



*Susan's Montessori story as it relates to AMIUSA
(The Association Montessori Internationale in the United States)
and founding director Karin Salzmann*

In preparation for the 50th anniversary of AMIUSA, the affiliate organization of the Association Montessori International in the United States, I have been asked to share a bit of my own Montessori story in the United States, and the work I did with Karin Salzmann, the founding director of AMIUSA and one of my best friends. Here are my answers to the questions suggested as an outline of this story.

Question 1 LBA (Lynne Breitenstein-Aliberti):
How did you find Montessori?

Answer (Susan Mayclin Stephenson):

1963 – I was a student on the first university semester aboard ship traveling around the world. the trip began in Europe, took us to the Middle East, through the Suez Canal and throughout Asia. I was at American University in Beirut when Kennedy was killed, and ours was the last non-military ship allowed into Vietnam during the war. So you can imagine this trip was influential on my life. I can share two discoveries that were very important.

FIRST, OBSERVING POVERTY. Since my major was pre-med I visited a lot of hospitals, orphanages, and humanitarian projects such as feeding children who spent their lives on little boats on the Hong Kong Harbor.

SECONDLY, OBSERVING HAPPINESS. The further we traveled east, away from Western Civilization with the emphasis on how a person looks, on competition, and material stuff, being in places with more of a focus on spirituality and community and family, the happier people seemed to be, even though they were clearly poorer in a material sense.

Returning to the USA my academic interests turned more to the study of philosophy and world religions. I wanted to find a way to help learn more about people of the world and to be helpful. In Montessori jargon, we would say I was searching for my *Cosmic Task*.

In 1968, when our first daughter began attending an AMI Montessori school in San Francisco. I had a glimpse of how that could be the answer. She came home wanting to clean and sort and help her family in any way she could and she was so happy doing this daily work! One day she and her older neighbors were watching me make an omelet, as the eggs were poured into the pan she said, "That looks like Asia." Her oldest friend, age 8, said, "What is Asia?" My daughter said, "Come with me" and she got out the globe and began to teach her friends the names of the continents.

I was convinced. Our daughter was finding happiness through work and helping the family, rather than stuff, and she was learning about the whole world. This is what the world needed as education for the next generations.

I went to the head of the school and asked her where she thought the best place in the world was to learn how to teach this method and she said the AMI training center in London that was begun by Dr. Montessori. We went.

It was the kind of education I dreamed of. The first months were spend rounding out the general knowledge of us adults, and learning how to teach physics, botany, zoology, history and geography, art and music to children. We shared the manners and practical life of our individual countries and learned how to return to our country, to observe, and to create the culture-specific lessons to children.

The director of training, Hilla Patell, who was later the general director of AMI, was the head trainer. Halfway through the course I realized that in order to earn a living I was going to be teaching children in families where the parents could afford tuition, and I was not going to be able to help children of the poor I had seen in my travels.

I asked her, "What do I do, wear blinders?"
Her reply, 'No, Susan, you meditate.'

Hilla introduced me to meditation, which I still practice today, and I never entered a classroom without preparing myself in this way. It changed my life.

Hilla and I became a good friend. The last time we were able to spend a few days together was during the AMI Congress in Prague in 2017, and when I was preparing to give the culture lectures from the London course for the first AMI primary course in Morocco we spoke on the phone at length.

Today we communicate regularly by email through Hilla's son who also lives in Oxford.

Question 2 LBA:

As you mentioned, you were a close friend of Karin Salzmann, the first executive director for AMIUSA. Tell us more about the work that the two of you did together.

Answer:

1976

I am more than happy to share my friendship with Karin. You will see throughout this Montessori story that it is long and varied. But I will have to travel backward first.

After teaching one year at the school in San Francisco I started the first school in Northern Michigan. My daughters had outgrown Montessori primary, I took the 6-12 training, the first full year course in the USA, in Washington DC.

That is when I met Karin.

The director of training, Margaret Stephenson, had trained 3-6 in London with a nun who ran a convent school where children were evacuated during the war. They cared for the children 24/7 following Montessori principles. She later took her 6-12 training with Mario Montessori in London. Her humor and understanding and compassion, as well as her many personal examples of giving choice and freedom to students, were an inspiration to me. And it was very special during that course to be able to meet Mario and Ada Montessori and other well-known Montessorians. Miss Stephenson and I later became good friends. Over the years many people have thought I was her daughter, and she loved hearing about that.

