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# Nothing but Net: An Interview with the Curry Family

By Peter Piché



Top: Stephen Curry (in white) makes his way down the court. Above: Seth, Dell, Sonya, and Sydel Curry

You cannot live in the heart of North Carolina, as I do, without being conscious of the intense emotion college basketball generates for its local fans. In 2008, a young man named Stephen Curry was playing for the Davidson Wildcats, a team that was expected to bow gracefully and early out of the NCAA postseason. The Wildcats had other plans. They became the Cinderella story of March Madness. I remember watching Davidson's historic run and felt physical pain as it ended with a heartbreaking 2-point loss to Kansas, in the quarterfinals. At the time, I had no idea that Stephen, as well as his younger brother and sister, had attended Montessori school, and that that school, founded by their mother, was here in North Carolina. Imagine my delight when AMS tapped me—both a Montessorian and a sports fan—to interview Stephen Curry and his family for a feature story in *Montessori Life*. Fast forward three months.

Photographs by James Nubile, except where otherwise credited.



*Stephen Curry with current students at the Christian Montessori School at Lake Norman*

As I walk into the Christian Montessori School at Lake Norman (CMSLN), in Huntersville, North Carolina, I am greeted by head of school Sonya Curry, who has become a sports media darling for her demonstrative support of her three children, Stephen, Seth, and Sydel. She is less known as the founder of this Montessori school, a school all three of her children attended until sixth grade. Stephen, 25, a professional basketball player for the Golden State Warriors, has just set the NBA record this season for three-point shots, solidifying his place as one of the game's elite. Seth, 23, has recently graduated from Duke University, where he was a crucial cog in the lineup of the Blue Devils basketball team. And Sydel, 19, a recent high school graduate, is headed to Elon University, where she will play volleyball. Dell, Sonya's husband, and the father of these three splendid athletes, played in the NBA and is widely regarded as one of the best off-the-bench scoring threats of his era.

Sonya and I chat informally in the hall outside her office, while we wait for her children and Dell to arrive. She founded this school in 1995 and has served as its head ever since, seeing it through humble beginnings, peaks, and valleys, and we discuss the challenges inherent in keeping a school vibrant and growing. As we talk, I gain a sense that Sonya is a strong, supportive fixture in her family, but also verify that she loves her school, loves children, and long ago, found her calling as an educator.

The rest of the Currys arrived, and I was eager to get their perspectives on how Montessori had affected each of them. We all took our seats in the center of a classroom.

**Peter Piché:** Dell, it sounds like your wife is passionate and came home and said, "This is what I want to do," and you believed in her. In terms of your own Montessori journey, what have you seen with your own kids?



**Dell Curry:** She's very passionate about whatever she sets her mind to, and she's always been one to have something going on. She's not a basketball wife who sits around. When she said she wanted to start something, I knew she'd be full bore with it. It was a big investment, but I knew she'd make it work. And then watching my kids come through here—how independent they were, how quickly they learned—I could see it at home when they were independent while doing things. It actually helped them learn how to do things around the house, which helped us [he laughs]. It all worked out. Obviously, Sonya felt something that she became passionate about. It kept her challenged and, in turn, helped form the type of people my children are today.

**PP:** Davidson College head basketball coach Bob McKillop has said: "There is no entitlement whatsoever in the family. If we had parents like Dell and Sonya in every household in America, we'd be in Paradise." It's clear that you abide by the Family First motto. Tell me what is special about your family.



**Stephen Curry:** Mom is the anchor of our family. She's had such an impact on my life, as has her love of teaching the Montessori way. Family is huge in my life, and it's an established tradition for us to be part of each other's lives, supporting each other in whatever we do. I live and play on the West Coast, but in my off-season, I come back to Charlotte to be able to spend time with family because I don't get to see them much during the season. Family is a big part of who I am, and now that I have my own family, my wife and daughter, just how important they are is highlighted even more. Family teaches you lessons and encourages you to just be who you are.



