

Notes from the Field

by Susan Mayclin Stephenson

Educateurs sans Frontiers (EsF) Luncheon address
Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Centenary Celebration
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IT BEGINS:

A journey from a privileged, protected upbringing, to India. An eye-opening student trip around the world, learning and service first hand, while traveling in Europe, North Africa, and Asia. For information see information on this program at the website: www.semesteratsea.com



1964 — BOMBAY, INDIA

India was an epiphany. I found myself on “The Street of 10,000 Prostitutes” where hundreds of ragged and skinny children played in front of cages, (tiny rooms behind bars) on the first floor of buildings where their mother earned their living as prostitutes.

The floors above were the same, and when the children were not on the street this is where they lived.



That day I decided to devote my life to helping the children of the world.

My photos of these children have been lost. These two pictures are from the book *Falkland Road, Prostitutes of Bombay*, by M. Mark.

1970-1971 — LONDON

Intending to return to help children in Asia, I earned an AMI (Association Montessori Internazionale) diploma from The Maria Montessori Institute in London. Fellow students were from many countries so, rather than preparing to teach in a Western culture only, there was an emphasis on learning to explore the history, geography, sciences, arts, and daily life of a country in order to adapt Montessori to each culture.

(MMI, <http://www.mariamontessori.org>)

Later, to help my work goals, I earned the AMI 6-12 and 0-3 diplomas, and a masters degree.



1978-79 — LIMA, PERU

After several wonderful, successful, enjoyable years teaching in Montessori 2-6 and 6-12 classes, I was interested in seeing how Montessori philosophy could be used in other situations, in homes and other kinds of schools, to help improve the lives of children who were not able to attend Montessori schools.

Colegio San Silvestre, a traditionally-run private British-Peruvian girls' school in Lima, wanted to incorporate Montessori ideas. I taught for a year, and learned that the philosophy did not depend on materials. The class was twenty-eight 5-8 year-olds, with required workbooks and no Montessori materials.

Because my class was tranquil, and girls who had previously not enjoyed or looked forward to school now did, the director asked me to teach the other teachers about Montessori.

A paper based on this talk, about Montessori principles, called “Lowering the Noise Level in an Open Classroom” is available on the Michael Olaf website. There is also a link to the San Silvestre School:

<http://www.michaelolaf.net/lectures.html>
School website: <http://www.sansilvestre.edu.pe>



1982 — OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

The Founding of the Michael Olaf Montessori Company

Seeing the need for more Montessori-type toys for their new baby brother, our two teenaged Montessori-educated daughters started “The Michael Olaf Montessori Company” in 1983 and named it after their baby brother.

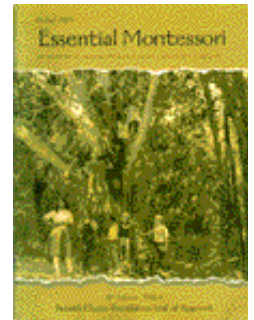
Montessori teachers found out about us and asked for a list of the items we had found, and later pictures. Eventually this turned into a catalogue, not of the hundreds of unnecessary materials that turn classrooms into crowded places that dissipate the child’s energy, (the supermarket effect) but of a few essential items.

The following years, talking to customers in the store about Montessori, and attending NAMTA, AMI, AMS, NCME and other Montessori conferences as a materials exhibitor, and speaker, I was in a unique position to learn about the various models of the *Montessori* method of education and the many, in my opinion, misunderstandings about it.

To help answer questions asked in the Michael Olaf store and at conferences I combined an in-progress Montessori book, an overview of Montessori 3-12 for teachers and parents, with the new catalogue of materials.

This was a text based on my own teaching experience and readings, that could be understood by anyone.

Note: this catalogue cover photo is of my elementary class in the US Virgin Islands in 1971-72.



1989-2001 — TRINIDAD, CA

Montessori Homeschooling: Having learned of the homeschooling movement, many homeschooling families were our customers, we wanted to see how “following the child” worked outside the classroom. But it was our youngest child Michael, still at home, who wanted it most of all.

