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ONE DOLLAR



Students in the Southampton Montessori School prekindergarten class hard at work on Friday. Below right, pre-K student Jasiu Gredysa drills holes.

ERIN MCKINLEY PHOTOS

Students As Learners Is Montessori Way

BY ERIN MCKINLEY

A pre-K student sits quietly in a corner, using a crank drill to make holes in a block of wood, while one of his classmates picks up a plate and serves herself a snack.

In another corner, two girls can be overheard counting as, up a short flight of stairs, another group of students work together to line up blocks in size order, small to large.

While they're undertaking different tasks, all of the students are working toward the same goal: honing their skills in counting and reading, and completing tasks that will prepare them for the upper grades in school.

The children, who range in age from 3 to 6 and attend either pre-K or kindergarten, are students at the Southampton Montessori School, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

Last week, school founder Irene Hope Gazza said she is thrilled to still be teaching students, noting that she loves the Montessori philosophy of teaching.

"I was working as a teacher in public school and, at the time, I felt that second grade children were coming to me year after year without basic skills," she said. "I was able to build the school with my husband, and I was very fortunate because it has proven to be a successful method of education."

"I chose it because it respects the child, and works with them individually at their own level," she added.

The Montessori program was first developed in 1907 by Maria Montessori, an Italian educator who opened her first school in Rome. The Montessori Method is a child-centered educational approach that's based on scientific observations. According to the Southampton Montessori website, children learn by manipulating materials, and that approach applies to whether they are learning about history, language, science, art, music or movement.

Ms. Gazza, a Farmingdale native, opened the Southampton Montessori School in Sep-



tember 1983 and, at that time, had just eight students. The program has grown since then and her school, located off St. Andrews Road in the village, can now accommodate up to 45 students a year.

During a recent interview, Ms. Gazza said she first had the idea to open a school while working as a second grade teacher in the Hampton Bays School District, explaining that, in her opinion, the students were not being properly prepared during their first few years of education. Originally hoping to introduce the Montessori Method of education to her public school classroom, she became certified in the program.

But while completing assistant work in a small Montessori school in a church basement in Westhampton Beach, Ms. Gazza recalls one day realizing that she was not going to be able to reach children when they are at their most critical ages for learning—between 3 and 6. Instead, she decided to open her own school on the East End.

Currently, the school has 35 students who come in for half a day of lessons, five days a week. Every morning, students change into a pair of slippers and work at different stations, honing their skills. They are supervised

by certified teachers and assistants who work to personalize tasks for each student as they progress.

The Montessori model differs from traditional early education classes in several ways, but the most noticeable one has to do with the role teachers play. In a traditional classroom, the teacher has a dominant, active role in activities; at Montessori, the teacher has an unobtrusive role in the classroom so students can actively participate in learning, according to Ms. Gazza.

Another difference is in the focus of learning. At Montessori, emphasis is placed on cognitive structures and social development, while a traditional program emphasizes a child's role and social development.

"My favorite part of being here is the children," Ms. Gazza said. "They are so joyful and they love learning, and they come in every day with a motivation to learn, which we are very respectful of. We want to build on that, and seeing their progress and achievements and their happiness is the best part of it—this school is focused on the children."

When Ms. Gazza opened her doors, she knew she needed the right staff to help

mold the one-building school that sits on four acres just off County Road 39. That is why she approached Karen Neubauer, a former teacher's aide for another Montessori School. Ms. Neubauer immediately joined the team in Southampton, and has been with the school since it opened.

Last week, Ms. Neubauer, who teaches kindergarten, said she is most proud of what the Montessori education provides for its students, noting that it sets kids up for success. She added that it warms her heart when students return after graduating from high school or college to thank them for the lessons they learned when they were younger.

"Our mantra is, 'I don't say I can't, I say I'll try,'" Ms. Neubauer said. "And we try to give them the tools to not just find the answer in one way. I'm not showing them the answers. I am showing them the way to find the answers they need."

"It is a lesson you can take with you through life," she added.

According to Ms. Gazza, the purpose of the school is to give students the foundation they need to be successful later in life. Most of the students, she said, will transfer into the local public schools after kindergarten, where they are poised to thrive.

"We have some wonderful public schools out here and, after us, the children can enter those schools at a higher level and feeling confident," she said. "That is really the natural time for them to transition schools, after kindergarten, because developmentally they are ready."

Moving ahead, Ms. Gazza said she is looking forward to working with more students and sharing the Montessori philosophy. She noted that her program has received praise from local educators, administrators, parents as well as former students, and hopes to continue building on that tradition.

"Parents have really felt that Montessori gave their children the foundation they need to be successful," she said. "We hear stories all of the time of successes, either with great colleges or occupations."