**Seth Curry:** I think Bob McKillop said that about my parents because of the way Stephen handled himself while he was at Davidson [Stephen attended Davidson College for 3 years before being drafted to the NBA]. It seemed like everyone there in the Davidson community fell in love with him. That's the person that he is, and it started in our household. We were obviously fortunate to grow up in this family, but our parents never gave us any handouts. Everything we acquired was earned. That was just the pattern in the household. So, going outside of the household, we acted the same. That's the way we were raised, and Stephen carried that with him to Davidson.



**Sydel Curry:** I've always felt that, despite the successes of our parents, they put family first. Our parents led by example, and we still look up to them for guidance and as models.

**PP:** Stephen, Seth, and Sydel, what are your clearest and fondest memories of your Montessori school experience?

**Stephen:** I have a lot of great memories! [Looks around him]. I am looking again at all the shelves and materials. and I'm remembering what they were and what they taught me—the multiplication beads and globes, and just all the hands-on materials that I had so much fun with! I used to love to come to school because there was something new I was going to learn every single day, at my own pace.



*Sydel and Seth Curry working with the trinomial cube while visiting their alma mater*

**Seth:** My fondest memory was simply learning different things in a hands-on way. You'd see other kids from other schools who just had sheets of paper, but going to Montessori school and being able to learn similar things in a totally different way—looking back on it now—that's unique. And it was fun, too. Leaving Montessori and going into middle and high school, I always felt a little ahead of the curve, everywhere, until I got to Duke. Most of the work that involved sheets of paper or reading in later schooling felt easy.

**Sydel:** I think what was unique about my Montessori experience was all the family that was here. I am pretty sure I had a cousin in each class. I had an aunt who was a teacher, and my grandmother was the school chef. That's what I loved about the school—being able to come here with friends and family. It also showed me how important my family is to me. So for me that's what I remember most about Montessori, but I also have two friends to this day that I made here at Montessori who are still close to my family and to me.

**PP:** Dell and Sonya, I've followed the evolving story of each of your children and seen your family values reflected in their college decisions. You live in North Carolina, and

your children chose higher education there—Stephen at Davidson, Seth at Duke, and now Sydel is headed to Elon. Dell, you served as an assistant coach for your sons' high school basketball team, and Sonya, you helped coach Sydel's high school volleyball team. Can you talk about the importance of keeping family close but letting your kids find their own way? How do you maintain the balance?

**Dell:** We both grew up with big, close families, so that was always instilled in us—family came first. We did everything together, so that was easy. Coaching our kids was a little tougher at times because we're both very competitive, being former athletes—we want our kids to be competitive and do well. We coached them because I was at the pinnacle of my sport, and both of us competed at the highest levels, so we knew what was going on. We also wanted the kids to understand that we were trying to help them. As Sydel said, the kids knew that family came first, so once they understood that Mom and Dad were trying to help them through coaching—trying to challenge them and not being critical of them all the time—it became easier.

**PP:** Sonya, as a mother, what characteristics were you convinced a Montessori education would foster in your children? Are there any specific characteristics within each of

your children that were cultivated through their early Montessori experience?



**Sonya:** I was thinking about this the other day and thinking about the school in the sense of what a Montessori education can offer; the term “tailor-made” came to mind. That’s what it did for three different human beings—my children. Stephen is a “type A” personality. His battery is running all the time. He could go into the environment and move as fast as he wanted—and he was able to move. Seth was more of a reserved child, observant and shy. He doesn’t like a lot of attention. In Montessori, he could also move at his own pace. He could go and do his thing, but he would be in the classroom with older kids and see what they were doing too, and then he would feel challenged by that. Sydel was my social butterfly, so she could sit with friends and then choose work if she wanted to! [Laughs]. It was exceptionally satisfying for me as a parent to see who my children were and how they were different, and yet they were never stifled. They never had to go into an environment and fit into the environment. Yes, there are parameters in Montessori, but it was always about respect. It’s all about doing whatever is right.

And sometimes doing what you want to do, if it impedes someone else’s ability to learn, is not right. So children learn how to sacrifice. Learning how to sacrifice and have limits but still have who you are be celebrated is what I believe Montessori gave all of them. It helped to cultivate what was already inside of each of them in the most positive way.

