

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:

From a privileged Midwest, USA background, to India, part of the first experiment of a university on a ship while traveling around the world. Learning and service first hand, while traveling in Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Website: ww.semesteratsea.com

1964 — BOMBAY, INDIA



Epiphany. Life was pretty much planned out. Then I found myself on "The Street of 10,000 Prostitutes" watching hundreds of ragged and skinny children playing in front of cages, bars on the first floor of buildings behind which their mother earned their living. The floors above were the same, and when the children were not on the street this is where they live.



On that day I became dedicated to helping children, the planet Earth, and her people.

Trip photos of children filling the streets in front of the "cages" of prostitutes in Bombay were lost. These two pictures are from the book *Falkland Road, Prostitutes of Bombay*, by M. Mark.

1970-1971 — LONDON

Preparing to return to help children in Asia, I earned a diploma from The Maria Montessori Institute, MMI (then MMTI) in London. There were students from many countries so, rather than preparing to teach in only a Western culture, there was an emphasis on learning to explore the culture and practical life of any country in order to help a child adapt to her time and place.

<http://www.mariamontessori.org>

When it became clear that a 3-6 diploma did not prepare one for teaching older children, I earned the AMI 6-12 diploma at the Washington Montessori Institute (WMI), and a masters degree.

<http://graduate.loyola.edu/graduate/academics/edu/montessori/wmi.asp>



1978-79 — LIMA, PERU

After several wonderful, successful, enjoyable years teaching in Montessori 2-6 and 6-13 classes, I was interested in seeing how the Montessori philosophy could be used in other situations, to help improve the lives of children who were not able to attend Montessori schools, by using Montessori philosophy in new ways.



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 quiet, and girls who previously did not want to come to school now did, the director asked me to help the other teachers. A paper, based on Montessori principles, called "Lowering the Noise Level in an Open Classroom" is posted on the Michael Olaf website:

<http://www.michaelolaf.net/lectures.html>

School website: <http://www.sansilvestre.edu.pe>



1982 — OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA The Founding of the Michael Olaf Montessori Company

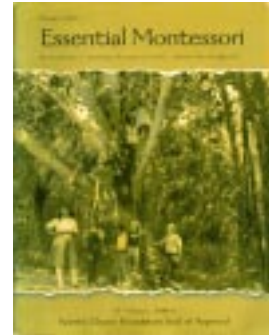
Seeing the need for more Montessori-type toys for their new baby brother, our two teenaged Montessori-trained daughters started the company "Michael Olaf Montessori Company" and named it after their baby brother.

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, known as "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 conference as a materials exhibitor, and later as a speaker, I was in a unique position to learn about the various interpretations of this method of education and the many, in my opinion, misinterpretations of the meaning of *Montessori*.

I combined an in-progress Montessori book, an overview of Montessori 3-12 for teachers and parents, with a catalogue of materials, a text based on my own teaching experience and readings, that could be understood by high school students and adults.

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, as many of the 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 rules and schedules so that he could follow his interests and not be 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 are being home-schooled (today 4 million) with a growth rate of 15 to 20 percent annual increase.



If one types "homeschooling" into google, "Montessori homeschooling comes up 17th out of 731,000 sites. Here is the URL: www.montessori.edu/homeschooling.html You can read about our experience at this site.

Basically, we didn't do anything "official" like arrange 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, 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, and only 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, 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, Humboldt State University, played professional music with several adult bands, earned a degree from Brown University in ethnomusicology in three years, and is now in law school. He is happy and contributing to the well-being of others.



Each year of homeschooling I gained further insight into the process of child-directed learning, and received many letters from homeschooling families, as well as teachers, about how to use Montessori ideas at home or in traditional classroom settings.

Many homeschoolers were replicating the traditional classroom complete with hour-long classes, bathroom breaks, and a required curriculum. And many Montessori teachers were using the Montessori materials, but otherwise to running a class where the teachers was at her desk and obviously in charge, with schedules, assignments, and group lessons. It was clear that children needed more self-direction, independence, responsibility, and joy in learning - and the letters showed that their adults sensed this.

I rewrote *Michael Olaf's Essential Montessori* each year based on questions—trying to interpret the essence of Montessori for these people.