He had attended a Montessori elementary class, a wonderful class, but wanted more freedom from the many assignments, rules and schedules so that he could follow his interests and not have them interrupted.

His father and I, with more confidence in him than in ourselves, decided to let him try.

The 2001 Census Bureau report on U.S. homeschooling trends estimated that perhaps as many as 2 million children were being home-schooled (today 4 million) with a growth rate of 15 to 20 percent annually.



If one types "Montessori" into www.google.com, "Montessori homeschooling" comes up 2nd out of 11 million sites. Here is the URL: www.montessori.edu/homeschooling.html. You can read about our experiment at this site.

We didn't do anything official like setting up an independent study arrangement with a school, but followed the ideas used in the Montessori elementary class: we helped Michael learn to make plans and to follow through on them, and to keep studies balanced while still leaving room for the passion of the moment which ranged from *The Mahabharata* to steel drums.

My husband and I both worked full time, I in a home office. We spent a few hours a week of "class" time helping Michael, although learning was occurring all the time, especially since we had no TV.

Michael focused mostly on music; he played sports, and had many homeschooling friends.

He passed the California High School test at age 15 and earned the certification to be a Suzuki piano teacher that year. He built a music studio with his dad, took classes at the local college,



played professional music with several adult bands, earned a college degree in ethnomusicology in three years, volunteered in India, and was first in his class in law school. He is happy and contributing to the well-being of society.

Each year of homeschooling we gained further



insight into the process of child-directed learning. One exciting lesson was about college entrance exams, ACT and SAT. Michael was not taught "to the test", so he tested very low on his first practice tests. He spent only 2 months catching up, getting high enough scores on the actual tests to earn a scholarship to Brown University.

Over the years we received many letters from homeschooling families and non-Montessori teachers, asking questions about how to use Montessori ideas at home or in traditional classroom settings. Through the Michael Olaf catalogues we were able to share what we were learning about education with homeschoolers and teachers of all kinds, and their feedback helped us as much as we helped them.



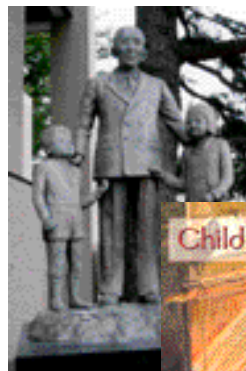
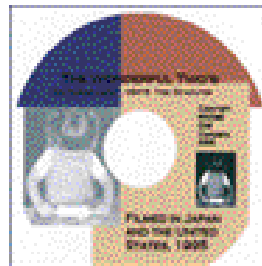
1995 — JAPAN

I visited with Judi Orion for one month at the first AMI 0-3, Assistants to Infancy, course in Osaka, Japan, videotaped the class, and then showed the film to Mrs. Waltraud Suzuki of the Suzuki music movement in Matsumoto. She was involved in creating a Suzuki preschool model.

At her request, and with the help of a friend at home in California, I turned it into a video "The Wonderful Twos," and presented it in Chicago, at the next International Suzuki conference. It is now used in schools and training courses.

Photos:

- 1 - Susan and Judi in Kyoto
- 2 - Wonderful Two's DVD
- 3 - Statue of Dr. Shinnichi Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan



1998 — WWW.MONTESSORI.EDU

In 1998 I searched "Montessori" on google.com and found 70,000 sites, each advertising only their own organization, school, or training center, each saying they were the best, the authentic.

There was no way for the public to compare one with the other intelligently.

What I thought was needed was a site where one could learn that the word *Montessori* could be used

by anyone, and where one could learn what Montessori was all about—and not from a site selling only one organization, school or training center.

Prospective parents or teachers need to know about school certification, and to be able to compare the details of training centers such as certification received, length of time on campus, membership details, costs., etc. But again, most of all I wanted people to know that anyone can use the name *Montessori* without permission from the family.

The first members were AMI/USA, AMS, NAMTA, the MMI course in London, and the TMI training center in Denver.

