

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

September 2006

From the Director

The beginning of school always feels like a wonderful reunion to me as staff, students, and families return, and new students and families are welcomed. It reminds me that CFMS is more than just a school. It is a community. We are indeed a "diverse community of parents, children, and staff working together" to accomplish the mission of CFMS. We are drawn to CFMS out of a desire to provide the best possible education and formation for our children.

Throughout the year, there are numerous ways you can participate in the life of this community. The school picnic this Friday is a wonderful way to connect with other parents and meet some of the children that your child will be spending each day with. Parent education sessions and classroom observations give you a window into the Montessori classroom. Faithfully fulfilling your co-op job enables the school to run smoothly and allows the staff to focus more of their energy on the students. And through the newsletter, Wednesday envelope, and the listserv, you will learn each week of ways you can participate in the life of CFMS.

I am grateful, both as a parent, and as a staff member, to be part of such a community. I know that all of us are extremely busy trying to balance work, parenting, and other obligations. But I invite you to participate in the life of CFMS as fully as you are able. Doing so will

make the CFMS experience richer for you, your child, and the rest of the community.

Peace,
Wendy

From the Director of Education

But my very first memories of St. Anselm's involve wondering, as a new seventh grader, what it would be like to attend a "normal" school, as I was coming off of a lifetime of Montessori education.

These words were spoken by a young man at the St. Anselm's high school graduation address this past June. I laughed to myself as I read his remarks because it felt so familiar to me, both in my role as Director of Education here at CFMS in addressing questions raised by parents, and as a parent myself in watching my own children grow through their years at CFMS and move on to "normal" schools.

In truth, as parents we wonder. I recall wondering when my now senior in high school was five years old in the primary and he seemed barely interested in letters. "Does he have dyslexia? When is he going to read?" Even though I had been trained as a Montessori teacher and had taught for a number of years, I asked his teacher those questions and felt a little uneasy until that "explosion into reading" happened quite awhile later.

I wondered yet again when my youngest son was three and seemed to do nothing but art every day in school. "You know I am an artist", he would declare. "Does he ever turn to the language materials or the practical life works?" I would ask his teacher. "He does..." she would say, "...but his passion right now is constructing with various art mediums." We have since seen those "passions" erupt in many other areas.

Before my own children were old enough to start school there were a couple of former CFMS students who had taken their college SATs and received perfect scores in Math. When asked by a friend how they did it, they both answered, "Montessori math!" I remember feeling impressed by that at the time, but when my son was a fourth grader I could see how he understood math processes, but it wasn't done in quite the same way on paper that I knew. I wondered still more, "What will happen when he goes somewhere else and doesn't have these cool math materials?"

Each of us as parents must face our own questions about what it means for us to have a child in a Montessori school and to trust our own child's growth and development. Maria Montessori calls us to "Trust the child." believing that children have an inner teacher who will guide them well when given the opportunity. Sometimes "trusting the child" may feel about as easy as "trusting your parachute" when you jump out of an airplane! (I've never had that much trust.)

My own wondering about Montessori for my own children has ended, because they have all transitioned to "normal" schools with flying colors. As Director of Education, I realize that most CFMS parents have not made that transition, and questions and wondering may arise.

I encourage you to bring these questions, whatever they may be, to your child's teacher. If you are curious about something, if you are unsure about something, request that your child's teacher call you. You are also welcome to call me, as Director of Education, at any time with any question or concern. Your parent teacher conference is another great place to ask questions specific to your child in the classroom. Don't hesitate.

Parent Education is also another way for you to more deeply understand and hopefully appreciate the Montessori approach. In an upcoming Wednesday envelope we will invite your suggestions for topics during Parent Education sessions. Teachers enjoy sharing aspects of the curriculum with parents to help you have a window into the classroom. Still, we want to address your questions about the Montessori and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as much as possible during these sessions. Please give us feedback.

Please also take advantage of our Parent Resource Library. There are books and videos about Montessori education and other topics relating to children. You are welcome to borrow these at any time.

It has been a joy to have the children back in school. Even at Open House they eagerly took materials from the shelves and delved into work. During these early days we have the pleasure of watching new children explore their new school and returning children engage with this familiar place. As parents your experience of your child's day is second-hand. You are left to wonder quite a bit about what they did all day. Please be in touch in with the staff in whatever ways will help you to address the wondering that you do.

Judy

From the Atrium

From Linda

THE CHILD AND GOD

Research shows that children come into this world with an intense closeness to God. They cannot verbally tell us so but anyone who has held a newborn baby can feel God's presence through the bundle of love they are holding in their arms. By the time they are two, some children begin to verbally reveal their knowledge of God. These are not words parroted back, but revelations which come from the depths of their own souls.