**PP:** Stephen, what kind of impact did attending your mom’s Montessori school have on you?

**Stephen:** It gave me a lot of confidence at a young age. I was able to learn the way I wanted and needed to, to gain a sense of achievement as I went along. I was able to push myself, and it taught me a lot of self-discipline and a work ethic. I always wanted to do more and get better. I liked to do math problems over and over again, even when that part of the day had moved on—I always wanted to get better at it. Montessori taught me that anything I put my hands on and practiced, I could accomplish. I think Montessori is a good fit for anybody because you can go at your own pace. You can take your time, and if you need help with something that you don’t understand, there’s a teacher that is present and personable to help you through. Montessori introduces you to a lot of different lessons that are part of any child’s development in the classroom, and each kid can

find a way to learn the best that he can. Montessori enhanced my personality because the person I was when I walked through that door was embraced and encouraged. I didn’t have to change anything about myself. I could harness my strengths and work on my weaknesses, and it allowed me to nurture my love of people and an ability to accept anybody that I come in contact with.

**PP:** Sonya, some Montessori educators are leery of the ugly side of competition. You were a high-achieving volleyball player at Virginia Tech. Dell, you were a two-sport athlete at Tech before going on to a career in the NBA. Can you tell us how you believe that competition can be positive in an educational setting and how you’ve been able to instill that positivity in your children as they compete at the highest levels in sports?

**Sonya:** The world teaches us that competition is a fact of life. What I’ve come to learn and hold on to and trust is that we already know what we’re capable of doing. So I always tell my children, “If you can tell me that you left everything out on that court in practice and games, then we don’t have to have any discussion. But if your answer is that you didn’t give 100 percent, then I’m going to challenge you on that because that’s where competition originates. There will always be someone better than you are. So external competition isn’t as positive and effective as inner competition. Someone can always win against you, but if you can say that you gave 100 percent but you can always go learn something else, or work on something else, then competition is very productive, because then you are in control, and then your worth and your success is not based on other people, it’s based on you.”

That’s what I found in Montessori classrooms: If you can teach children to be self-confident and to know that God has already equipped them with what they need to be successful in what He wants them to be successful in, then children can focus on that. And I counsel my own children not to worry about what the naysayers have to say because we deal with that a lot in our world. One day you’re great, and the next day you’re too short, you’re too this, you’ll never make this. Our kids have never fit precisely what the athletic recruiters wanted, but they’ve adapted and been successful. So, I want every child who comes to our school to know not to listen to outside voices. You have to listen to yourself and hear God’s voice, and let that guide you. Life may be a little easier then, but you still have to go and operate in the arena of life and a large part of that can’t be easy; it’s not supposed to be.

I also want the Montessori community to know that you don’t have to have a huge sports program. Our kids



*Stephen and Sonya Curry*

played in recreational leagues up until they were in middle school. We have a lot of parents, now, who come to our school and worry that there is no sports program. There's time for children to excel. People ask Dell—did you go out and shoot with your kids all the time? The answer is no because he did not want them to think they *had* to play basketball. We let them figure out what they wanted to do. We started them out in basketball young, and they burned out, so we know firsthand that they don't have to be pushed. There are lots of people that don't start playing basketball until high school and then end up in the pros. My advice: Let them be children. Let them be. Let them be in good, healthy environments, and they're going to find their way.

**PP:** Stephen, was it always your dream to play in the NBA?

**Stephen:** Since high school it has been. I've been around that lifestyle, with Dad playing 16 years in the NBA, but you never actually know for sure if you'll achieve it. My dad was great at allowing us to make our own decisions about what we wanted to pursue, so there was never any real pressure to pursue basketball if I didn't want to. But I gained a love for it early, and once I got to high school I knew the blueprint of what it would take to get there. Obviously, a lot of work has to go into it, but it was a dream of mine since high school.

**PP:** A *San Francisco Chronicle* interview stated, "Stephen attributes much of his self-confidence to that early education" (referring to Montessori school). There were a lot of naysayers when you first entered the NBA, claiming you weren't big enough, or that your game wasn't aggressive enough. Did your Montessori education influence your confidence, and how do you handle criticism as a result?

