



**A History of the
AMI-Elementary Alumni Association**

1968 – 2007

www.ami-eaa.org

AMI-EAA, a member-run professional association of AMI elementary teachers and trainers, provides a supportive community for the exchange of ideas and promotes the principles of Montessori education.

A History of AMI-EAA

AMI-trained elementary Montessori teachers have been communicating with each other through a newsletter since 1968. The organization developed out of annual summer workshops begun in 1970. The earliest informal gatherings provided an avenue for sharing and making materials in order to aid the establishment of Montessori elementary classrooms throughout the country.

The idea for the workshops began at the Centenary Celebration of Maria Montessori's birth in Washington, D.C. in April of 1970. AMI-USA and NAMTA were also formed at this time. Camillo Grazzini, the director of training for the elementary course in Bergamo, met with elementary teachers at the Centenary to discuss the concept of a teachers' organization and to plan the first gathering at Mercy Center in Cincinnati, the site of the first three summer workshops. The newsletter was also revived at that time through Jean Miller, whose efforts held the group together through the early years. Additional contributors to the newsletters of the Seventies – which included many articles, clippings, surveys, and general information on wide-ranging topics of interest – included Sanford Jones, David Kahn, John MacNamara, Kit Futrell, Robert Detmer, Alan Temple, R.K. Gupta, Debby Thompson, Steve Callender, Phil Gang, Nell Weniger, Donna Bryant Goertz, Maureen Peifer, Lawrence Lewis, Patricia Benckenstein, Sally Dorn, John Berno, and Lillian DeVault.

Early Workshops

In the early seventies the elementary teachers' summer workshops consisted mainly of frantic material making and lamination sessions, plus the sharing of materials that individuals had researched, designed and produced for their classrooms, interspersed with enjoyable midnight swims in the pool at Mercy Center. One meeting was spent making materials for Bob Detmer's school, which had burned down.

As time went on, those who had attended a number of workshops and had been in their own classrooms for a few years realized that workshops run solely for material making were not meeting their needs, and further, that the focus on materials led to a supermarket phenomenon resulting in too much stimulation in the classrooms. Having survived the first few years in the classroom, these teachers were ready to reflect upon classroom procedures, the amount of material in the classroom ("less is more"), and where Montessori elementary should be heading.

New Directions

As the needs of the elementary teachers changed, the focus of the workshops changed. Beginning in 1975, a Montessori pedagogue was invited to attend each workshop in order to aid in discussion and reflection upon Montessori philosophy. **Abs Joosten** gave generously of his time at the 1975 workshop in Minneapolis/St. Paul. At the 1978 workshop, **Margaret Stephenson** was enthusiastically received. **Mario Montessori Jr.** participated in the 1979 Tarrytown workshop and shared his thoughts on the Erdkinder. The summer workshops gradually changed to a combination of sharing plus invitational presentations by experienced teachers, based on requests from members. The leadership for subsequent meetings depended on the people willing to take on arranging summer conferences.

Initially the leadership at conferences was shared among those present. The earliest meetings had been open to all interested parties, resulting in a great deal of time being devoted to introductory sessions for those who were not yet AMI-trained. At the June 1980 conference at

UNICOI State Park in Georgia, the group decided to limit attendance to those with AMI elementary diplomas, trainers, and those registered for an AMI elementary course, so that we could begin discussions from the same basis and foundations. The experience of being with others who shared the same AMI training enabled participants to acknowledge frustrations as well as triumphs. Martha Bicknell suggested the idea of an alumni association; thus the loosely knit group formally metamorphosed into the AMI Elementary Alumni Association (AMI-EAA).

For two years the group functioned under the Montessori Development Foundation umbrella with its non-profit status. Regional representatives were selected by the group and sites were selected for the next two workshops. The first official expenditure was for wine.

In 1981 at Devil's Thumb Ranch in Colorado, the membership formed an executive committee composed of coordinator Jean Miller plus the present, past and future workshop coordinators, and charged them with refinement of the organizational structure and organization of upcoming conferences.

Formal Structure

In 1982, in conjunction with a two-year Planning Council organized by AMI, Phyllis Pottish-Lewis was asked to help organize the elementary teachers. She gathered a group of about seven people from all over the country and from all three training courses: Bergamo, Ireland and Washington. At the instigation of the Planning Council, Phyllis drew up a charter. In June of 1982, fifty-six EAA members gathered at the Asilomar retreat center in Pacific Grove, California, for the 12th annual Summer Conference. The membership voted in the charter unanimously, and AMI-EAA was became a legal entity with an executive board providing a formal structure. A few years later the organization incorporated as a non-profit with the help of Phyllis' husband, an attorney.

