

Third-generation Montessori says education begins at home

By Jeanne Gehret

If we want well-behaved children, we must discipline ourselves to give them the proper environment in which to grow, said Renilde Montessori during a recent visit to the Montessori School of Rochester.

Renilde Montessori is the granddaughter of the late Dr. Maria Montessori, the medical doctor and anthropologist who developed an alternative method of education that has spread from her native Italy to every continent. Renilde serves as director of training at the Toronto Montessori Institute in Toronto, Canada.

Parents and educators from all seven Montessori schools in the Rochester area attended a lecture given by Renilde Montessori earlier this month. The Montessori School of Rochester, which hosted the distinguished speaker, was the first Montessori facility to be established in this area. As the only Montessori center in upstate New York with an elementary program, it has drawn students from as far away as Auburn, since the school's founding in 1976.

Montessori education began in Rome, Italy in 1907, when Maria Montessori opened a school for poor children with mental disabilities. Trained as an engineer and physician, Maria Montessori applied psychological principles to develop educational methods that made her "poor unfortunates," as she called them, outshine normal children on educational tests.

Wondering "what is wrong with education that these children should do better than supposedly normal children," Maria pioneered many changes, including child-sized furnishings for the very young, hands-on learning, mixed-age groups and cooperative rather than competitive learning.

The Montessori method came to this continent in 1915 and became widespread in the 1960s. Today it is often miscast as a program of accelerated education, despite its emphasis on developing the whole child — physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually.

In her recent lecture, entitled "Freedom and Discipline," Renilde Montessori focused her remarks on reinforcing Montessori principles in the home. "The basis for Montessori education is liberty and discipline in a prepared environment," Renilde told her audience,

"but people usually have a narrow interpretation of these terms. For them, liberty is doing anything they like, and discipline means being controlled by somebody from the outside.

"Our understanding is quite different. For us, discipline comes from within," she continued.

The Montessori method helps children develop self-control, courtesy, curiosity, concentration and reverence for life, so that they can strive for perfection in human society. The absence of these disciplines is not freedom, says Renilde, but a handicap — much like that incurred by going deep into the ocean without air tanks.

Montessori students, the educator said, gain more than knowledge; they receive an education that prepares them for life in general. "Education is a mutual affair that doesn't stop suddenly when we leave school," she explained. "Education goes on. When others cease to educate us, we continue to learn by simply living with other people. As parents, we should ponder the extent to which we are educated by our children."

The Montessori clan certainly had many opportunities to ponder such intergenerational precepts first-hand. Born in 1929 in Barcelona, Spain, Renilde herself was educated primarily in Montessori schools. She spent many years living in her grandmother's household and traveling with Maria and her son, Mario (Renilde's father). With her own two sons, Renilde emigrated to Canada in 1969, when her husband assumed a post at Laval University in Quebec. She received her Primary Montessori Diploma in Washington, D.C., and has subsequently conducted workshops and lectured to parent/teacher groups in Europe, Canada, the United States, Japan and South Africa.

Parents in her Rochester audience nodded appreciatively when Renilde Montessori remarked on the amazement of new parents over the way a child can alter everything in their lives. Parents who closely observe their children have an opportunity to absorb life anew, she said.

"Many people say, 'Babies are boring until they're about three months old,' or 'I don't enjoy them until they can throw a football around.' That's sad, because those parents



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Renilde Montessori

miss the fantastic mental and physical development that occurs from the very beginning of life."

Once parents commit themselves to bringing a child into the world, she continued, they must discipline themselves to create an environment in which the child can grow freely. From the moment of conception, parents should "accord their child the intelligence but not the knowledge of an adult. From a very young age, children understand an amazing amount, if not with their minds, then with their entire intuition."

"Children translate information into knowledge and then wisdom, if the environment is conducive (to it)," she observed.

Parents who apply the principle of "loving observation" to childrearing will be able to meet their children's developmental needs rather than respond to their whims. Children need to be stimulated, to become a vital part of the family and to take on small measures of responsibility as they are ready, said Renilde. Parents should prepare them in advance to do things properly, rather than scolding them for making mistakes.

Just as a baby confined to a small space can't learn to turn over, an older child can't

function in the family if he is constantly excluded when other grownups visit or is forbidden to touch breakable objects.

