

# COMMUNITY BUILDING IN SCHOOLS

by Terry Ford

*Working in the urban environment of Dallas, Texas, executive director of Lumin Education Terry Ford shows how schools which might normally be competing with each other can support each other instead and forge a community amongst themselves, ultimately serving the families of the area more successfully. Ford highlights using the classroom model of the prepared environment and the core value of grace and courtesy to help build widespread community by fostering a culture of mutual respect, compassion, and love.*

*This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled **Montessori's Framework: Shaping Education for All Children in Dallas, Texas on November 8-11, 2018**. She envisioned it as something that supported the development of the child without interfering with its natural process, thus allowing the child to develop to full potential. The result of this kind of education not only benefited the child, but the world. It gave hope for a better future and led to "the emergence of the New Man, who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mold the future of mankind." (The Absorbent Mind, p. 8)*

How do we build community ... within our schools, between our schools, within this glorious movement, to make Montessori accessible for all children and families? I'd like to share my thoughts

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***Terry N. Ford**, a bilingual first grade teacher, opened a school for eight children in response to concerns of neighborhood parents who saw their children falling through the cracks in public school, branded "failures" as early as second grade. Since that day in 1978, she has engaged a wide spectrum of the Dallas community, leveraging private and public funds to develop Lumin Education – a nationally and internationally recognized organization that serves 600 urban, low-income, and immigrant families on three campuses. With its holistic approach that includes parent education beginning in pregnancy, Montessori Early Head Start (pregnancy to age 3) and public charter school classrooms for children ages 3 to 9, Lumin has garnered praise from politicians, civic leaders, and educators for parental involvement, student success rate, and child-centered philosophy. In neighborhoods that struggle with poverty and high dropout rates, Lumin alumni graduate from high school at a rate of 96% with 89% of those graduates attending college.*

by beginning with a story. Like so many of my favorite stories, it begins like this:

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a big metropolis. This metropolis spread out for hundreds of square miles and was home to hundreds of thousands of people. Now within this metropolis, there were all kinds of schools. In fact, there were all kinds of Montessori schools: private, public, charter schools, nonprofit, schools run by businesses, ... And all of these Montessori schools were vying for children to come to their schools and for the best teachers to be hired by their schools and for the best Montessorians to come lead their schools.

At the same time that all these Montessori schools were vying and competing with each other, because they were full of Montessorians, they found ways to reach out and build community between their schools.

An example of this was two years ago, when the big metropolitan school district – a huge district with 150,000 students – reached out to a much smaller charter public school and asked, “We’re going to have a back-to-school, professional development, two-day conference for all of the Montessori teachers in our district. Would you provide our keynote speech?”

Uma Ramani notes, “It is through practical life that individuals find their place in the human narrative.”

In the same way that the big city school district had reached across that divide between district public schools and charter public schools with this invitation to speak, the charter Montessori school used that keynote speech to take another step in building community. The title of that speech was “Montessori in Dallas for Children of Diverse Backgrounds”.

That keynote speech started like this:

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago ... in fact, in 1937, a little girl was born whose destiny was to become a Montessori teacher and school leader in Dallas, Texas ... a pioneer in sharing Montessori with children of all backgrounds. Her name was Sherley Johnson.

Sherley's mom was 15 years old when Sherley was born at Parkland Public Hospital. Sherley was raised her whole life by her granny, growing up in the Love Field Airport neighborhood, which was an unincorporated area of Dallas at that time. As a child, Sherley could stand at the end of her street with the other neighborhood kids and wave at the pilots as they flew overhead ... and the pilots would wave back!

Sherley told me, "Each Sunday, my granny would pack a sack lunch, put me in the wagon and pull me up the long hill to the church. We spent all day at the church. There was always a morning service and an afternoon service. My granny was a heavy-set lady, so rather than go back down the hill home, and then come back to church, we would stay, just like so many of the families. We would all gather and enjoy lunches together."



When Sherley was 14 years old, her best friend introduced her to a 17-year-old man who had quit school and joined the military. They met when he was on furlough. When he left to go back to the Korean War, she began writing him. Her granny would read every letter! And she warned Sherley, "This young man was not born in our neighborhood!" He was a "town boy". You have to watch those "town boys"!