During the beginning research with NAMTA about the establishment of Erdkinder programs in the USA, Miss Stephenson and I wrote long letters to each other to explore what was happening in Montessori 3-6 and 6-12 classes, talking about the level of freedom and responsibility, life skills and independence, necessary at these levels for a young adult to be prepared for a student-operated Montessori Erdkinder boarding school in the country.

Question 3 LBA:

How did the Michael Olaf Montessori Company come about and what did you learn from this.

Answer:

1982

In 1982, when our youngest child was born, his teenage sisters, both of whom had attended Montessori primary and elementary, were disgusted at what was available for children in the San Francisco Area toy stores and decided to start a Montessori shop, which they did, naming it after their new baby brother, Michael Olaf. At first one set of shelves of practical life tools in a woman's co-op. Narda soon left for university. Ursula had permission from her arts middle school, a magnet school, to run the store on Wednesday afternoons.

Soon Montessori teachers found out about us and asked for a list of products. Then there was a 5-page catalogue that we stapled together. I wasn't really interested much in products and material but I wanted to share with others what I had learned teaching and parenting Montessori, so half of the catalog was a book-type text.

After earning the AMI diplomas, running the Michael Olaf Montessori Shop became my SECOND *training course* about Montessori. It was truly a unique and very valuable education for me.

Now I was learning about what the general public thought about Montessori and what they wanted to know. University professors, parents, public school principals, homeschoolers, anyone at all could come into the store and have conversations with me, bringing their questions, and having very interesting conversations. I learned a lot about how to explain Montessori to people with many different backgrounds and interests.

It was during this time that I learned that there were differences, even within the AMI courses in the United States. Following a conversation in the store with one of the teachers of the Head Start program for the poor in Oakland, I was asked to help with this work. Thinking that sharing the 3-6 physics work from my training, simple experiments exploring sound, light, gravity, electricity, and so on, would be the best place to start because the materials are so easy to provide. I asked a local AMI teacher and friend if I could borrow the physics materials over the week-end. She didn't know what I was talking about but was interested to learn. Since then I have given these and other culture lessons from my training in many places, first of all at a Montessori conference in New Zealand. And lastly as a guest lecturer at the first AMI primary course in Morocco. As a result of being asked to share them by many people, these lessons are included in one of my books.

One day a young man who had studied *multiple intelligences* with Dr. Howard Gardner at HGSE, the Harvard Graduate school of Education, came into the store to interview me for a book he was writing, called "In Their Own Way." He heard that Montessori provided many different ways to teach math, which was the subject he was interested in. It was because of this interview that I later did my master's thesis on Gardner's work and then went to Harvard to take a course with him.

Eventually we were publishing 100,000 ages 0-3 catalogs and 100,000 ages 3-12+ catalogs each year. Many of the catalogs were mostly sold as books rather than catalogs. Schools bought them by the box for the school families. One Pediatrician bought them by the box and gave him to each of his patient families. He said he could tell the difference in babies whose parents had read them.

This was especially rewarding for me because as a school administrator and teacher at my own school years earlier I understood how difficult it is to have the time to share an understanding of Montessori with parents! And how helpful it is for teachers at one level (0-3, 3-6, 6-12, 12-18) to have some understanding of the other levels.

Exhibiting Michael Olaf books and materials at education conferences was my THIRD *training course* about Montessori.

AMIUSA, NAMTA, and other Montessori and homeschool organizations asked us to exhibit at conferences. I attended 40+ Montessori lectures each year by well-known keynote speakers,

including Mr. Rogers. As he walked onto the stage toward a grand piano, singing, “It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood . . . “hundreds of us joined him with tears in our eyes.

I attended lectures by many teacher trainers, and teachers, many of whom became good friends. I also learned a lot from the questions asked by teachers as they looked through the books and materials we were exhibiting.

As a result of this, and of the questions asked by the general public at the Michael Olaf store, each year I re-wrote the text of the catalogs because I was learning more and more about how to answer questions, and to explain Montessori.

It was at one of these conferences that I heard Judi Orion and Dr. Silvana Montanaro introduce the Assistants to Infancy, birth to three, program that had been begun by Dr. Montessori in 1949 in Rome. So, I started making plans to take this training.

