

Christian Montessori School Builds Community

“Building Community” has become a catchphrase at Christian Montessori School (CMS) on St. Simons Island, Georgia. At CMS, building community means bringing people together, giving them opportunities to contribute to the school, get to know each other, and work together for common good. CMS is working to transform itself and its community with several tangible efforts meant to build a foundation for the future.

The first opportunity to build community in the 20th anniversary year for CMS came with a vision to build an Outdoor Education Center. The effort to move from vision to the creation of this unique space involved almost every parent in the school, several grandparents, and many other members of the greater community.



Home Depot’s local store generously agreed to provide all of the materials and labor to create an outdoor education center that featured an arbor/outdoor stage, pond/waterfall, butterfly garden, butterfly hatchery, worm bins and composting bins, and firepit/storytelling area. The plan was to build the outdoor center in one day, using dozens of CMS parents and dozens of Home Depot associates working together.

The September day when the center was built was the best example of community building CMS has ever seen. Over 75% of the parent body was involved, dozens of grandparents, and many community leaders showed up to help transform an under-utilized part of our campus into a spectacular outdoor education center. A local radio remote publicized the event, Starbucks provided coffee, Chick-fil-A provided breakfast, and a local restaurant grilled out lunch for all the volunteers. The day was a celebration for the entire community full of laughter and making memories for the school and students.

The students enjoy the outdoor classroom every day, but the most surprising outcome of the project was how energized Home Depot was by the experience. Home Depot associates felt reconnected to the values of Team Depot, their volunteer arm, and all called this “the best community project we have ever been involved with.”

As a result of this outstanding experience, the newly energized leadership team of CMS was inspired to attend the “Building Community” conference in Sarasota, FL sponsored by the International Montessori Council. This marked the first time that CMS had ever attended an IMC event, and it represented the first step in elevating the sights of our school and how it can transform our local community. Two Board members and a CMS Lead Teacher attended the

conference and are helping the CMS community live the vision of building a World-Class Montessori School in our region.

Building community and changing culture need touchstones for people to identify with. The latest project to help foster community at CMS is the re-purposing of an underutilized lunchroom / common room area into a true Gathering Room. This warm and inviting room will be a “bricks and mortar” commitment to literally, building space for community to gather. The Gathering Room will feature comfortable seating and a coffee bar, partnering with a local business, to make it convenient and comfortable for parents to “hang out” at school, observe their children in the classroom, and meet with other parents. There will be a Parent Resource Center featuring books and articles on parenting and Montessori as we intentionally educate and inculcate the spirit of Montessori throughout our community at large.

The vision is to have parents, grandparents, prospective parents, and the community at large feel comfortable in the space and spending more time getting invested in our school. The space could host book club meetings, student activities, church groups, etc – it will be a community event to re-purpose the room, and will be a tangible commitment to building community at CMS. In true Montessori fashion, the students will play an active role in the construction of furniture, sewing of pillows and cushions, and painting bare walls.

CMS is engaging community partners in this project – the Golden Isles Career Academy, Wale-Up Coffee, Home Depot, Carpet One, and several other community leaders are volunteering time and materials to create this unique space. CMS is broadening the vision of what community is, and we are partnering with other organizations in the region to help educate our children and build the Montessori brand.

The newly formed EDGE curriculum (Experience and Discovery Guiding Education) is another example of reaching out beyond the classroom. This program, described in more detail in this same issue of *Tomorrow's Child*, builds on the traditional Montessori materials and commitment to hands-on education and gives students experiences unique to their area. For CMS, our barrier island location has led us to partnerships with the International Seafarers, the Department of Natural Resources, Tidelands Nature Center, and University of Georgia Marine Extension Service.

With EDGE, our students learn in the natural environment and have instruction and hands-on application from subject matter experts. The Lead Teachers coordinate this curriculum into the prepared environment, and the students' world gets bigger, and their definition of community gets larger.

Whether it is building an outdoor education center, a true Gathering Room, or starting a field curriculum, the common thread is building community. Our school community is building

relationships with individuals and organizations that will stand the test of time. Our children will receive the benefits of understanding all that makes themselves and their home unique. Future generations will point to these early days of building community as the turning point where a school moved from an insular institution to one that is leader in promoting Montessori and transforming the entire community, one child, one experience, at a time.