Sherley didn't see Kurt again until 1955, the year she graduated from high school, but they had been writing all those years. They got married in December 1955 and Sherley Johnson became Sherley Collier. It was years later, when Sherley and Kurt had three children and Sherley was working at Little Dude's Preschool, that she first heard about Montessori.

Sherley ended up going to work for The Creative Learning Center, whose mission was to educate children from poverty families who were considered to be Talented and Gifted. Sherley became a Montessori teacher and eventually the director of the entire school. That school, which opened in 1968, was the first time in Dallas that Montessori was available to children whose families could not af-

ford to pay tuition.

Meanwhile, when Sherley was just 5 yrs old, a little girl named Dina Jaramillo was born in 1942 in Belen, New Mexico. Dina's family's first language was Spanish. Her father always told her, "La educación abre puertas". Education opens doors. After attending Catholic school through eighth grade, Dina convinced her father to send her to a boarding school called Marywood Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan – a long, long way from Belen, New Mexico.

There was a small cottage near Marywood Academy. It was a Montessori school for young children. As a senior in high school, Dina volunteered at this little Montessori school. She eventually got her



master's in education and fell in love with Jim Paulik who had opened a Montessori school for Cheyenne Native Americans in Montana.

Dina and Jim got married in 1971 in Dallas and Dina Jaramillo became Dina Paulik. Jim started a Montessori teacher training center in Dallas. Dina became a Montessori teacher and both of them became leaders in the first Montessori programs to be opened by the Dallas public schools.

Initially in 1973, Dina got her principal's permission to unofficially create a Montessori classroom at Sam Houston Elementary. 1973 was the first time that Montessori was available in a Dallas public school. Then in 1976, Jim was hired to open Dallas' first Montessori magnet school. 1976 was the first time that any parent in Dallas could apply for their child to attend a free, public Montessori magnet school. That program eventually grew to serve kindergarten through eighth grades.

Meanwhile, back in 1952, when Dina Jaramillo was just 10 years old in Belen, New Mexico and Sherley Johnson was attending high school in Dallas, Texas, a little girl was born in Prairie Village, Kansas. I was the first of four children. My big hero growing up was Martin Luther King, Jr. and I remember sitting in the evenings with my brothers, my sister, and parents, watching our black and white TV

as the civil rights movement unfolded. I saw the sit-ins and the protest marches. I was captivated by this struggle for justice and determined to take some action to be part of this righteous cause. Finally one evening, I told my parents, "Mom and Dad, I'm going to Alabama. I'm going to march with Martin Luther King!" My parents looked at me and said, "Terry, you are 9 years old. You are not going anywhere."



A few years later I decided that I could do my part by becoming a first grade teacher in a big urban school district. While I was in college at SMU, Barbara Gordon, director of a private Montessori school that is now called Alcuin School, welcomed me as an observer in a Montessori classroom.

I was fascinated ... but when I realized that Montessori was just for children whose parents could afford to pay tuition, I gave up the idea of getting Montessori training and focused on my first job out of college – being a first grade, bilingual teacher at Mount Auburn Elementary in the Dallas public schools. I loved teaching first grade except for one thing as children moved into the upper grades, I saw so many bright, intelligent, eager-to-learn students begin to get discouraged and fall between the cracks.



So, a group of parents and another teacher and I decided to start a school. It was thus in 1978, Lumin Education (then East Dallas Community School), made it possible for the first time for 3 and 4-year-olds from low-income families in Dallas to apply to a Montessori school without screening for academic ability.

Later in 1991, Lumin opened a Pregnancy to Age 3 program, with parent education home visits and a toddler class. In 1999, Lumin opened the first Montessori charter public school in Dallas. Ten

years later in 2009, we opened the first Montessori Early Head Start program in Dallas.

Lumin has grown to do primarily two things: 1) We make Montessori home visits. At Lumin full time parent educators, ideally beginning when parents are pregnant, make weekly or every-other-week home visits, working to support parents in creating inspiring learning environments at home. 2) We provide daily Montessori classes beginning with toddlers at age 1 through lower elementary, age 9.

Back to our story ... Where are we now? Sherley has retired. Her legacy lives on through the thousands of lives that she touched in her lifetime. Plus, one of her daughters, Kecia, has been a Montessori educator at Lumin for 25 years. Dina and Jim eventually left the Dallas public schools to open a private school and are currently continuing to train teachers. And Terry is standing in front of you this morning.