1990

The store and the mail order business were both growing. The Michael Olaf store was beautiful, divided by the areas one would find in class, with books and materials for babies through the elementary years. By now, we had been invited to have stores at airports and shopping malls around the country but we knew we would not be able to supply the kind of quality we were offering at such large scale, and, as we had seen happen to many mail order businesses, we would have to add a lot of products that we didn't believe in. Our goal always had been to provide only those things that would be used in AMI teacher training courses, or recommended by these trainers for parents.

Also, we wanted a quiet life, so we closed the store and moved to Northern California and continued only the mail order part of Michael Olaf Montessori Company.

1994

By now I had earned the AMI 0-3 diploma, and understanding the importance of spreading this work I was going every summer to help read albums and prepare students for exams at The Montessori Institute in Denver. Karin was doing the same thing. She and I usually traded off, going on alternate summers, but eventually the classes were so large we both went. At this point Karin and I began to be good friends as we realized that we agreed on everything to do with Montessori. She visited us in California because she was thinking about where to live after leaving Santa Fe.

1998

This year Karin moved to Trinidad, staying with us while she looked for a house to buy. She ended up just three miles from us, and from then on until Karin died in 2013 we worked together on everything to do with Montessori. And she became like a member of our family.

Karin helped us pick out books and other products for the Michael Olaf company and edited my catalog text. In 1999, when Michael Olaf was moving to a large warehouse Karin and I decided that no one but a Montessori teacher should be handling the materials, taking them out of boxes

and placing them on the warehouse shelves. So, the two of us spent three days moving tons of books and materials! I was 56 years old and Karin 68, so we must have been in pretty good physical shape to do that.

Working with AMI trainers Michael Olaf had a lot of the 0-3 materials made by local artisans. They were shipped around the world and we encouraged people to copy these designs and make them affordable in their own countries. On one consulting trip to Nepal I was very pleased to see these materials and even furniture copied for the children at a school in Kathmandu.

Today we still carry some of these items, but the main work of Michael Olaf is the wholesale shipping of my books to Montessorians all over the world. We hope to do this for a couple more years even though my husband and I are in our 70's.

And when I began to do more international work, it was to Karin I went after returning, to discuss what had happened, what I had learned, and how to support the future of Montessori in the world. Later we were 0-3 examiners together in places like Thailand and China.



Question 4 LBA:

Did you ever think about becoming an AMI teacher trainer?

Answer:

Yes indeed, and it was often suggested. Karin and I talked a lot about the possibility of becoming AMI teacher trainers. Before discovering Montessori, I had worked with older children, both as a Latin tutor and a counselor for adolescents, so I was looking at Montessori education from the perspective of adolescents. After taking the 0-3 training I realized that this information would have been the most valuable I could have had to help older children, young adults. So, I would have wanted the 0-3 information to be part of any training course at any level. This was not going to be possible as all AMI courses are demanding and intensive already.

With Karin's guidance, I realized that my keeping to the overview of human development from birth through adolescence, through writing and other work, was the most important thing I could do. Perhaps my Cosmic Task.

Question 5 LBA:

Why did you start writing books about Montessori education?

Answer:

2013

That was Karin's idea.

We were both taking the first part of 0-3 (TOT) training of trainers program—not to become trainers—but for our work as course oral examiners for teacher training courses. At that point Karin insisted that I turn the 0-3 and 3-12 catalog text into books. Since I was already quite used to page layout and catalog design it was logical to self-publish the books. We decided to begin with the 3-12 text as it was shorter.

So, I pulled together the text from the 3-12 catalog. However, in my mind it was scattered and had gaps and just wasn't going to work. I told Karin I thought it just wasn't going to be possible. I still remember her words, "Susan, you have all of the necessary experience, as a parent, a teacher, and a school administration, the passion, and a very unique and special voice. And I will help you with the editing."

So that was that. My first book, *Child of the World: Montessori, Global Education for Age 3-12+* was published in 2013, with an introduction by Karin. As I had done with the catalogs the cover was decorated with one of my oil paintings.

Karin immediately assigned me to write the book for 0-3. She was being treated for cancer and she was in a hurry. Usually my books contain pictures that I have taken, but to make the pictures in the 0-3 book more international many of our friends from around the world who were also taking the 0-3 TOT course offered pictures from their work. We consulted with Dr. Silvana Montanaro through a Japanese friend who lived in Rome for a whole year for this book. We all agreed that replicating the course albums was not helpful, so we focused on observing children in simple ways that parents, and people new to Montessori could benefit from.

The Joyful Child: Montessori, Global Wisdom from Birth to Three was published, with an introduction by Silvana. Shortly after this Karin died of Cancer.