In your child's classroom there are many areas of work such as practical life, language, and math. One such area is the Atrium, the place where the children come to more deeply experience and nourish their already existing relationship with God. Here they express their love of God, seek comfort from the Good Shepherd, and express their joy as they deepen their knowledge and gain the vocabulary to more freely speak of this wonderful love that they know so intensely.

This fall, the primary children will be receiving presentations on The Altar, The Good Shepherd, and the Liturgical Colors. Some of their previous responses follow.

Several years ago, a young three year old was crying. I invited him into the Atrium. Upon entering, he stood still, stopped crying, and approached the altar work. After preparing the altar, he sat gazing at the cross. He picked the cross up, held it in his lap and began swaying gently back and forth. He closed his eyes and held tight to the cross alternately raising his arms in the air, placing the cross over his heart,

and cradling it in his lap. After about five minutes. He put his work away and calmly returned to the classroom.

One morning I was greeted by a two-and-half year old little boy who had been waiting patiently by the Good Shepherd material. He insisted I read the scripture and as he moved the figures he was full of joy. When he brought the sheep back into the sheepfold he lifted each sheep up to the Good Shepherd and had the Good Shepherd kiss them, announce the "sheep's" name, and say, "I love you." He ended with the Good Shepherd proclaiming, "I love my sheep! I love my sheep!"

Two five year old girls had just had a presentation on the Liturgical Calendar, a work in which we discuss how we celebrate God's presence throughout the year. They grew in excitement as we discussed God's continual presence week after week, year after year. Then both girls spontaneously threw their hands up in the air, rose to their knees, and proclaimed, "I love God. I love God so much!"

This is just the beginning of a wonderful walk with God. The elementary children will continue to explore this relationship and how it traverses all time and all people and what their role in this relationship is. Thank you for the wonderful opportunity of looking at God through your child's eyes and hearts!

God bless you all!

From Catherine

From an Atrium in Uganda!

Dear CFMS,

As I write this I'm preparing for the second of a four week course about the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for 27 teachers and catechists in western Uganda. Most of them are Catholic sisters who work in one of several Montessori schools here in Uganda, as well as in Rwanda and Kenya. I was greeted again and again last week by everyone I met: You are most welcome!

Thankfully, English is the official language here, so I am only struggling to speak slowly enough to be understood, rather than with a whole new language. My first gift in Uganda was a pet name: Amooti. Every child receives one of twelve of these names when they are born, and every visitor receives one from the first Ugandan they meet here. Sr. Maria Goretti gave me her own pet name when we met at Entebbe airport after 24 hours of travel from Washington DC.

Giving atrium lessons in Africa has a new twist: we interrupt our day frequently to sing, accompanied by the drums and shakers of the participants. I am slowly developing the muscles needed in my thumbs to play the shaker I am bringing back. Every song seems to have several parts and harmonies.

I am thinking of you this week as CFMS re-opens. Each atrium will have its first gatherings at the prayer table this month, and the new primary children will soon be introduced to the parable of the Good Shepherd. My prayer for you is that the first weeks of school will be peaceful for all, teachers, parents, children and office staff.

Time to get under the mosquito net. See you after September 15.

From the Primary Classes

From Kristi

As we settle into our classroom and daily routines, the beginnings of our class community starts with the time we spend together singing songs and reciting poems. The classroom is in so many ways a mysterious place to be, full of so many new things to discover. It's a bit disorienting in the beginning. But even for the youngest of children, music and poems are instantly accessible and comforting. At the end of a song, there is a wonderful silence that lingers in the room, as we savor what we have created together.

For parents, as well, the classroom is a mysterious place. Often, the children don't offer much information about our day at school. But the thing that does find its way easily into home life are the songs and poems. It is the beginning of your connection as parents to our budding classroom community.

One of my favorite songs to sing at the beginning of the year is "What Shall We Do with the Baby-O?" It's a beautiful Appalachian folk song and the children sit at rapt attention listening to the guitar and the story of a tired father who is struggling with the question of how to help his new little baby to fall asleep.

*What shall we do with the baby-o?
What shall we do with the baby-o?
What shall we do with the baby-o?
What shall we do with the baby-o,
She won't go to sleepy-o.*

*Wrap her up in calico.
Wrap her up in calico.
Wrap her up in calico.
Then she'll go to sleepy-o*

As we continue the song, the children raise their hands with ideas about what might help the baby to fall asleep.

