

Guiding the Future:

How Art Enhances a Montessori Child's Life

By Barb Short

When my husband and I first discovered Madison Montessori School for our daughter a few years ago, we had a respectful but limited understanding of the Montessori philosophy and the benefits of a Montessori education. What I remember was that in my research and conversations and visits with other schools, nothing compared to Madison Montessori. The educators there spoke a language and held beliefs that were true to my heart. Even on my first visit, they taught me about my child and about myself as a parent.

One thing about Madison Montessori School that impresses me greatly is its belief in the power and importance of art in education: that an art program can enhance the power of the core learning programs designed for our children and that art develops the whole child, the whole family, the whole school, and the whole community.

Nearly a decade ago, through the inspiration and commitment of the school's director and cofounder, Terry Armstrong, and parent Catherine Cianciara, the school began a program that it aptly named "Genuine Art." Genuine Art is best described as a unique extracurricular program and series of events created for the students by a group of parent volunteers, teachers, and artists. Throughout the school year, professional artists donate their time to visit the classroom and guide students through a series of collaborative art sessions.

While Genuine Art's main objective is to expose children to learning through the creation of art itself, the experience goes far beyond that. Each art session is a community

experience—artist, teachers, parent volunteers, students, all working together with new materials to create one work of art. That work of art becomes part of a larger community experience: an art show that displays the work of all the school's students, from every age and classroom. The show takes place at a local gallery called domo gallery (which also donates the space for the exhibit). The opening is held on a weekend afternoon; students proudly lead their families and friends to the fruits of their artistic labor and take home a portfolio of individual pieces from the

various sessions in which they participated to frame and display proudly.

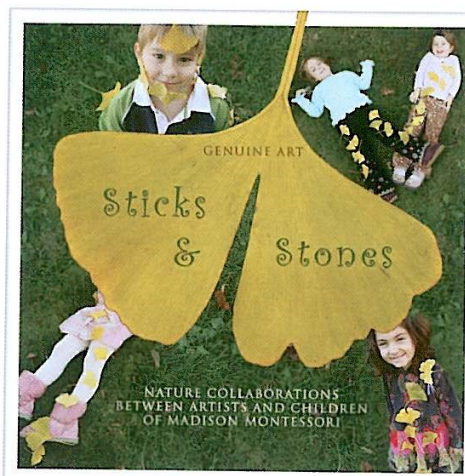
The materials the children work with include leaves, clay, silk dyes, paint, topsoil, and, in one case, their very own shoes. The works they create include concrete poetry, ceramics, mandalas, photography, paintings, and mobile sculpture.

In the spring, in the small, sun-touched domo gallery in Summit, NJ, the warmth the children feel from their close community, the sense of confidence they feel in themselves, and the genuine and strong appreciation they feel for the artists, parents, and teachers that helped them shows in their

smiles, embraces, and the stories they tell.

The instant we entered the gallery last spring, my daughter recognized her contribution to a piece that was displayed quite a few feet away and told me the story of how it was created. She showed me where her classmates' contributions were and spoke warmly about the parent artist who had helped them create it.

Each year, the program is given a theme of study. Last year the theme was shapes. A memorable session was a kindergarten project at a nature preserve with local pho-





Preparing shapes for collages

tographer Doug Mott. The resulting collage shows the children holding shapes from nature that correspond to the shapes of their eyes, hands, and mouths. This school year, the theme is nature. The art curriculum also always includes at least one piece influenced by the school's country of study. Last year's country was Tibet; this year's country is Finland.

This all would be enough to illustrate the positive impact an art program can have in a Montessori school environment. But there's another important element to Genuine Art. The evening before the student art opening, the school holds a Genuine Art Silent Auction for the artwork on display. Parents, artists, and teachers all come together for a night of community and thanks. Each of us eagerly seeks out the pieces our children have already spoken about with such enjoyment. The proceeds from the auction make possible the Madison Montessori School Student Scholarship fund, which assists children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to attend the school.

Both photographer Doug Mott and domo gallery director Asdrubal Franco (and other families who have discovered the school through the Genuine Art program) have enrolled their children in the Madison Montessori School. In addition, the meaning and power of Genuine Art has touched new artists, such as Brazilian painter and award-winning art educator Duda Penteado of nearby Jersey City, who will volunteer his time to create with the children this year.

Combined with the daily work in the classroom and with the music, creative movement, drama, and science curricula, Genuine Art complements and even elevates the everyday learning experiences that the Madison Montessori teachers so thoughtfully, attentively, and skillfully afford our children.

Our Montessori school, like so many others, brings people together, appreciates each and every child as unique, and develops in the children what they find to be special about themselves. Through my children's artistic

Genuine ART

Collaborations Between Artists and Children

at Madison Montessori School

experiences at Madison Montessori School, I have learned some of the most important things about them—their interests, their passions, who they are, and who they want to be. The intimacy of the learning environment and the trust, respect, and admiration my children have for their teachers create a space for expressive communication, at school and at home, and a unique collaboration between child, parent, and teacher that I believe has been enhanced—even made possible, at times—through the vehicle of art.

As the editors and writers of *Montessori Life* have underscored in prior pages of this magazine, in every Montessori classroom sits, on a soft rug, side by side, the future. Our children's Montessori education prepares them for the future with skills, with confidence, with independence, and with an important sense of citizenship. I believe it must be true that every Montessori child's very genuine art experiences make all aspects of that preparation for the future even stronger. But what touches me most of all is that these experiences help them to *dream* about the future—and the part they will take in its goodness.

BARB SHORT is a writer and Montessori parent living in Madison, New Jersey. Contact her at barbshort@optonline.net.