**Stephen:** It did influence me. I think it takes confidence to be where I am personally. I've had a lot of success in the sports world, but to go to a school like Davidson and excel in the classroom there, all that's based on the foundation of how you learn and how you attack certain things in the classroom. So Montessori really helped me to navigate that part of my life. I was always that guy who was kind of, I guess, downplayed. As a basketball player, I didn't have the straight and easy path to where I am now. I was always seen as too small or somebody who couldn't play at the next level, but I was able to battle through all of that, with the Lord on my side, and allowed myself to basically be true to who I am. And a lot of the foundation that my parents have given me has set me up to shine; I'm a guy who's made some mistakes but has always tried to do the right thing, and I've become a better, stronger person. And I've become stronger in my faith, regardless of what other paths every-

body else is going down. I'm okay with being that guy who stands alone.

**PP:** Stephen, congratulations on setting the single-season record for three-point shots. I was hoping we might finish the interview with each of the Curry children offering me "three-points" that you think everyone should know about Montessori?

**Stephen:** I want people to know that Montessori can work for everybody! I had so many different people, personalities, and different backgrounds that came together in my Montessori experience. We came together and we helped each other. It was a cool experience for the 6 years I was a part of that environment. Montessori allows your creativity to shine, and your true personality to shine.

**Seth:** The main thing I've brought from Montessori is the independence of being able to complete tasks on my own and solve problems in any kind of way. Montessori is hands-on, and in a sense, it allows you to teach yourself, and to go at your own pace with learning. Every child is different and learns in different ways, and Montessori allows you to do that.

**Sydel:** Montessori is adaptable to each type of learning style, and it allowed me to really get to know what kind of person I was. Montessori has been a great foundation for me because it allowed me to be who I wanted to be but also molded me to be the best I could be. In my experience, it was the best time in my life. It's just fun.

**PP:** Sonya, would you like to add a closing thought that you want everyone to know about Montessori?

**Sonya:** I think Montessori is wonderful. It is worth the time and financial investment. At Christian Montessori School at Lake Norman, we strive to cultivate an environment in which children can fall in love with learning and in love with God.

*Editors' note: Due to Stephen Curry's travel schedule, Peter Piché interviewed Sonya, Dell, Seth, and Sydel Curry, while Stephen Curry was interviewed by AMS in a separate session, later the same day.*

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# Stephen Curry

By Peter Piché

**STEPHEN CURRY IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF** how Montessori helps foster global citizenry in its students. One week after our interview, Stephen flew to Africa in conjunction with Nothing But Nets, a grassroots campaign dedicated to preventing malaria deaths by installing bed nets in malaria-ravaged parts of the world. Ten dollars buys one net. For each three-point shot Stephen hit in the 2012–2013 NBA season, he pledged to donate three bed nets—a pledge that culminated in 816 donated bed nets after he hit an NBA-record total of 272 three-pointers.

But it wasn't enough to donate the money; Stephen was compelled to go to the Nyarugusu refugee camp, in Tanzania, himself to hang the nets. During the trip, he met refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and was able to see firsthand how he was making a difference. Having witnessed the family values exemplified in my interview, coupled with the Curry children's formative development in their mother's Montessori school, I would say it's no surprise that Stephen is widely recognized for what he is doing off the court through his charitable work, community service, and as a dedicated family man. Stephen shared his thoughts with AMS on:

**His dreams at the age of 25:** To raise my daughter the best way I know how. It's awesome to have that responsibility, to have a family that I have to provide for and have to support. It's just a blessing, and I hope that I do it the right way.

**Potentially facing his brother, Seth, in the NBA someday:** To play against each other in an NBA game—I don't even know how to put that into words. It's just a surreal feeling. Growing up, we used to play [basketball] video games and watch the NBA on TV. For both of us to be on that level would be really special.

*continued on page 26*



*Future basketball star in training?*



**How he hopes children see him** (reflecting on a recent visit to a school in Oakland, CA): Hopefully as a good influence and a good role model. There are so many people on TV and in pop culture that kids look up to who are not good influences. It's just a blessing to be able to meet so many different kids and talk to them . . . and allow them to see that people they look up to have similar stories.

