

## Gamble Montessori Great Lesson: Our Creation, as told by Jack Jose

This is a true story. And, at the end, it is a choose-your-own-adventure story. At first this might sound like a paradox. But if you think about it, true stories really are always choose-your-own-adventure stories. Maybe more so than stories that are fiction.

I admit up front that this is not the whole story. This is a small selection from the many days and many people who make the whole story. I've very intentionally cut out the days that were just days, and the evenings at the dining room table spent grading papers, and difficult parent conferences. I've left out some of the students who misbehaved, and those misbehaviors, and some students who got mostly A's. Let's all just agree that those things are part of the story of any school. But I am trying to make this story special. And I invite you to choose to see this school the way I do.

Okay, there, fine, I admit it, I am trying to make this story about our school special, so I am telling parts of the story that help you see it the way I do. But this is a true story. In fact, I think it is truer than the whole story. And I like to talk about the school as if it were a child.

### [Rug roll-out and timeline]

So, enough preamble.

Once upon a time there were a group of parents in Westwood, the biggest, most diverse neighborhood in all of Cincinnati, who sent their children to a school called Dater Montessori. These parents included Tom Haid. They might not have known much about Maria Montessori, [[Photo of Maria Montessori](#)] and they did not spend much time contemplating the near-miracle that resulted in a comprehensive Montessori system in the Cincinnati public schools, but they knew that at this school, children learned in multi-age classrooms, they learned math with cubes and history with time lines, and they sometimes came home with their vowel sounds painted on their arms so they could practice at the dinner table. These parents were determined to see their children continue in Montessori education beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade. However, the only Montessori high school was located clear across town in a neighborhood called Hyde Park and parents imagined the hardship associated with driving 25 minutes each time their child needed picked up or dropped off. And this school could not hold all of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students

So they became very active in the Cincinnati Montessori Coalition and approached Superintendent Blackwell to request a Montessori high school on the west side of town. In 2005, they got permission to start the school in August of the 2005-2006 school year, by renovating the basement of Dater to create rooms that didn't even

have numbers, instead they were rooms A, B, C, and D. [\[photo of doors\]](#) That year, under the guidance of Dater Principal Meg Thomas, they kept a small group of about 30 students as they became 7<sup>th</sup> graders. You could choose to believe that this was a small group and that this showed a lack of faith in the future of this school. I know that in fact this was a tremendous show of faith by a group of dedicated parents, and the teachers and staff involved were inspired and encouraged by their great faith. The following year they added another group of students and they formed two communities, named after the rooms they inhabited: AB and CD. At the time, CPS was in the midst of a massive new building campaign, but the money had all been assigned to other schools and projects years earlier. It was proposed that maybe one day this new school could end up in the Gamble building, but they would get it as-is. Though later some would see this as an oversight or an insult to the school, the families and staff at the time were excited that they would eventually get their own building – this meant that their dream was coming true.

[\[First PK photo\]](#) So the baby Gamble Montessori grew inside of Dater Montessori and made plans for its birth. Teachers Jason Banks, Ann Bak, Gloria Lane, Marilou Priestle and Dawnetta Hayes, along with IA Lee Wells and Janice Dale, established a culture of inclusion, and a family-like ethos. They committed to 5 core values, [\[set of core values here\]](#) and wrote a vision and mission statement that guide us today. At the end of that second year our very own Principal, Dan Dalton, was hired for our transition out into the world. And the Montessori coalition, along with Marta Donahoe and Tom Rothwell, helped ensure that when we ventured out, we would share a temporary space with Clark Montessori in the Jacobs Center. [\[Photo of the Jake\]](#) Our big sister school could then more easily pair with us and show us how they had developed a sterling reputation in CPS as a place where teachers sent their own children, and teachers worked beyond established contractual limits to offer a rigorous and engaging college-preparatory education. As happens around the time of birth, the parents were asked to name the school. No one remembers how the name was arrived upon – not Meg Thomas or Dan Dalton or even Assistant Superintendent Tom Rothwell – but this new school was christened simply “Westside Montessori.” [\[Westside hat\]](#)

That is the first part of our story from birth until toddlerhood.

In the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years, our toddlerhood, our school became remarkable because of the students and teachers who worked in our halls. The school grew to 9<sup>th</sup> and then 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Kris Gaul, Jeff Groh, Matt Bye, Jennifer Smith, Rebecca Thacker, Josh Vogt, me, and others, some of whom have left and some who are still here, were hired to help shape our growth. Every student who came through our halls was remarkable. Some of them made names for themselves beyond our walls: Andrew Uetrecht [\[photo\]](#) who became a National Merit Finalist, and Indyasia Johnson [\[photo\]](#) who – while renowned for her strength of character and positive influence on her peers – added academic accolades as well and became a Gates Millenium Scholar. These were students who chose to be with us, and they are students who shaped our school forever.

In the 2008-2009 school year, student Corea Mitchell's mother died. For a week the students in my first bell class refused to change the date on the board [photo of board with December 15, 2008] because, they pointed out, "that was Corea's job." This was the first of many times that I realized the person that this toddler school was struggling to be. We wanted to honor each other, and depend on each other, and push each other to be present for each other. We wanted to be interdependent, favoring that over independence. [Josh's candle ceremony picture] Once I may have chosen to see this as weakness on our part, to not want to be independent. But I choose now to see the great strength in depending on each other, because it makes us better able to know when someone else needs help, and better able to help.

