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Curiosity Without Limits

FOR 60 YEARS AND COUNTING, THE EDUCATORS OF **Gladwyne Montessori** HAVE BEEN NURTURING CONFIDENT, CURIOUS, AND COMPASSIONATE LEARNERS WELL PREPARED FOR THE CHALLENGES OF TOMORROW.

BY PHIL GIANFICARO | PHOTOS BY NINA LEA PHOTOGRAPHY

Hadley Ruggles possesses an intimate understanding of the innumerable benefits of a Montessori education. However, her knowledge is based not solely from her role as Head of School at prestigious Gladwyne Montessori, but also because she's a product of the proven approach to learning founded by Dr. Maria Montessori in Italy more than a century ago.

"I attended a Montessori school in Kansas City where I grew up," says Ruggles, a fifth-generation educator, who assumed her current role in July after serving eight years as Head of School at BASIS Independent School in Brooklyn. "I know firsthand the benefits of the Montessori approach to learning. Montessori education cultivates the students' talents. As a product of a Montessori education, I felt nothing was ever out of reach. I was encouraged to play to my strengths, and I was grateful to others for their strengths.

"Ultimately," she continues, "Montessori students get to fulfill that sense of purpose that can sometimes get lost in programs that are otherwise too directed or focused on an instructional mode that

can limit that autonomy."

Celebrating its 60th year, Gladwyne Montessori is an independent school serving 240 children, ages six weeks to 12 years, and is nestled on five picturesque, nature-rich acres along Philadelphia's Main Line. The school offers programs that encourage each child to pursue their unique interests. A Gladwyne Montessori education combines the time-tested and visionary insights of Dr. Montessori with the ever-evolving world of advanced technology and modern research. Its mission is to offer the best foundation for a lifetime of learning, thereby creating a confident, curious, and academically superior student prepared for life in the 21st century.

Ruggles, who is currently in the Doctor of Education program at the University of Pennsylvania, says, "Even at our youngest ages in our infant and young toddler programs, students are making choices for themselves. We communicate and listen to them. For example, if a child has something in reach in their environment, they can reach and grab it. We create an environment conducive for a child to explore."



Gladwyne Montessori By the Numbers

240

Current number of students, ages six weeks to 12 years

60

Years in operation

55

Number of staff and faculty

20

Average classroom size

10:1

Average student-to-teacher ratio in the primary and elementary program

6:1

Average student-to-teacher ratio in the toddler program

At Gladwyne Montessori, faculty are trained to deliver three years of curriculum in their multi-aged classrooms, serving students varying in ages from six weeks to 12 years old. They provide students with the gift of time to absorb and practice new concepts, the ability to push ahead as they achieve mastery, and the opportunity to explore their curiosity without limits.

The Montessori education process is based on the understanding that learning is predicated upon the basic human urge to explore. Many of the skills identified as being essential for success today, such as initiative, self-direction, creativity, innovation, and social responsibility, have always been prominent focuses of the Montessori philosophy. Gladwyne Montessori strives to develop these skills in all students.

"Parents are often in shock when they observe what their child is capable of," Ruggles says.

Gladwyne Montessori not only observes its 60th year by celebrating its rich history, but also by preparing its students for the immense challenges of the future. Campus improvements consist of upgrading and increasing facilities and programs, including a nature trail, orchard, greenhouse, gardens, and playing field on two acres of outdoor learning spaces, and the construction of a 1,600-square-foot visual and industrial arts center.

Among the upgrades is an increased makerspace, a destination where students can create, problem solve, and develop skills, talents, thinking, and mental rigor, either alone or alongside staff, parents, and mentors.

"In the makerspace area, students engage in hands-on learning," says Ruggles. "It's art-based. Students are given a problem and work to solve it. It's a large space. There's a kiln and classic art spaces. We also have a large deck for outdoor learning, and increased spaces with fields and playgrounds that are age-appropriate with age-appropriate equipment."

Gwen Shangle, Assistant Head of School, stands assured that the foundation of learning established by Dr. Montessori in 1907, as well as the vision of the seven female founders of the Gladwyne School in

1962, continues to this day.

"Women created this," says Shangle, who has 30 years of experience in education. "Mothers created this school. These are super women. And Dr. Montessori started all of it. We're followers of what she dedicated her entire life to researching and developing. She's a role model for women and to those who may not believe they belong. We talk to the children, even those as young as two or three, about how Dr. Montessori designed the materials we use in class.

"Another thing Dr. Montessori did is to escalate early childhood education," she continues. "Women are leaders and nurturers, not babysitters. This is not just daycare; it's child education. For women here, it's a career steeped in science and education. Of the 55 members of our staff, 50 are women."

When a new parent drops a child off for the first time, Ruggles, Shangle, and the rest of the Gladwyne Montessori faculty understand the parent's worry. At the same time, they pride themselves on allaying those fears.

"We send pictures and videos to parents and guardians throughout the school day," Shangle says. "We know parents are nervous. One dad, after seeing the pictures and videos, told us we exceeded all his expectations. Now, they're expecting another child. We hope to give them another experience equal to that of their first child.

"We're the only accredited Montessori school on the Main Line serving infants through adolescents," she continues. "I came here from another well-established school in New Jersey, and I could have gone anywhere. But I love that we have a tight-knit, family setting. We have a sense of community. We're not just caring for and teaching children. It doesn't feel like daycare. This feels like a giant house of love." ■



Gladwyne Montessori

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