

Dear Families,

I was born and raised a city boy learning to play with others in the streets of our neighborhood. This is where I was first educated in philosophy. It was called “being street wise” and kept me alive through out that developmental period, although I had some close calls. The Bronx was also where I went with my brother and the other kids to the local graded school where while being taught our academic lessons by rule of “carrot and stick” we were not happy. This was evident for how very much we all yearned for the end of the day and for weekends and especially for vacation time when we could be free for a while from such restraints and the physical and verbal abuse of our teachers.

Just as I was entering the middle school years, my father sent my brother and me to work on a dairy farm way upstate New York for the summer. What a change in culture that was! There I learned personally about Life with a capital L – how everything grows from the inside out by the wondrous force of Nature with not a little bit of caring help from the farmers. The biggest surprise was the discovery that this agriculture was also steeped in science. It was not a “permissive” allowing of things to be and to grow by them selves but rather also by the observant and carefully prepared efforts of men and women committed to help things be the best they could be through their hard work and guided by genuine scientific research gained from the universities and field agents. I was so influenced by my being immersed in the wisdom of farming for four summers that I decided to study agronomy and animal husbandry at Cornell – all of which became the preparation for my life’s dedication to serve children as a Montessori educator/gardener for all my adult life.

You can well imagine my sense of awe and personal joy when in 1960 I observed for the first time a well-prepared and thriving Montessori learning environment. Unlike the unnaturalness of the graded rigidity of my school days, there before my eyes was a true garden of learning where twenty-five children of different ages were quietly and happily at work everywhere I looked seemingly on their own but under the watchful eyes and wisdom of their almost invisible Montessori educator. What a revelation! Just as there could be a garden of thriving plants there could also be a garden of thriving children – founded on the scientific observations of a medical doctor who became one of the world’s great educational reformers.

The other day I welcomed two visitors from a sister Montessori charter school in Land O’ Lakes. They were two mothers whose children had been attending this fine Montessori school for a number of years and were now ready to move on since the school did not have a learning environment prepared for middle schoolers. They had learned of our school and had come to ask me questions about how we had developed ours and also to observe our learning laboratories and contract plans at work. They told me they and other parents at their school were desirous to “keep their children in Montessori as long as possible.” I answered their queries as best I could, gave them some of the papers we had written explaining the “Contract Plan in a Nutshell” – but most importantly got them a pinned middle school Self-Directed Learner to be their guide and take them for a slow tour of our learning labs so they could witness with their own eyes the life of learning going on there.

They came back to my office more than excited – they were ebullient – bubbling over with praise for what they just had seen. “In every one of the four rooms we saw the

students all concentrated at their work. It was amazing. It was peaceful and intense. It was much more Montessori than we expected.” I told them that it had taken the faculty and the students the two and one half years since we began our middle school to develop such a positive working climate of learning – to cultivate such a good garden. I told them that the quality of learning they had observed was a direct result of the structure of the Contract Plan and that the genius behind it all was based of pure Montessori principles. In fact all the principles we use have much scientific research to back them up. There is even a book just published titled: MONTESSORI The Science Behind the Genius which they could read. They left as happy apostles for they had seen with their own eyes just what a Montessori middle school could be. We see it every day, and it keeps getting better and better – as a well tended garden should.

Peace.

Paul