Children love observing nature, and this poem about a squirrel is a particular favorite. This poem has fun hand motions. Ask your child to share them with you.

Whisky Frisky

*Whisky, frisky, hippity, hop,
Up he goes to the treetop.
Whirly, twirly, round and round,
Down he scampers to the ground.*

*Furly, curly what a tail,
Tall as a feather, broad as a sail.
Where's his supper? In a shell.
Snappity, crackity, out it fell.*

From Lindy

The Little Plant

*In the heart of a seed,
Buried deep so deep,
A tiny plant
Lay fast asleep.
"Wake," said the sunshine,
"And creep to the light."
"Wake," said the voice
Of the raindrops bright.
The little plant heard
And it rose to see,
What the wonderful,
Outside world might be*

I was recently reading this poem and it made me think of the children who will be in my class this year and all that is yet to emerge from these beautiful little seeds. That within each child there is this plant that is ready to grow and be nourished. This poem can simply be seen as a sweet poem about a little plant, but when I read

it I saw so much more. The sun and the rain each calling the plant to emerge and the plant chooses to come out to see the world around it. This is similar to the life of a child with parents and teachers there to provide nourishment and yet neither is able to do it alone. And with all that support and encouragement the plant or the child chooses to come out to let us all see who they are and bless us with their beautiful presence. It is my hope for this year and always that each child will "hear" the calls that we, as adults, are there to give together and will explore their world in great ways.

From the Elementary Classes

From Neiva

HELPING CHILDREN BEGIN A STRESS-FREE DAY

Last 28 August was the Elementary Parents' Night. Ms. Melinda and I were delighted to see 98% attendance. Being a new teacher in the school, this percentage of attendance was very encouraging and inspiring.

While I know that parents, especially those who belong to my class, were excited to meet and hear me, my take on that night was beyond a mere-getting-an-initial-glimpse of me. That night showed me how involved the parents are in their children's education. It also indicated that the parents have recognized and understood their role in the partnership between the school and the home.

Such partnership is important to me because it is one of the factors that can affect the children as they tread the path toward normalization. Such partnership entails different forms of parent involvement. As the school year begins, one aspect of parent involvement that could define the children's

attitude toward school is their commitment to send the children to school on time.

Just like a new born babe who is helpless, these school age children won't be able to make it to the school's door without the parents' assistance. The children need their parents to make sure that they eat a nutritious and full breakfast and that they arrive at school on time. Parents have to understand that when children come to school on time it gives them that moment to refocus their energy and attain that level of peace before being involved in the actual class work. That moment also allows the children to reconnect with their friends and the teacher (and other adults they meet on their way to the classroom). That moment gives them the time to share a part of themselves without causing anyone to be distracted from work. Eventually, that reconnecting helps them attain a sense of belongingness. According to studies, students who feel a sense of belongingness are happier to come to school, listen to their teacher and peers and take on great work. In the elementary, children naturally like to work in groups and like to know that they can work with someone they feel they belong to. If children are able to work with or beside somebody who they look up to, who help them in their work when they need it or, who give encouraging words after they share their work, it boosts their confidence and self-image. This feeling of confidence and having a healthy self-image are keys that lead them to greater steps towards normalization.

In her book *The Secret of Childhood*, Maria Montessori wrote that what humanity needs can be found in a child who has attained normalization. She wrote:

The unknown energy that can help humanity is that which lies hidden in the child... For an improvement in education can have only one basis, the

normalization of the child... Anyone wishing to succeed in some aim for the good of society must necessarily turn to the child, not only to save him from deviation, but also to learn from him the practical secret of our life (p. 226).

She went on, in the next chapter, to write:

The child's parents are [not his makers, but] his guardians. They must protect and care for him, in the deepest sense, as a sacred mission that goes far beyond the interest and ideas of external life (p.227).

For this school year, what I would like to see are parents bringing or sending their children to school on time not only during the beginning months but until the last day of the school year. Let it be a reminder to the parents that sending or bringing their children to school on time is one type of parent involvement that can affect the children's behavior as they walk the path towards normalization.

From Melinda

Welcome back! The beginning of the school year is always an exciting time, and this year is especially so, with a new classroom, many students new to our class, and a new teacher next door! I should warn you that this article will be a little long-winded, because I have so much that I'm excited about to tell you!

Our class this year is made up of 22 students: 4 second-graders, 2 third-graders, 3 fourth-graders, 5 fifth-graders and 8 sixth-graders. (We have 6 boys and 16 girls.) This is a larger age span than the upper/lower elementary split we've had recently at CFMS, but the first-through sixth-grade model is well established in both Montessori theory and practice.

