

Montessori School in Godfrey celebrating nearly 40 years of developmental-based learning

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY - Rod and Jane Connell founded the Montessori School in Alton in 1979.

That school has since moved to Godfrey, thanks to a generous offering from then Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) Vice President Dale Chapman, who is now the president of the college. In 1988, Rod Connell said the school moved to its current

location on the campus of the college. It serves around 150 students, including both in class and as after school students through the eighth grade.

A Montessori education differs from standard public education, because it is based on the development of the child more than the child's age group. In a Montessori education, Rod Connell said, students are able to pursue more of their interests hands-on at an early age. Students enter the Montessori campus around the age of two.

"To me, the main thing is they develop real early into a love of learning, which makes everything else after that much easier," Rod Connell said.

Rod Connell was trained in the Montessori method of education, and taught in Miami for a year, and South Carolina for five, before returning home to the Riverbend to found his own school. At the time, it was the only school in the area of its kind outside of a campus in Edwardsville.

The first Montessori schools were founded by Dr. Maria Montessori, who used her wealthy family's influence to break gender barriers at the turn of the 20th century. Montessori shunned the idea women were meant to be strictly housewives and educators, and instead opted to become an engineer, Rod Connell said.

Eventually, Montessori changed her vocation to medicine, and she endured many hardships as a woman in that field. She was not allowed to study corpses with her fellow male medical students, and would often have to take lessons at night.

During her medical studies, Montessori encountered several poor children in blighted neighborhoods who had complete unsupervised run of the streets when their parents were working. She wanted to give those kids something to do, and eventually dedicated her time to their development instead of a career as a doctor.

"She discovered children went through several natural states of development," Rod Connell said. "Those are sensitive periods in which children can learn things very easily."

The most hands-on time for that development is between 0-6 years old, he said. Because of that, the young children at the Montessori School in Godfrey are able to partake in several hands-on activities involving such diverse fields as geography, reading, courtesy and science.

Originally, Rod Connell said he, his wife and staff only catered to young children, labeled as "pre-elementary." As time continued, though, he said parents were requesting their children stay with that mode of education through further levels. He and his wife attained more training and have developed it through the eighth grade level.

Students at the Montessori School in Godfrey also have access to the entire LCCC campus. Rod Connell said those resources "enrich" the development of the students. He said use of stages, art galleries, a gymnasium and even the woods and streams around the campus assists in the overall learning and development of the students.

Currently, the school also staffs 18 instructors for subjects such as P.E., computer, Spanish and helping children who may be struggling with reading.

"We have a very wonderful and dedicated staff," Rod Connell said. "Everything is looking good."