Today www.montessori.edu comes up #1 out of 8,380,000 sites, receiving over 400,000 hits a month from around the world. It is used for research and is being linked to many colleges and universities mainly because of the comparative and inclusive element.

The International Montessori Index
<http://www.montessori.edu>



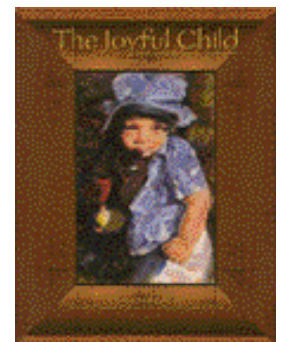
1999 — SPLIT of Michael Olaf catalogue into two age levels

After attending a La Leche conference and realizing the importance of getting the Montessori 0-3 information to more people, we split *Michael Olaf's Essential Montessori, for Birth to Age Twelve* into two publications,

They are *The Joyful Child* (0-3) and *Child of the World* (3-12 years).

Today they are sold as Montessori introductions on www.Amazon.com, and by Montessori schools and other organizations around the world.

The text of *The Joyful Child* has even been translated into Chinese!



This website contains the text and other important information, including the children's projects that Michael Olaf is involved with:
www.michaelolaf.net

2002 — RETURN TO INDIA

With the last child in college I could finally return to India. By now I had a second reason: I wanted to better understand the relationship between the amazing results of long periods of concentration by children in a Montessori environment to the results of meditation in adults. This interest had begun with Montessori trainer Hilla Patell who introduced me to meditation in London in 1971. I was aware that Tibetan meditators are being studied by Western scientists today.



I had discovered that the children in the exile communities in India, most of whom had been sent out of Tibet by their parents to that they could grow up and be educated as Tibetans, attend Montessori schools at the 3-6 level.

To learn more about this I traveled to the Tibetan Children's Villages in Northern India.



This experience is posted on-line "emails home" at: www.michaelolaf.net/susanemails2002.html



Photos:

- 1 - The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) in Dharamsala, with the slogan *Come to Learn, Go to Serve*
- 2 - The largest TCV classroom
- 3 - A newly arrived refugee child from Tibet, still with traces of typical frostbite
- 4 - One of the two groups of Montessori teachers for whom I gave talks



2003 — NEPAL

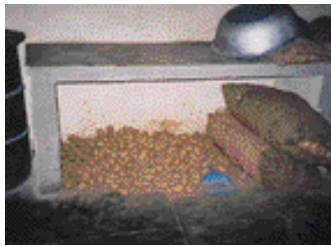
Upon my return home, my husband and I now helping the refugees long distance, I started hearing two conflicting stories on conditions in Tibet:

- (1) Conditions of Tibetans in China are fine now.
- (2) Tibetans can still be imprisoned and tortured for practicing their religion, teaching their history and culture, even having pictures of the Dalai Lama. So I decided to find out.

I was put in touch with a Montessori 0-3 teacher who was preparing to begin a school in Kathmandu.

When Tibetans escape from Tibet they come through Nepal first staying at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center. The teacher and I visited several times and she helped me interview children.

With the help of my husband and friends at home, we arranged to buy food, sports equipment, a DVD player and CD's, and to provide a performance by a magician from Europe which was a very special treat for the refugees.



Then together we planned the building which was remodeling as a school.

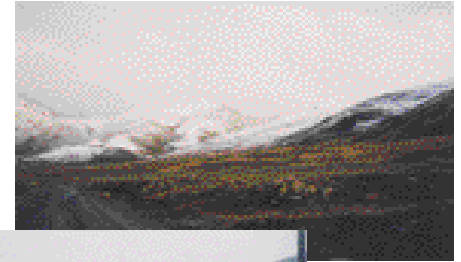
Photos:

- 1 - The Tibetan Refugee Center, for 150+ children, still arriving daily
- 2 - The sparse food supplies, potatoes and grain.
- 3 - Two pots of soup, the meal for everyone.
- 4 - The 0-3 Montessori teacher Diptee Acharya videotaping an interview with a Tibetan child. I asked the question in English, she translated it into Nepalese to the man, he translated it into Tibetan to the child.
- 5 - New Montessori school under renovation.

