



Get to know Francesca, OMA's Executive Director!

What brought you to Montessori?

After graduating from college in Colorado, I was drawn to working with children and spent several years gaining experience in a variety of educational settings — as a behavioral interventionist in a public school in Vermont, as a substitute teacher in public schools in California and Montana, as a tutor in California, and as an English teacher in South Korea. In each of these endeavors, I learned a great deal and was deeply motivated and inspired by the relationships I built with the children. However, I always had a nagging sense that the systems within which I was working were not set up to support the children to be the fullest, brightest versions of themselves. A pivotal conversation with my husband's aunt about her son's experiences many decades ago in a Montessori primary program lit a spark within me; it was my first introduction to an educational system designed around the developmental needs of children and around observation. I was captivated! At that time, I had actually returned from Asia (temporarily, I thought!) to attend a family wedding on the east coast. My excitement and desire to learn more about Montessori was so strong that I decided to forgo my return plane ticket to Japan so I could apply to take the training at Washington Montessori Institute as soon as possible. In the summer of 2007, I joined the Elementary course at WMI, and the rest is history.

What are you most excited about in stepping into the Executive Director role?

Several years ago, as I was transitioning out of the classroom to start my family, a mentor told me, "There are many ways to be a Montessorian." Having worked for more than a decade now in Montessori schools in a variety of roles, I have developed a deep appreciation for the truth of that statement! I have been a Lower Elementary classroom guide and all-school substitute, provided program support and consultation, managed admissions, and most recently, served as a program director. In each of these roles, I was empowered to see and understand the community from an important new perspective. Each person within a school community contributes something different and valuable; it is the synergy of these contributions that make the system strong and dynamic and functional. I believe the

same extends to the broader Montessori community of which we are all a part. We all have our own unique roles to play, and hopefully, by collaborating and supporting each other, we can create a whole that is stronger than the sum of its parts. I am excited that this role gives me the opportunity to see and understand our collective Montessori community from a broad new vantage point, and I am humbled to be in a position to nurture and serve the whole. I especially love visiting member schools. I have been so fortunate to have had the opportunity to observe in many Portland-area Montessori schools over the past decade, but I know there are still many schools, both locally and around the state, that I have yet to visit. I am eager to connect with and hear from Montessorians from all walks, in all roles, to better understand their perspectives, needs, challenges, and celebrations.

What do you think are the most pressing issues facing the Montessori community right now?

Our collective time of living through a global pandemic has been incredibly challenging, to say the least. Montessori schools have had to adapt very quickly and be more flexible and resilient than perhaps they ever could have imagined! It has been beautiful to witness and hear countless stories of the dedication that schools have shown as they have navigated and overcome myriad obstacles in order to continue serving the children as well as possible. Of course, we know that not all schools survived the pandemic; sadly, several had to shut their doors. There are others that continue to struggle. Wherever schools are in their journey at this point, whether relatively thriving, just barely hanging on, or somewhere in between, I think the most pressing issue ahead of us is recalibrating in order to find or create a new normal as we collectively make our way out of the pandemic. That will be our first order of business. My hope is that with a combination of collaboration, creativity, advocacy, and patience, we will prevail and come out of this stronger, together.

What do you love about Oregon? What are some of your favorite places in Oregon?

There is so much that I love about Oregon! The geography is astonishingly beautiful and varied. I suspect I could live here in Oregon for the rest of my life and never run out of new places to explore. Here in Portland, where I live, it is so green. Being around trees makes me happy, so I am grateful for all of the forested areas in and around our beautiful city. On the weekends, if I'm staying local, I love to hike in Tryon Creek, Forest Park, or Mount Tabor.

The Columbia River Gorge is definitely one of my favorite places in the state. It is such a dramatic, awe-inspiring landscape, and I am so lucky to have it in my own backyard. Waldo Lake is another one of my favorite spots. The water is incredibly clear and it is a perfect place to go canoeing. You can pick huckleberries, hike, paddle, and relax. A place I haven't yet visited but have always wanted to go are the Wallowas. As soon as my kids are a little older and can carry their own packs, we'll do a family backpacking trip there!

What are you reading now? What is a book you would recommend to our community?

I'm a person who typically has bookmarks in about a dozen books at a time! One book that I am currently reading and would strongly recommend to our community is "Everyday Antiracism," edited by Mica Pollock. It is a collection of brilliant, thought-provoking essays about navigating topics of race and racism in school settings, and about creating an antiracist school community. There is so much to learn from all of the different voices and perspectives, and think it should be required reading for educators. Each essay ends with a resource list and discussion questions, which would be great for any schools or groups wanting to delve into a structured book study!

Another book I'm currently (re)reading is "The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind," by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. This classic book lays out both the brain science (the "why") and the best practices and strategies (the "how") to most fully support and engage with children; I think it's a must-read for every parent and educator. I get something new out of it every time I revisit it.