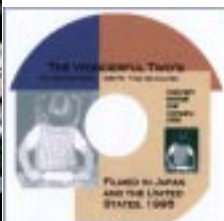
1995 — JAPAN



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



Photos: Susan and Judi in Kyoto, Statue of Dr. Shinnichi Suzuki, Wonderful Two's DVD



1998 — WWW.MONTESSORI.EDU

I searched "Montessori" at google.com and found 70,000 sites, each advertising only their own organization, school, or training center, with no way for the public to compare anything intelligently.

What I thought was needed was a site where the public could learn about Montessori and Montessori schools, and compare the details of training centers in order to make an intelligent choice for their own teacher training; details such as certification received, length of time on campus, membership details, costs., etc., Most of all I wanted people to know that anyone can use the name "Montessori!" to describe a school, materials, or a training center.

The first members were AMI/USA, AMS, NAMTA, Lynne Lawrence at MMI in London, and Judi Orion at 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.

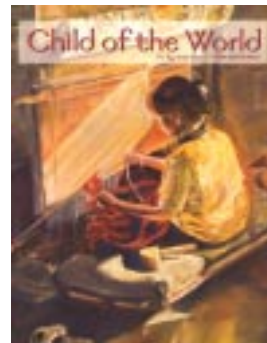
The International Montessori Index
<http://www.montessori.edu>

1999 — SPLIT of Michael Olaf catalogue into two age levels

After attending a La Leche conference and finding that many babies would benefit from the Montessori 0-3 information I split *Michael Olaf's Essential Montessori* into two publications, consulting with many friends, teachers and trainers, on the title of each. They are *The Joyful Child* (0-3) and *Child of the World* (3-12 years). Today we sell or give away about 70,000 combined publications, 90% of which are used as overviews to Montessori, not for ordering materials.

We wanted people to know that it is the philosophy, not the materials, that is most important. The website contains the text and other important information, including the children's projects that Michael Olaf is involved with. www.michaelolaf.net

This site comes up usually in the top 10, searching "Montessori" out of over 7 million Montessori sites around the world.



2002 — RETURN TO INDIA

With the last child in college I could finally return to India. Over the years I had become more and more interested in the relationship to the attention and concentration of children in a Montessori environment leading to “normalization” and how this is similar to the results of meditation in adults. This began with Hilla Patell who introduced me to meditation in London in 1971. Tibetan Buddhism is being studied by Western scientists in this regard today.



Also 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:

The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) in Dharamsala; the slogan *Come to Learn, Go to Serve*; The largest classroom; a newly arrived refugee child from Tibet, still



with traces of typical frostbite; one of the two groups of Montessori teachers for whom I gave workshops.



2003 — NEPAL

Upon my return home, my husband and I working to help 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, revering or even having pictures of the Dalai Lama. So I decided to find out.

I was put in touch with Montessori 0-3 teacher who was preparing to begin a school in Kathmandu. I helped her plan the building she was remodeling and she helped me interview children at the Tibetan Reception Center in Kathmandu.



When Tibetans escape from Tibet they come through Nepal. We went several times to the reception center, and, with the help of friends at home, contacted by email, arranged donations to buy food, sports equipment, a DVD player and CD's, and a performance by a magician from Europe, a friend of my husband who himself is an ex- actor and clown.



The question in English, she translated it into Nepalese to the man in blue, he translated it into Tibetan to the child.



Photos:

(above) The 0-3 Montessori teacher Diptee Acharya videotaping an interview with a Tibetan child. I asked

The Tibetan Refugee Center, built by donations from Switzerland, Germany, England, and Italy. 150+ children.

Two pots of soup, the meal for everyone.

The sparse food supply.

2003 TIBET

The refugee path from Tibet to Nepal



The path is near Mt. Everest and many Tibetans become trekker guides just to help children

escape. Parents give up their children, their dearest

possessions, often for life, so they can keep 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.



Sabriye Tenberken, a blind German woman I visited lives in

Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and has started a school for blind children in Tibet. They use Montessori dressing frames and the Michael Olaf catalogues for ideas on education that can be used with the blind. We donate money through a California Himalayan organization, which you can find out about at: www.michaelolaf.net/tibet.html

NOTE: excellent sources of information on Tibet are the DVD *Tibet, Cry of the Snow Lion*, the movie *Blindsight*, and the book *My Path Leads to Tibet* by Sabriye (see next page)



There is more information at: michaelolaf.net