Maria Montessori objected to the practice of putting children to bed just when a social evening at home "was getting juicy and interesting," said her granddaughter. "Being part of social occasions creates the humus of human relationships, from which communication can grow. If it's off to bed at 7 o'clock, the child doesn't acquire the discipline to communicate with people from all walks of life. If he's not at ease with all kinds of people, he won't act properly," explained Renilde.

The speaker recommended that parents leave fragile things around the house for young children to handle and treasure. "Of course, you don't leave a Ming vase out for a very young child," she suggested. "But do have less costly things around, and show the child how to handle them. Let her care for the environment. You'll be surprised how careful she can be and how devastated she is if, by chance, she does drop and break something. You won't have to scold the child because the object is precious to her, too."

Children in less-developed countries are given responsibility for the family's herds — the only source of income — as early as the age of six or seven, Renilde said. Our own children should be encouraged to take on every challenge that they are capable of, she added, but modern parents are in such a tremendous hurry that they do everything for their offspring because it's easier.

"Children need to feel secure about their own abilities, and if we continue to do everything for them, they will never have that security. And they will also start manipulating us," the educator warned.

She admitted that it takes a tremendous amount of loving observation, in order for a parent to recognize the difference between a child's whim and a true developmental need. Sometimes children (especially teenagers) desperately need to be told no "without anger but with great conviction," Renilde Montessori concluded.

"The child suddenly feels 'Ah, I cannot go any further,'" she observed. "Yet children are indeed consoled and comforted to know the limits."

Concert to feature local musicians; proceeds benefit counseling center

There's a lot of musical ground between Bach and Broadway, but vocalist Loretta Cisterna Doyle and pianist Teryle Thomas Brewley plan to cover a good chunk of it later this month at a benefit concert for Matt Talbot Ministries.

Irish ballads, Latin hymns and Italian tunes will also be featured at the concert, which begins at 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, March 29, at St. Mary's Church in Downtown Rochester.

All proceeds will benefit Matt Talbot Ministries, a center that offers counseling and support for families under stress, whether from drug or alcohol abuse, communication failures or a need for spiritual growth.

Founded at St. Augustine's Parish by Deacon Gregory Doyle (no relation to Loretta), Matt Talbot Ministries has recently relocated to Empire Boulevard near St. Ambrose Parish.

Through St. Augustine's, both Brewley, who serves as the parish's organist and choir director, and Doyle, who has performed there, became acquainted with the Talbot center.

"People may be really on the brink when they go there, but you notice a marvelous peacefulness about the place," Doyle said. "I really think the word healing is a good word to use for that ministry."

"They mentioned to us that they'd be doing a fundraiser," Brewley added. "A little light bulb went off in Loretta's head, and she made the offer."

The event will mark Doyle's first concert appearance, although she's performed in a host of other settings.

A soloist and song leader at St. Helen's Church, Gates, and a member of St. Mary's Hospital choir, Doyle has performed with the Rochester Oratorio Society and the Bach Choir. She also sings regularly for senior citizen luncheons, parties and funerals.

"My music is my ministry," she said. "When someone comes up to me after church and says they've been reduced to tears or whatever, I feel I've done my job."

Brewley works as a vocal music director at East High School. She serves as choir director and organist at St. Augustine's Parish and as music director for St. John's Home. She also directs the Peace Child Chorus of Rochester and serves as a board member of the diocesan Office of Black Ministries, and as president of the Association of Black Catholic Women of Greater Rochester.

Before she came to Rochester, Brewley, who plays the cello as well as the piano, studied for 10 years at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. She later studied at the Eastman School of Music as well as the



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Teryle Brewley accompanies Loretta Doyle during a recent practice at Doyle's home. The pair have been practicing once a week for the past two months for Doyle's concert premiere.

Manhattan School of Music and the Royal College of Music in London, England.

Also featured at the March 29 concert will be Mary Lou Ognibene, formerly choir director at St. Pius the Tenth Parish in Chili, and tenor Harold LeBoeuf.

Tickets for the event cost \$6 and are on sale at St. Helen's, St. Augustine's and St. Rita's parish rectories, St. Mary's Hospital

Pastoral Office, Logos, Trant's and the Irish Import Shop.

To order tickets, send a check payable to Matt Talbot Ministries to 1806 East Avenue, Rochester, 14610.

Discounts are available for children and seniors. For more information, call (716)244-3400.



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