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FEATURED

Inaugural class makes history: Hershey fulfills Montessori philosophies and celebrates first high school graduation

Krista S. Kano Jun 7, 2018 Updated Jun 7, 2018



Hershey Montessori School's class of 2018 celebrates graduation at the Huntsburg Township campus this past Sunday for the school's first high school commencement ceremony. Hershey Montessori added its upper school three years ago, making it the first known in the world to incorporate all of Maria Montessori's teaching philosophies in one program.

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Hershey Montessori School is not just about education. It's about being a part of a community and working to have an impact on that community. So when it came to planning their graduation, the class of 2018 wasn't just focused on themselves; they were focused on future

generations.

"This is the first graduation, so we wanted to set up a tradition that everyone would love and appreciate," Makenna Venaleck, 18, of Concord said. "We're setting the standard, so it's not just about what colors we want. It's not just for us. It's for the people who come after us."

This year's graduating class is making history not only as the first in the 40-year history of the school with campuses in Concord and Huntsburg, but also as the first class to graduate from a school that completely fulfills the vision of Dr. Maria Montessori, a 19th- and 20th-century educator who advocated for developing a child physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively.

"Maria Montessori's original vision was to have a working farm, boarding for adolescents and to sell the wares we make, so we're the first school to do all the things she described in her original vision. No one else does all of that, and that's what makes us unique in the world," explained Upper School Program Director Laurie Ewert-Krocker.

Dr. Montessori started developing her educational philosophy and methods in the late 19th century, but it wasn't until 2015 when Hershey welcomed its inaugural high school class in 2015 that her vision came to full fruition, in part thanks to Debra Hershey Guren, who served as a board member and board president for 25 years and whose family foundation is the school's namesake.

Mrs. Guren explained that she first learned about Montessori when she was in college formulating her educational philosophy and someone told her that her ideas aligned with those of Dr. Montessori. She became a Montessori parent in 1980 when her daughter was 2 years old, and joined the school (then called the Western Reserve Montessori School) board in 1984.

"When I was younger, I had no idea that the school would grow to this potential," Mrs. Guren said. "It's like I grew up as the school was growing up, and every time there was an opportunity to expand, it was at the right time with the right leadership."

For example, after driving with other pregnant mothers, Mrs. Guren went to the head of school and asked if there was anything the school could do for babies.

"He said, 'Yes there is. There's an infant program.' So we sent someone for infancy training and she started the program 33 years ago," Mrs. Guren said. "So just as you follow the child, you develop these things as the school matures."

Over the years, the school continued to expand both in its acreage and its programming, and finally incorporated all of Dr. Montessori's ideas in 2015.

"I was just like, we should do this. We've been talking about it for 40 years. Let's do it," Mrs. Guren said.

At the time, Hershey ninth-graders were already touring other public and private schools, as they initially believed the school's programming ended after ninth-grade.

Adam Nusrala, now 18, of Gates Mills had just transferred to Hershey from Hawken, even though he believed he would only spend one year at the school. Makenna, who had been at Hershey since birth, and Elise Spintzyk, 18, of Concord, who had been at the school since age 4, were looking at their local public school as well as Catholic schools in the area. But when the school announced that they would expand its upper school, all three decided to stay.

"I was really excited for this, but I also thought maybe this isn't the right thing for me because it's the only thing I've ever known since birth," said Makenna, whose mother Judy Venaleck is the school's middle school program director. "I liked the structure of a private Catholic school better than the typical public school because it reminded me of here. So if I'm liking something better because it reminds me of this school, I should probably just stay here."

"I visited a public and a private high school, and I think I could have been successful there, but there was a difference in the culture of how much people love learning. Just that passion, there was a discrepancy there. I didn't think I could thrive in that environment as I could here, so I decided to stay," Elise explained.

Elise continued that she had the opportunity to incorporate all of Hershey's offerings and Dr. Montessori's philosophies when she was a boarder at the school five days a week in the ninth grade.

"I'm an only child so it was eye-opening to live with other people," Elise said. "My room was much cleaner because I was sharing space, and you get more involved with the farm when you're here 24 hours a day. You're cooking dinner for your friends, working on the farm,

cleaning your room together.”

Elise said that she especially enjoyed working on the farm because, “I had the opportunity to know where my food comes from and do hard work that I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do otherwise. It’s validating to do something that a lot of people don’t do, and do it well. That builds confidence at the middle school level, and once you have built mastery to be able to teach others and to take ownership and work at the adult level in high school, that’s a really empowering thing.”

After three years of hands-on learning projects covering topics like water quality, immigration, bridges and gun control, the class had to solve the problem of their graduation – what it would be like and how it would feel. Makenna explained that a student committee, along with two parents and the school board, decided to hold the graduation at the Huntsburg campus, to wear burgundy robes, and to receive diplomas embossed with a golden depiction of the farmhouse on their campus, among other details.

“It feels like I’m making a difference in my high school career, especially in the local community, but knowing how much of an impact this school has on the Montessori community globally is pretty amazing,” Elise said. “You feel like you’re part of a community of a graduating class of eight, and then you realize how many teachers come here and use our school as a model for other schools all around the world. That’s a pretty cool thing.”

Krista Kano

Krista Kano joined the Times in 2015, and has reported on the Republican National Convention, statewide issues, marijuana, the Geauga Park District and Bentleyville. The award-winning reporter is a graduate of Boston University