Question 6 LBA:

When did you start working with Montessori Schools outside of the US?

Answer:

1980-2002

In 1980, after having taught in Lima, Peru, I had gone with group of professors from California to study the educational system and mental health system in Cuba. At this time, the Soviet Union was heavily supporting Cuba and what we found was just wonderful. In 2002, I had registered for a second trip to Cuba through the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

This trip was cancelled for US political reasons but I had saved the money and scheduled the time so I began to think about where else I could go. I had heard through Michael Olaf customers about the refugee children in the Tibetan Children's Villages in India where they were educating the children based on Montessori so I wrote and offered my services as a volunteer consultant. My first trip to Dharamsala was in 2002 and again I would say that it was just as educational for me as for those I worked with. That was the beginning of my main work outside the USA.

Learning to share Montessori beyond the USA was my *FOURTH training course* about Montessori.

I share much of this international work via the internet, a blog, all of my books, and all of this can be found through my main website. www.susanart.net

Question 7 LBA:

What is your Montessori work today?

Answer:

2021

In 1999, Maria Montessori's granddaughter, Renilde Montessori, organized the first EsF (Educateurs sans Frontières) Assembly. Since then there have been six more EsF Assemblies held around the world. This year it is online. Our goal is to identify the problems of children and to work together to alleviate them. Today I am privileged to help with this work.

I also try to focus, in my speaking and consulting and writing, on the goal of peace among individuals and nations. I have seen, and experienced in my own upbringing, that competition in education can lead to separation between individuals and groups of individuals, to selfishness and greed, stress and unhappiness. On the other hand, an authentic Montessori experience gives individuals the opportunity to contribute, to collaborate with the work to the family and other groups, from early in life. This is the path to peace.

Question 8 LBA:

Is there anything you could say to sum up what you have learned about Montessori and the future of this work?

Answer:

Yes, I would like to share something that I am seeing all over the world. Many Montessori teachers and administrators, who could, with support, offer the most authentic Montessori experience possible, are being pressured to teach in a collective-lesson, teacher-scheduled, curriculum-centered way. This risks everything Montessori has to offer to create the “new human” that could go a long way to fulfill our dream of a new international, environmentally-friendly way of living.

I see parents, naturally worried about an unpredictable future for their children, falling back on methods of education that have already been proven not to work, just because that is all they know. Schools are trying to combine this pressure with authentic Montessori practice, even though these are completely incompatible.

So, for teachers and administrators . . .

the most helpful thing we can do is to support efforts to create authentic Montessori schools which means large classes (if the teacher is well-trained), as wide a range of age as possible, and long periods of child-chosen work—hours for the young, days and weeks for young adults—with no scheduled imposed by an adult.

For parents . . .

During covid I have observed, in blogs and books, a request for parents to re-create a Montessori school environment in the home, purchasing materials and trying to give presentations or lessons, even though the parent is not trained. I have seen these attempts result in more stress in the family, and problems between parents. I understand this because in the past I have observed my own daughters, both of whom had earned AMI diplomas, being frustrated in trying to be both teacher and parent because there is so much more expected of parents in the home.

The most helpful thing I think we can do is to give guidance in observing children’s natural tendency to concentrate and their desire to be part of the daily activities and practical work of the family rather than to be expected to be happy in a room full of Montessori materials. And to give suggestions for real work, and ways to be valuable and helpful, depending on the age and stage of development.

Today, everywhere I work, and in several books, I share this quote:

When the children had completed an absorbing bit of work, they appeared rested and deeply pleased. It almost seemed as if a road had opened up within their souls that led to all of their latent powers, revealing the better part of themselves. They exhibited a great affability to everyone, put themselves out to help others and seemed full of good will.

—Maria Montessori, MD,
The Child in the Family

We know that it is not necessary to “teach” human beings to be compassionate and how to care about and help others; it is an inborn urge when the conditions are ripe for compassion to be practiced.

AMIUSA is the oldest AMI affiliate society. I have shared this organization in helping to create AMI affiliates in several other countries. AMIUSA has the largest number of training centers and more Montessori schools than any other country.

I believe that AMIUSA has a great responsibility to withstand any pressure to compromise, and to create the very best of authentic Montessori, because this is a model for the world and, if successful will give many others faith in Dr. Montessori’s vision of revealing and supporting the best in human development, and to bring happiness through basic Montessori work, concentration, and compassion.