth that we have seen over the past five years. Our retention rates have increased to unprecedented figures, so much so that it called for the founding of a middle school. It is also undeniable that the financial well-being of MEC rests completely with the parents. ... They are the ones who help to ensure our teachers are supported as best they can be so MEC will continue for another 40-plus years.”

Flaherty said consideration is being given to an athletic director who could initiate programs such as soccer, cross country, golf and tennis. She said it’s a “dream of mine” to partner with a local major business to offer a primary classroom at the business location for children of the employees.

MEC currently offers classes through eighth grade. “Many of our parents are advocating for high school courses at our school. It would be a big undertaking, but so was the toddler program and the middle school. I am not going to dismiss the idea,” Flaherty said.

In the meantime, the school will continue to provide a unique and remarkable education for each child.

Robison said her three children, Katie, Mikey and Jackson, attended MEC and “have thanked me repeatedly over the years for sending them to Montessori.”

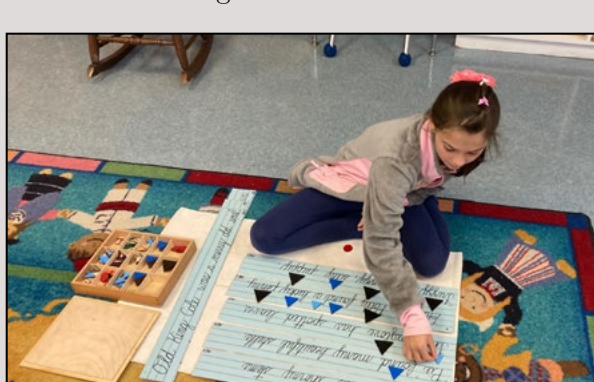
“Shortly after graduating from MEC, during his seventh-grade year, my middle son calmly turned to me one morning, thanked me for his Montessori education and said, ‘You know, I don’t remember everything I learned at MEC, but I LEARNED how to learn, and it will stay with me.’ I nearly broke the car off the road,” Robison wrote.

That reflects the value of Montessori Educational Center, now celebrating 40 years and still going strong.

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



Children enjoy the playground structures at MEC.



Students learn to parse sentences at MEC. Montessori uses a variety of materials to teach concepts to children.