That year we lined up on a hill outside for a school photo and we were nearly all in place when a student realized we had not reminded Taylor Hlebak about the picture. Taylor, a remarkably strong and persistent young lady, was confined to a wheelchair and spent part of her time with her nurse during the school day. A student volunteered to run back to the school to get her. Without direction from staff, the group waited patiently until she joined us, and then as three students carried her chair down the slope so she could be with all of us in the picture. [Group photo]

We continued our commitment to taking the students camping each year as an integral part of our community building. Teacher Jason Banks' mini-lessons on character and honesty, given at any time they seemed appropriate, became legendary. We taught students about Kohlberg's morality chart, and asked them to strive for the highest levels, to do right by others in every situation, even if it broke a rule. [Kohlberg chart]

In the second year of our toddlerhood, our Principal resigned. Teachers and parents approached Superintendent Ronan and Assistant Superintendent Rothwell to demand that they violate contract by hiring a teacher – me – as Principal. Because we were paired with Clark in the same building, a way was found, and I was hired. More teachers and staff were brought on board as we grew, too many to name here, but most of them are still here with us and in this room right now [Carla Sarr, Krista Taylor, Matt Kane, Katie Doyle, Mary Ann Ellis, Bill Sedgwick, Steve Sinden, Nick Otto, Kim McGee, Teresa Conley, Beau Wheatley and more.] We were learning to walk on our own, now. And make our own decisions. We were maturing through childhood. We were even developing a sense of humor. Our first senior class pranked us all with a subtle but long-lasting prank, gluing quarters [quarter] strategically on the floor in several doorways. Somehow 25 cents was enough: Bend over, fail, get bumped into, laugh at yourself. That was the hilarious pattern for two weeks.

So we moved from childhood to become pre-teens.

Like many pre-teens, Westside Montessori's maturation caused an identity crisis. Our students chose our school mascot and team name, the Gators, and our school

colors, purple and green. In dozens of ways, they made their mark on the school. And with great significance we asked ourselves: did the name “Westside” simply define us as “Not Clark - the school on the east side”? Would we spend an eternity explaining that we did not say “West High”? The LSDMC sought proposals and eventually voted to change the name to James N. Gamble Montessori High School. [Spirit towel] We finally had our own name to match our fledgling identity, and to match the building we were destined to inhabit. Clark moved out and we were suddenly on our own, but not quite home.

Our first group of students graduated from Gamble in 2011 and left for colleges and jobs in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and even beyond. [Program from the first graduation] This and the next two graduation ceremonies over our first three years featured Gamble at our best: exhibiting gratitude and acknowledging those who got us where we were. In 2011 we told the story of bringing Montessori to Cincinnati, and in 2013 Marta Donahoe indicated that CMSTEP, now an international program, existed because of Gamble, as a response to the large number of teachers needing to be trained each year as we grew.

The 2012-2013 school year, this year of our 3<sup>rd</sup> graduating class, started off with some great news. The Ohio Department of Education evaluation determined what we already knew, and Gamble was “Excellent” [Excellent banner photo] This was certainly a major achievement. However, our students’ spirits, and not their standardized test scores, were still our driving focus. At halftime on basketball senior night in 2013, our coach told the team he was going to put Jawaun Strover, [photo] a student with multiple disabilities, in the game. “Let him take a shot,” coach directed them. It took more than 6 minutes of game time, and our young men feeding him the ball on every trip down the court, but they went beyond the coach’s directive to instead make sure he scored his only two points of his basketball career.

Then, in August 2013, we moved home to Westwood, [photo of new building] and started adolescence in earnest. Like every maturation experience, it was slow and slow and then it seemed everything happened all at once. With 10 days available before school started, we were finishing the work on every part of the building – floors being cleaned, wiring being installed, but we were ready when the students arrived. On opening day some parents, students, and staff expressed disappointment that we were not given all that we had hoped for. But many of us saw to this as a shining moment to demonstrate our resilience and our commitment to following through on the dreams of our founders.

[When the walls came down to open up the final third of our building. In the tradition to which we have become accustomed, we sought input from our entire staff. We committed to best practices and communities and teams as our first priorities. As with all big work in deciding one’s character and composition, the decisions were difficult and necessitated some sacrifices, but we emerged from the process unscathed and ready to move forward together. ]

And there was more emotional growth to do. Like an adolescent, we realized that no one was going to come along and restore our auditorium seats for us, so we did it ourselves. Miriam Wise wrote a grant for supplies, and Tom Haid worked with the

PTO to schedule three work days and David Tiffany taught us all how to sand, and we revitalized our auditorium [photo of before/after auditorium]. More than 60 people – parents, students, siblings, community members, and staff and their families, converged to sand, stain, and polyurethane 498 chairs, and the work was finished in time for the spring concert.

So, now, here we are. Preparing for the last stages of our growth. Welcoming our fourth and final middle school community, with groundwork laid to welcome a third high school community, and with you. Each of you -- students and staff alike -- whether this is your sixth year at Gamble or your first, is now an integral part of who we are collectively, and each of you will leave your mark as we continue the "big work" of becoming. We can't do it without you. I have told you the story of Gamble's past; your first choice was to become part of Gamble, and your second was in how to shape together Gamble's future. I look forward to witnessing your contributions. Thanks for being a part of us.