**What Montessori gave him:** A sense of confidence that I could do anything. A [Montessori] classroom might seem overwhelming, with so many different materials. But once you get in here and see the way it works, it's a great thing. And for any kid to experience it allows them a sense of confidence that when things get tough, they can persevere and adapt.

### Learn more!

Stephen Curry: [stephencurry30.com](http://stephencurry30.com)

Nothing But Nets: [nothingbutnets.net](http://nothingbutnets.net)



*Stephen Curry with his mother, Sonya, and his daughter, Riley*

## Sonya Curry's Montessori Story

*By Peter Piché*

**I WAS CURIOUS TO LEARN HOW SONYA CURRY** discovered Montessori. I also wanted to know what made Montessori her choice for her own children and how that led to her founding the Christian Montessori School at Lake Norman. Here's what she had to say:

My background is in elementary education. Dell and I moved to Charlotte in 1988—so Dell could play for North Carolina's NBA team, the Charlotte Hornets—and, in 1989, we looked for a school for Stephen, who was 1 year old, eventually settling on a church preschool. In addition to preschool, I was teaching Stephen at home, and I noticed he learned quickly. When I went to pick him up from school one day, they had a chart up on the wall. The children were rewarded with multicolored scoops of ice cream underneath their names for good work. The more scoops you had on your cone, the better you were doing. Stephen had 50 scoops, and some kids didn't have any. My first internal reaction was, "I told you he was smart," and my second thought was, "I need to find a more challenging environment for him!" And then something inside of me just got sad. I thought to myself, there are other little kids here that

are 2 and 3 years old, and they are looking up there and wondering why they don't have colorful scoops on their cones. I know they noticed that! Then I started wondering about the other parents that would see this up on the wall and how they might feel when they saw their child in light of this comparison chart.

I returned home and decided that I wanted to find a more challenging place for Stephen. I'd heard that Montessori was a very academically challenging environment for children. I researched some schools and found Charlotte Preparatory School, which has a Montessori early childhood program. We visited and fell in love with it. I walked in and thought, Wow. There were all these children in the classroom, choosing work and working on different activities. They were talking and moving around, and I thought, This can't be real. This can't be true, especially this freedom to move. I was traditionally trained, you see—I was used to sitting at a desk and working on ditto sheets, and listening to a teacher all day. When I played school as a youngster, this is what I did. So I was blown away. Dell and I visited again to make sure that what I thought I was seeing was real, and when we saw that it was, we enrolled Stephen. Seth came next, and I remember thinking, "I'm going to really test this thing" by enrolling him as well, in

the same primary class as Stephen. We knew they were two totally different children. Seth moved about the classroom, observant and cautious, trying things when they felt safe, and Stephen buzzed around the classroom trying everything, and I was amazed. Maura Leahy-Tucker, the founder and head of Charlotte Preparatory School, had watched me with my children and suggested that I might be a good fit as an administrator at one of her planned satellite locations. So I became partners with her, and we opened up a satellite school while she maintained her other school, and that was the beginning.

Dell and I were building a home here in Huntersville and wanted to keep our children in Montessori school. I came home one evening and said, "Dell, I want to start my own school here in Huntersville." He looked at me and kind of laughed and said, "Who starts a school?" I thought it was a good question, and the answer was I wanted to start one. We found this property, started the school here,

and then we had Sydel. Stephen and Seth started Montessori at 3 years old, and they started in my school at 6 and 4 years old, respectively, and then went through 6th grade. And Sydel started at 15 months in my school. I decided, "You know what, she's a girl. I've got two boys, and she's very different from them. . . . Let's see how she does. She did fine and attended our school until 6th grade. That's how I got into it. I got *sold* on Montessori [laughs]."

#### AMS VIDEO SERIES:

##### "Living Montessori: The Curry Family"

AMS has produced a short video about the Currys! Find it, along with other AMS videos, on YouTube—just search for "American Montessori Society." You can download this, and other AMS videos, for playing at your school open houses or events.



*Sonya Curry, working with a student in the classroom, at the Christian Montessori School at Lake Norman*