I've already been privileged to see some lovely scenes of the different age groups working together, just during Open House and the first 2 days: sixth-graders showing second-graders around the classroom; fifth-graders showing fourth-graders how to handle our class gecko; a fifth-grader and a sixth-grader teaching two second-graders how to juggle; even a third-grader showing a fifth-grader how to use our electric keyboard with headphones! All of the second- and third-graders have been matched with sixth-grade buddies, and their buddies have already been helpful in various ways: teaching them the rules to games, helping them with spelling and writing in the daily record-keeping tasks, showing them around the class, and suggesting works and lessons. The younger students, in return, also help the older students with their class jobs - for example, a third-grader was holding the dustpan while her sixth-grade buddy swept the stairs on Friday. These kinds of shared experiences will help build the kind of family cooperation I'm hoping for in our class this year.

I like to pick a theme for each year, to help me focus on some aspect of caring for the students beyond just academics, and this year's theme is "*We are all works of art being created in God's image.*" Our cubby nametags have little picture frames in one corner, and I spoke to the children about how God's image can be reflected in each of us, in all our diversity, by showing them photo-mosaic portraits done by artists. Montessori wrote of the child's work as a process of "self-construction," and I'm encouraging the children to think of their work this year, not just as stuff to get done, but as part of this artistic process.

The process of being co-creators with God is at the core of the elementary curriculum. It's expressed in five "Great Stories" told in the

first few weeks of school, to orient the children to all of our academic subjects. These stories give a mythic framework to various fields of inquiry, and were told by Montessori (and her son Mario, who worked with her) to engage the imagination of the elementary children and give them a grand picture of their place in the Universe. The Great Stories are:

- The God Who Had No Hands - the origins of the universe and its laws, an introduction to geography and physical science;
- The Coming of Life - an introduction to biology and the unique role of life and of each species in Creation;
- The Coming of Human Beings - an introduction to history and cultures, focusing on the unique capacities of humans;
- The Story of Our Alphabet - an introduction to written language and literacy;
- The Story of Our Numerals - an introduction to math and numeracy.

Along with these five, there are stories to introduce geometry, human biology, art and written music, which come later in the year. After hearing these stories, designed to encourage curiosity, wonder, and gratitude, the children have an emotional and conceptual framework to motivate and organize their daily work.

A few practical details about the daily work this year: Homework and spelling begin Monday, September 11. A homework folder with written instructions will come home that day, and should return to school Friday, with homework inside. Each Monday the children will choose their homework for the week (optional for second-graders) and make a homework plan. If you have any questions about the homework, (or anything

else) feel free to call me at home in the evenings between 4 and 9 p.m. I also respond to e-mail, and I check it about once a day. My home phone is 301-277-3469 and my e-mail is mamelone@verizon.net.

We also have a new record-keeping system for work this year, which involves the children keeping track of their lessons and skills practices in their own folder (in addition to my own records), so they can see their own progress. This system was introduced to me by Ms. Nieva, who's been using it in her classes for years. The older students seem excited by it already- they can see how much they've learned over the years, what they might want to review, and what's left for them to find out this year. We will be giving you more details about the curriculum and academic matters at the first parent education session this year, on Friday 6 October.

One last detail - I've been asked to re-print the dress code I sent out in the summer mailing. Feel free to cut this out and post it on your refrigerator to settle any arguments.

Clothes and Shoes

We will have recess, PE or fitness activities every day, so students need comfortable, safe **sneakers and socks every day**. Sandals, clogs, boots, etc. are not safe for the full range of activities the students will encounter. There are also many new kinds of shoes that look sort of like sneakers - such as wrestling, rock climbing, and water sport shoes. While these are fine for classroom wear, they do not provide enough ankle and arch support for running and jumping. Look for running, tennis or basketball shoes, with laces or velcro fastenings, not pull-ons with elastic. Students without proper footwear will not be able to participate in many fitness activities. Since bare feet are not allowed at

school, students who wear sandals, slides, etc., need to have socks available for when they remove their shoes. **Students can bring a spare pair of sneakers and socks to school for the year and store them with their changes of clothes.**

Students should also be **dressed for physical activity** every day. For both boys and girls, this means clothes that fit at the waist and won't fall off or ride below the hips, and no jewelry that could pose a hazard or be lost while playing. For girls, this also means no ankle-length skirts, no short skirts without shorts underneath, and no off-the-shoulder, bare midriff or spaghetti-strap tops. Children should dress for safety, comfort and freedom from distraction at all times.