### **Building Community Between Types Of Montessori Schools**

Sherley, Dina, and I represent a microcosm of the different types of Montessori schools often found in urban areas: Sherley led a private Montessori school; Dina taught in a district public Montessori school; and I'm part of a charter public Montessori school. The point is this: of course, in some ways, Montessori schools compete with each other. At the same time, because of who we are and our vision for a world of peace and harmony, we find ways to reach out and build community between our schools and within our schools.

Just as the Dallas public school district reached out to Lumin Education for their professional development conference, Lumin has reached out to principals with district Montessori schools near our campuses and created opportunities for their new Montessori teachers to observe and interact with experienced Montessorians. When the Texas legislature was considering legislation that would be detrimental to Montessori, a group of Montessori school leaders from across the state – public and private, AMI and AMS – gathered to testify to the State Board of Education.

## Building Community For Children

Within each of our schools, building community begins in the classroom. How is building community in the classroom important for an individual child? Children learn when they feel safe. Humans and other animals survive because we are constantly – even at this very moment – scanning the environment for risk and reward. It’s an unconscious process. If you hear a sudden loud sound, you’ll react instinctively to make sure that you’re safe.



That sense of safety and belonging in the classroom, being part of a community, is the foundation for learning. Our brains are wired to be looking for things that bring life, nurturing, and safety. If you feel threatened, you’re not in a position to focus on learning. On the other hand, food, shelter, companionship, social connection – those are basic needs of every human being. If someone in my classroom acts friendly, I have a positive social response, especially if I am in need of a friend or in need of guidance.

All of us look for ways to create that atmosphere, not only in the classroom, but campus-wide. We want children to hear the message: “You belong in this school community. This is a safe place where people care about you.”

One of the ways that we do that at Lumin is with a school-wide tradition at the beginning of each year. With all the children gathered around, I share a question-and-response, interactive story of how the school got started. It’s the same story every year, so by the time children are 8 or 9-years-old, they know it by heart. The repetitive theme is of how hard the parents and teachers work to create the school, emphasizing school values of children working and treating each other with respect and kindness. Of course, it’s the ongoing Montessori practices of grace and courtesy and modeling respectful behavior that have the greatest impact on how children respect, work, and play with each other.

## Building Community For Children

We all know that it's important for our children to have a sense of safety, belonging, and community in our classrooms. But why do we need to build community school-wide? Picture someone in your school community who is struggling with some challenge at work. When you try to reach out to that person...Do they react defensively? Or with openness? Their reaction depends on how safe they feel, how far they can trust that you really believe in them, how much community support they feel.

How do we build community in the midst of the pressures and challenges that each of us faces in our day-to-day life ...

- When families are struggling with the effects of poverty and the isolation that can come from feeling so alone in facing the financial and health and housing and so many other problems that arise?
- When our staff are struggling – not only with children who may not have had enough to eat or who may have witnessed violence outside their door – but also with the external pressures of getting good test scores, unfunded mandates, and compliance regulations?
- Or at more affluent schools, when some of our students come from such entitled backgrounds that they or their parents believe that they can do no wrong?

I suggest that there are three ways to build community and that they all boil down to a very familiar Montessori concept: the prepared environment.

At the same time ... This is the work we choose to do, right? It's the field that we choose to play in.

I suggest that there are three ways to build community and that they all boil down to a very familiar Montessori concept: the prepared environment. Knowing that the key to learning for children, parents, and staff – is feeling safe and that being safe means being surrounded by a community of respect, compassion, and love, then the way to



be a learning community where all of us learn from each other is to create a prepared environment. This work is an ongoing process, a never-ending effort to create and maintain that environment.

### **Building Community Through A Prepared Environment Three Ways:**

1. Practice how we interact with each other
2. Create opportunities for shared experiences
3. Create opportunities for personal and professional growth

#### **I. PRACTICE HOW WE INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER**

##### **A. Use responsible language**

*Open, honest, and direct communication*

A parent came to me last week with a complaint about her child's classroom. At Lumin we practice talking to each other, rather than about each other. Before I respond to a complaint, I ask myself:

Have I encouraged the person to go directly to the other person?  
Did I coach them and support them in how to do that?

*Reflective listening*

Seek to understand the speaker's idea. Then offer the idea back to the speaker, to confirm that you understood correctly. Focus on understanding first, before seeking to be understood. This is an opportunity for each person to truly hear one another, to end the conversation with each person feeling heard and understood, not necessarily agreed with. This requires being a good listener by listening without trying to be thinking of a response.

