

The First Time

By Beth Black



J. J. Hill Montessori School

The first time I saw a Montessori bead chain, I thought it was a rosary.

I was working as Director of Academic Resources in University Housing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and scheduled to give a study skills workshop in one of the high-rise dorms. A lanky pre-med sophomore named Jason was the resident assistant, sponsoring the program for his wing of 30 freshmen. I arrived early for my presentation and stuck my head in Jason's dorm room. The nar-

row cell featured what you might call "All Star" décor. Posters of Michael Jordan were plastered on the wall above a shelf of high school sports trophies. A mountain bike hung from a hook in the ceiling, cross-country skis stood in the corner, and a bright orange Frisbee lay on top of a pile of papers like an oversized paperweight. It was your standard-issue college guy's room except for two things that I

noticed right away: a string of glass beads hanging vertically from one leg of Jason's lofted bed, and a low table made from a board and piled-up bricks. Jason extracted his long legs from under the table and stood to greet me. He pointed to the table and shrugged. "I know," he said. "People think it's weird that I don't use the desk. Can't help it. I got used to using a lap desk in elementary school." I must have given him a quizzical look, because he elaborated: "I was a Montessori kid."

A Montessori kid? At the time, I had no idea what that meant. Jason gave me the lowdown from his perspective. It was about being responsible for your own education. It was about kids being free to move around the room and make choices about what to study on any given day. It was about hands-on activities as a foundation for abstract learning. He took down the bead chain and explained how Montessori math materials had made algebra "pathetically easy" for him. I asked him whether Montessori was a program for gifted kids and he stopped to think for a minute. "Not really," he said.

There were a lot of really bright people at my school and we all got into good colleges, but the teachers weren't interested in churning out a bunch of grade-obsessed graduates. They wanted us to be good people, no matter what we did. And we had some quirky, creative people in my class. There was this one girl who was nuts about fashion way back in kindergarten. The teachers always let her do stuff related to that whenever we did book reports. When we studied the French Revolution, she came to school one day with her hair in this huge bun with a pirate ship on top. She was researching Marie Antoinette's hairdos. She was hilarious.

He laughed. "I made a working model of a guillotine. I wonder what that says about me?"

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I'm not sure what the guillotine might stand for, but Jason's self-assurance, leadership ability, and organizational skills said a lot about the value of a Montessori education. Before I came to Chiaravalle Montessori School, in my career as a college and high school teacher, dean of students, and boarding school dorm parent, I came across a few dozen or so other "Montessori kids." On the surface, they could not have been less alike. I remember Sara, a 15-year-old whose color-coded closet and time management skills were legendary among the boarding school faculty. Her advisor said: "Well, what do you expect? Montessori is all about order." I remember Todd, who drove his history teacher crazy trying to negotiate the terms of every assignment. "It's more work for me, but it's great to see," my colleague sighed. "It means those Montessori schools teach kids to think for themselves." I remember Chandrika, who baked whole wheat bread for a Teacher Appreciation dinner, and Qiang, who taught his roommate how to iron a dress shirt the night before the homecoming dance. "Those Montessori schools do a decent job of teaching life skills," noted the school guidance counselor. And then there was Erika, who organized a group of peers to sing at the nursing home on Valentine's Day. She came to me to request bus transportation, having already confirmed all the details with

the nursing home administrator, raised money to purchase a rose for each elderly resident, and scheduled four rehearsals. "Independence," said her volleyball coach, "is what they teach at Montessori schools."

What all these students had in common is something I see as an almost ineffable quality—a unique combination of a questioning habit of mind, an emotional sturdiness, and a special kind of groundedness that comes from knowing yourself and trusting in your own abilities. I see it in the morning in the toddler who is determined to walk downstairs to her classroom *by herself*, in the hallway when a preschooler wipes away a friend's tears, during a visit to an elementary classroom when I mention the Gunpowder Plot and 10 seconds later two girls have looked it up in the encyclopedia, and in eighth grade graduates when they stand, nervous but poised, on the stage at commencement and address a crowd of over 100 adults.

I hate to think how many beads I would have to count to add up the number of years since I met my first "Montessori kid." I am glad I wandered into that dorm room in Madison and met Jason. It was the first step on a journey that eventually brought me to a place where talented Montessori-educated teachers encourage students to explore their passions, allow them to make mistakes they can learn from, and would, no doubt, enthusiastically support the learning involved in constructing a miniature guillotine or pirate ship hairstyle.

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