

personal profile

After initially embarking on a career as a travel agent in South Africa, and having two children of her own, **Suzanne van Niekark** discovered Montessori after being given a copy of 'the Secret of Childhood' which was to dramatically change the course of her life.



Field trip to the U-Shaka Marine World Aquarium, Durban, to gain an experience of marine life.

What Montessori means

In the last hours of February 28th 1993 my son Juergen was born at St Augustine's Hospital in Durban, South Africa. A few hours later, his lifelong friend Otto also made his entrance into the world and with that started a friendship that would ultimately lead to where I am in Montessori today.

I was born in Germany to parents who had very different life ideas to those of their peers and soon after the birth of my sister, left Germany to set up residence and start a windsurfing school and diving and fishing charter business in Seychelles.

My schooling career was diverse to say the least, having been schooled in four different countries in five languages! I had no idea what direction to take after I completed high school in Cape Town, South Africa, and decided to embark on a career as a travel agent,

“Montessori as a philosophy has become for me much more than a career – as clichéd as it may sound, it has become my life.”

which again allowed me to broaden my horizons and embrace diverse cultures and peoples across the world.

On a fateful flight back home to Seychelles a few years later, the ground staff of Luxavia saw fit to seat me next to a rather dashing gentleman who would become my husband 18 months later in early 1991.

When it came to children and what to do with them, I was really quite clueless when Juergen was born. In fact, were it not for a certain Marina Petropoulos and her Baby and Childcare Handbook, I doubt my son would have survived and grown into

International Peace Day. The children all made windmills into which their peace wishes were inscribed. We later planted the windmills in the garden so that the wind could blow their peace wishes to the world.

the fine young teenager he is today.

Juergen and Otto grew up normal little boys in Africa, attending Mums and Tots classes, visiting animals farms, being Superman and Batman and generally doing all the things that young boys do, until the time came that they needed to go to school. Otto's mum was adamant that Otto should attend the local Montessori school, where she duly enrolled him. I was shocked that such a seemingly sane woman would want to send her son to a Montessori school. Everybody knew that Montessori was where children had no boundaries, no discipline and basically just ran riot for three years before giving the teachers in primary school a really hard time. What on earth was she thinking? I, on the other hand, being a far more responsible parent enrolled my son in a well established mainstream 'normal' primary school where I immediately became very involved in the Parent Teacher Association.

My daughter Steffanie was born during this time, and having been involved with children on a more regular basis, I started to understand children and their development a bit better and to my horror, started to see the differences in the education that my child was getting in comparison to what his friend was doing at his Montessori school.

Once I had pushed my personal, completely unfounded, prejudices aside and swallowed my pride long enough to make enquiries about what Montessori actually was, my dear gracious friend gave me a copy of The Secret of Childhood to read. I cannot honestly say at this point that I understood what I read completely, but





The end of a busy day at school!

s to me...

what I did understand was enough to have me banging on the door of the Montessori school begging for a place for my children!

Persistence eventually paid off and I was able to enrol both my children into the Montessori school. Sadly for Juergen, he was only able to attend the school for one year before moving back into mainstream primary schooling as no Montessori primary schools exist in our surrounds. I was so astounded by the progress that my son was making and the manner in which he was learning that I needed no great encouragement when my husband came across an advert for Montessori Teacher Training in our local paper and suggested that perhaps I might like to study this further.

I started my Montessori training course in January 2000, and with that came a complete and utter change of life. The period of study was very intense, as I had two young children, one in primary school and one in the Montessori preschool. During my teaching practice, one of the teachers at my teaching practice placement school

Right and below – Suzanne Van Niekark and children from Little Learners Montessori



resigned and I was offered the full-time teaching post. Talk about being dropped into the deep end of the Montessori pool.

I completed my studies and continued working at the school whilst putting plans into place to open my own school in partnership with a colleague I had met whilst studying. The Montessori Kindergarten opened its doors in 2001 and ran most successfully until the partnership dissolved in 2004. By this stage, I had become so entrenched in everything Montessori that I became involved with the formation of the Southern African Montessori Association (SAMA) in 2003 and have sat on its Executive Committee as Regional Representative, National Preschool Representative and currently as Treasurer. After the dissolution of the school partnership, I joined another school, Little Learners Montessori, where I continue to love to be. We are a close community of 40 children, four directresses and 74 parents with a common vision for the holistic development and nurturing of the child.

Montessori as an educational philosophy has great prospects in South Africa. There are already many well established Montessori preschools around the country and a handful of primary and secondary schools. With the change in government in 1994 also came a change in the education system. The current National

Curriculum Statement is formulated around outcomes-based education principles, which have much in common with the Montessori Philosophy. As SAMA, we have worked tirelessly over the past six years to gain acceptance of Montessori as an alternate educational philosophy by government and continue to make good progress. Various individual Montessori Training Centres have sought accreditation by the required quality assurance training authorities and education departments and many are now able to offer a Montessori diploma in Early Childhood education that has been aligned to the national requirements and is accepted as a valid ECD qualification in this country.

Montessori as a philosophy has become for me much more than a career – as clichéd as it may sound, it has become my life.

I have recently completed my MCI Teacher Training and joined forces with Lucy Watson at the MCI Durban Study Circle to lecture Montessori students. I feel absolutely blessed to have the opportunity to have found a calling in my (still young-ish!) lifetime that allows me to fulfil my career obligations with such passion and enjoyment. Through the children, I have learnt humility, compassion and child-like humour but most of all, through Montessori, through my children and my diverse upbringing, I have learned to really live life. ■

