

Montessori School Takes Learning Outdoors



CMS students from left, Keeta Moore, Alex Good, Abby Glotzbach, Ben Brubaker, Chloe Stewart, Lily Hock, Colby Griner

By Kathi Williams

Let me preface this article by clarifying that none of the members of the *Coastal Illustrated* staff have children at the Christian Montessori School (CMS) on St. Simons Island. We frequently feature stories about CMS because over the years they have invited us to events taking place at the school that have ranged from concerts to ribbon-cuttings for new buildings, from open houses to cultural events programs. CMS takes such pride in their school, their students, and the innovative programs that they offer, it is always easy to share their enthusiasm.

Earlier this year, I met with Tom Brubaker, CMS's Development Director, to discuss new tax incentives for enrolling students at the school, new extended hours for after-care, and some long-range plans for development. Tom walked me through a small overgrown courtyard area adjacent to the school's recently built playground, and told me about a vision they had for an "Outdoor Education Center" in the rather derelict area. With the help of a design created by Thomas Thaddeus Truett, Architect, and associates, materials and manpower from Home Depot, tireless organization by Brubaker, Michelle Stewart, and Tracey Tennant, and an army of local volunteers, parents and students, that vision has become a reality.

On Thursday, September 2, CMS was the site of what was, in essence, a 21st century "barn-raising." Representatives and employees of Home Depot arrived early that morning with a truckload of material they had donated to begin building in the courtyard. They were joined by school staff, supportive parents and friends of CMS. Chik-Fil-A was on site, providing breakfast for the hungry volunteers, and Saltwater Cowboy grilled lunch later in the day for that group of more than 40 individuals who were hard at work creating this innovative learning center for the students. Amazingly, their work was completed before 3:00 p.m. that afternoon, and the space was completely transformed.



CMS Development Director Tom Brubaker

As you walk around the Outdoor Education Center, it is easy to see what a terrific place it is for children to experience hands-on learning. Upon entering this amazing outdoor classroom, you'll first notice a small pond and waterfall that will be home to aquatic plants and animals. There are bird feeders, nesting boxes, and a bird bath in the courtyard to invite more feathered friends to visit. A butterfly garden beckons more winged visitors, and a butterfly hatchery has also been built so that the students can observe the metamorphosis of caterpillar into butterfly. Among the other plants in the garden areas, there are insect traps like the Venus fly trap and a pitcher plant. A weather station and rain gauge will permit students to be junior meteorologists. For those interested in studying geological features, there is a rock pile ready for perusal. To promote green living, there is a composting area and worm bins where refuse can be turned into nutrient rich soil for the gardens. Students are responsible for the daily composting and maintenance of the gardens. There is a lighted arbor/stage/seating area for teaching or, when needed, performance. One of my favorite areas is the raised firepit surrounded by logs for stories around the "campfire."

And while Brubaker had shared the vision that the school had for the "outdoor classroom," I think the end result and the fantastic response from Home Depot, parents and community volunteers amazed even him. He can't stress enough how helpful Home Depot was in completing this project. He says they took the initial design to Home Depot with questions about how to proceed and the coordinator at the Brunswick store immediately looked at it and said, "We'll do it." When that coordinator was transferred to another store in Florida, not only did he continue with the project, but volunteers from both the Brunswick and Florida Home Depot stores arrived on site to help complete the job. Tom said that he later got a surprising call from that coordinator thanking CMS for allowing them to help with the project because it energized the Home Depot employees and renewed their desire to work in a company that supports community projects like this. Amazing.

What is truly wonderful about the new Outdoor Education Center is the students' reaction to it. The two elementary classrooms open directly into the area, and the new space is so inviting, yet still quiet enough to permit schoolwork to be completed, so the students may be permitted to read or do other work out there during class time. You could tell by the way the kids' eyes lit up when I asked them about their favorite thing about this new space that they were enthusiastic about the subject and eager to share. While Marshall Baker was eager to show me the Venus flytrap that he had donated to the garden, Annalise Miller thought the best part of the new center was the worm bins where they could put trash in to make the worm tea to use for fertilizer. Perhaps it was Brooke Zell's answer that amused me the most, and best summed up how the students feel about their new open-air classroom: "I have two favorite parts . . . Well,



maybe it's the whole thing." She explained, "I like the pond because there are going to be tadpoles in it. I think the flowers and the design are pretty." And everyone agreed that the firepit was the absolute perfect place for telling stories. I'll bring the marshmallows and s'mores fixings if they let me join them!

Kudos to CMS and all of the volunteers from Home Depot and beyond, like Seaboard Construction, who donated gravel and Kraig Ware, who installed the lighting, and so many more parents and friends of CMS who worked together to make this happen. The vision for the school, Brubaker assures me, does not stop here. They are now planning to add on an annex that includes a day-lit cultural arts center and will present a whole new look to the school from Frederica Road. A board of advisors from the community has been assembled to help with the CMS's long-term planning and major curriculum innovation, and the momentum does not look like it will slow.



only fundamentals but diverse cultural elements and hands-on learning.

More of this "field experience" education will be possible thanks to the Outdoor Education Center, and developing partnerships with agencies like the DNR, Coastal Resources Division and other environmental groups. CMS hopes this type of experience will not only be a unique part of their students' education, it will also enable them to learn the skills they need to understand this unique ecosystem that we call home and encourage their interest in pursuing careers locally that will help preserve it.

If you are interested in learning more about Lord of Life Christian Montessori School, please call 638-1692 or visit www.cmssi.org. There are limited enrollment opportunities now, and discounted tuition may also be available. Join a school who really thinks outside the box! **II**



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