*Own messages that you send to others*

Talk from the perspective of "I": I think ...I feel ...I imagine ...I'm under the impression that...You are the expert on what you think and how you feel. Avoid arguing from the perspective of "You". You think ...You feel ...You always ...You never ...This approach puts others on the defensive.

Use language that takes responsibility

- “I” instead of “you”
- “I want” instead of “I need”
- “I choose to” instead of “I should”
- “I choose not to” instead of “I shouldn’t”
- “I won’t” instead of “I can’t”

## **B. Notice and Acknowledge**

### *Get Curious*

I worked in a school in a traditional setting years ago and was asked to translate at a parent teacher conference for a parent who didn’t speak English. The teacher’s message to the parent was, “Your child is failing because you don’t speak English to him.” How different might that parent’s response been if the teacher had said, “You know your child better than anyone else. I’d like your help to figure out how to reach him. What does he get excited about? What does he enjoy?”

### *Use Gratitude*

For example, children decorate gratitude jars. During the course of the year, each child writes something that s/he is grateful for and drops it into his or her jar. Near Thanksgiving (or whatever day you designate), read the notes.

### *Assume Good Intent*

Many years ago, in preparation for tutoring a child, I visited with his grandmother. “Whup him!” she told me. “Whup him ‘til his bones break if you have to, but learn him. Learn him good.” That grandmother cared deeply about her grandson. By recognizing good intent, we can build on what we have in common.



When something goes missing, trust the child who has a pattern of stealing until you know for sure what happened. Get curious when you find the missing shoe in the child's cubby.

All of the above are simple concepts, but not easy to practice consistently. Practicing these practices builds community.

## II. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARED EXPERIENCES

### *Build on strengths*

Look for opportunities to invite children, parents, staff, and alumni to share their gifts, talents, and interests. At one of Lumin's 40th anniversary celebrations, we invited a gifted alumni pianist to perform. At our beginning of year celebration, we invite staff to tell true Lumin stories that illustrate our values.

### *Have fun*

Having fun is just as important as sharing information. Our parents' feedback is, "We want more time to talk to each other. We want a stronger foundation of friends." Sometimes our parent evenings are Mom and Dad's one night out together. We provide childcare and dinner, so Mom and Dad are fed, their kids are fed, and the only cost to Mom and Dad is the gas to get there.

### *Out of the Box*

Out of the Box is when staff are invited to get out of their office and help out in the classroom. Our head of fund-raising told me, "Few experiences at Lumin were more transformative for me than the week I spent as a substitute assistant in a primary class. I was so proudly exhausted after lunch every day and so impressed with the teacher and assistant—their patience, their knowledge, their ability to think on their feet, their enormous responsibility!"

## III. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

### *Grow Your Own*

One of our most effective strategies for finding great staff is to provide opportunities to people within our own community (parents, staff, alumni) who have interests and strengths that match our needs. For example, two of our school directors started at Lumin as parents, then became parent educators, then teachers, and then directors. We also partner with other organizations (for example, community organizers and our state charter association) to train our parents to advocate for issues they care about.

### *Personal Development*

Look for opportunities to remind parents and staff that we want them to take good care of themselves. For example, create time for a yoga class, a mindfulness workshop, a walk in the park. One of the greatest gifts we ever received was when a church donated weekly sessions of a family counselor to Lumin. Now, thanks to partially donated services, we are able to offer play therapy for children, family counseling to parents, and leadership coaching to staff.

## **Conclusion**

Knowing that we want our political climate to be less polarized, the place to start is where we have influence. Each of us has a sphere of influence within our family, at our place of work, in our neighborhood, and/or in our place of worship. Whether we are part of a private Montessori school, a charter public Montessori school, a district public school Montessori school, or part of the larger community ... Whether we are part of AMI, AMS, or some other approach to Montessori training ... we all have common ground.

We care about the quality and effectiveness of our work. We care about expanding access to beautiful learning environments for children, regardless of race, religion, language, legal documentation of citizenship, or income. We are all about educating the children of the world.

Montessorians envision a world of peace and harmony. We create that world in our everyday interactions in our classrooms, in our schools, between schools and organizations and at conferences like this one.