2003 TIBET

The refugee path from Tibet to Nepal

Then I headed for Lhasa, Tibet, overland from Kathmandu, the reverse of the refugee path.



The road is near Mt. Everest and many Tibetans become trekker guides in order to help children escape.

Parents give up their children, their dearest possessions, often for life, so they can practice their religion, their culture, and mainly so they can receive an education and have a future.

One of the ways they make a little money is to find the ammonite fossils available in this area and sell them to travelers.

After my husband showed me an article about "Braille Without Borders" in the *New York Times* I had contacted this home by email, and then visited.



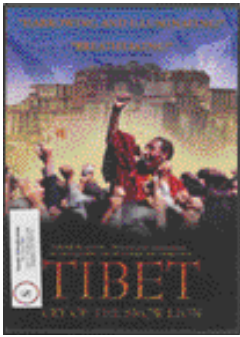
Sabriye Tenberken, a blind German woman lives in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and has started a school for blind children in Tibet.

They use Montessori dressing frames and now the Michael Olaf publications for ideas on education that can be used with the blind

We donate money through a California Himalayan organization. For more information see: www.michaelolaf.net/childrensprojects.html

NOTE: excellent sources of information on Tibet include the DVD *Tibet, Cry of the Snow Lion*, the movie *Blindsight*, and the book *My Path Leads to Tibet* by Sabriye.



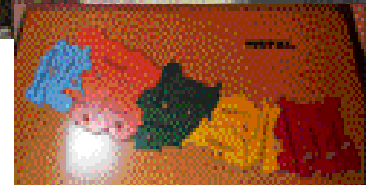


2005 Fall — NEPAL

My husband and I, while visiting relatives in Minnesota, had met with Molly and taken pictures of the training center. On this trip I took a letter from Molly and pictures, and met with the head of the scholarship division to explain about AMI training; and he explained to me the long process of obtaining a visa for a refugee! The process began.



On the same trip as the TCV anniversary I returned to Nepal.



Not able to keep the AMI 3-6 teacher Diptee (above) had hired, or take AMI 3-6 training herself, she had created an authentic Infant Community, but was forced to learn 3-6 by means of a correspondence course in order to try to meet the needs of the older children. She had many questions for me.

She had had a Norwegian AMI teacher teach the class for a few months, and a Russian AMI teacher-in-training come to visit.

Some of these pictures (of the children) were taken by the visiting teacher, Yuliya Naumkina,



Photos:
1 - Diptee at the school gate
2 - School photo.
3 - Infant Community Stair

4 - The 3-6 class "The Bells"
5 - Boys in traditional Nepalese hats called *topis*



2005 Summer — AUSTRALIA

Jetsun Pema, the Dalai Lama's sister and head of TCV, was invited to speak at the International Montessori Congress in Sydney. Even though at the last minute she could not come, TCV was well represented by the TCV Montessori graduate and musician Tenzin Choegyal.



Inspired, AMI Montessori teacher trainers Molly O'Shaughnessy and Silvia Dubovoy offered scholarships for teachers who would help Tibetan children. Judi Orion was already in the process of arranging a 0-3 scholarship.

Photos: Tenzin Choegyal; a painting of a young child imitating the adults, practicing the bows, or prostrations, during a service led by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. (www.susanart.net)



Photos:
1 - 45th TCV Anniversary celebration
2 - Montessori Training Center of Minnesota
2 - Dolma Tsering, now a graduate of Molly's 3-6 course in Minnesota
4 - Lhamo Pemba (London AMI 1979) now a graduate of Judi's 0-3 course in Denver

2005 fall — INDIA

TCV (Tibetan Children's Villages) 45th Anniversary

Along with a Swiss friend who had been helping TCV for many years, I attended the TCV anniversary. TCV graduates returned from all over the world to hear Jetsun Pema and the Dalai Lama speak, and to celebrate with food, singing, and dances representing all of the areas of Tibet.