1982 was the year EAA set up its own bank account, which began with a zero balance; everything EAA has earned to date has been accrued from conferences, regional workshops, and Refresher Courses. With the passage of the charter, the first executive board was established with Phyllis Pottish-Lewis as chair, Jean Miller as past chair (though she never officially held this title), Alan Temple as workshop/research coordinator, Maryse Lepoutre-Postlewaite as newsletter coordinator, and Tom Postlewaite as materials coordinator. The first board set term limits so the organization wouldn't end up with static leadership, and they staggered terms so that there would be continuity. Eventually the plan was to arrive at three-year terms.

Chairs & Board Members

Phyllis Pottish-Lewis served as chair from 1982-1990. Following her in this position were Alan Temple (1990-91), Carol Hicks (1991-93), Patty Pantano (1993-97), Gladys Strauss-Peterson (1997-99), Kevin O'Loughlin (1999-2001), Paula Gibson-Smith (2001-3), Mindy Holte (2003-5), and Phoebe Allen (2005-2009). In addition to those mentioned above, board members during the 1980s and 90s included Kathy Bihl, J. McKeever, Janice DeBra Roberts, Johnnie Denton, Debby Thompson, Melinda Miller, and Sandra Johnson. More recent board members have included Claudia Gisonda, Gail Pruitt Hall, Amanda Linton Evans, Alison Stern, Andrea Fleener, Jean Vencl, Jamie Rue, John Snyder, Chris Trostel and Julie Meiman.

Summer Conferences

Exemplifying a typical annual Summer Conference, presenters at Asilomar included active teachers as well as AMI leaders and training course personnel. Sanford Jones presented his

American history timeline; Jean Miller demonstrated her methods of music notation. Estela Palmieri gave a presentation on foreign languages; Tom & Maryse Lepoutre-Postlewaite led a panel on drama. Kathy Carter and John Berno led a discussion on classroom management. Theoretical presentations were followed by group discussions focusing on practical applications. Carla Caudill spoke about the Needs and Tendencies of the Human Being and their manifestation in the elementary child. Phil Gang offered a paper on Finality and Causality. A group of California teachers organized an afternoon of New Games, and a local park ranger guided the group on nature walks. Beach walks, a cookout, songfest and dance session with crazy hats and props made for a week of fun.

Annual Summer Conferences continue to be held in beautiful retreat type settings around the country: Crow Canyon, Berea College, Menucha Retreat Center in Oregon, Norden Hem in Michigan, Colonial Williamsburg, Seabrook Island in South Carolina, and other retreat centers in Washington, Mexico, Oregon, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Minnesota. The conferences offer a balanced program of lectures, discussions, sharing, nature studies and field trips.

The First Refresher Course: 1982

The 1982 conference was held back-to-back with the first elementary Refresher Course, which was held in Lafayette, California. The purpose of the Refresher Course was to provide an in-depth study of one area of the elementary Montessori curriculum. Miss Stephenson, the first presenter, spoke on the subject of language. It was a week-long course, as were the next three Refresher Courses.

In 1983 the Summer Conference was in Berea, Kentucky. Fahmida Malik presented geography at the back-to-back Refresher Course. That was the year, after a caving incident, that insurance was purchased for the organization.

Kay Baker presented math at the Refresher Course in the summer of 1984 in Portland. Margaret Stephenson spoke on Montessori Philosophy in the summer of 1985; Phyllis Pottish-Lewis collaborated with her, focusing on implementation. There was no Refresher Course in 1986, but the Summer Conference continued in Crow Canyon, Colorado.

First Joint Refresher Course: 1987

AMI-USA approached AMI-EAA to hold the first joint Refresher Course in St. Louis, Missouri, in January of 1987, with Miss Stephenson reviewing history with the elementary participants. She returned to Houston with a panel of classroom teachers the following year to discuss classroom management. The Refresher Course has been held over Presidents' Day weekend since that year, bringing renewed inspiration in a particular area of the Montessori curriculum with an AMI elementary trainer.

Current Organizational Structure

The structure of the organization has changed over the years as it adapts to the needs and resources of the group. Although Regional Workshops during the school year were begun in 1983, the regional concept was eventually set aside as those workshops were not well attended or cost effective.

Volunteers continue to serve on the ever-evolving Executive Committee, currently composed of five members serving two-year terms, with a maximum of three terms. With replacement materials currently available through the Washington Montessori Institute, the former materials coordinator now serves as Membership Coordinator/Secretary. In addition to the Chair and

Publications Coordinator positions, a Vice-Chair serves as Treasurer, and a Workshop Coordinator oversees the Refresher Courses and the Annual Summer Conferences with the assistance of on-site coordinators and elementary liaisons. The board meets four times a year – twice in board members’ homes, and prior to each conference.

Membership in AMI-EAA includes a newsletter, directory, and access to our EAA-Talk “inter-net-work” for dialog and peer support. Our website, www.ami-eaa.org, features ads, a membership form, and up-to-date information about our conferences.

This grassroots organization has continued to function through volunteer assistance from its membership for almost 40 years. Active participation from members is essential to its future.

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