

## **Valley Montessori puts kids at the helm**

### **Livermore school celebrates boom in Italian physician's teaching method**

By Lea Blevins, Staff Writer at the TRI VALLEY HERALD

LIVERMORE — On top of a hill in Livermore rests a place where children are free to learn, be independent and collaborate with each other and adults in an innovative environment.

Valley Montessori School calls this place home.

The school was started in 1976 with six preschool students, and now serves more than 480 children from 8 weeks old through eighth grade.

The private, nonprofit school moved to its home on the hill along North Livermore Avenue, overlooking Roselawn Cemetery, in 1998.

Mary Ellen Kordas of Livermore was the mother of one of the school's first six students.

She heard about the school from one of her neighbors whose children had attended Montessori programs back East and decided to give it a try.

"It just felt so right," Kordas said. "I felt at home."

She felt so at home she became the school's director 25 years ago.

Kordas and the school's administrators, Pam Shay and Ann Jones, are aware of the public's misconceptions about Montessori schools.

Too much structure. Too much freedom. Children running around in their bare feet.

They've heard it all.

"We have freedom within limits," said Jones, administrator of toddler and primary programs.

"You don't have to structure the children if you structure the environment," Kordas said.

"It's highly structured, but you can't tell," said Shay, administrator of the elementary and middle school programs. "We don't want to see the controls."

These women clearly feel passionately about the Montessori method, having sent or currently sending their children to the school.

This structured freedom they speak of goes back to the educational practices developed by Italian physician Maria Montessori, who observed the ways

children learn and theorized that children teach themselves.

A Montessori classroom is quite different than the typical public or private school classroom.

There are no rows of desks, no teachers lecturing at the head of the class and no zoned-out students staring blankly at a blackboard.

To an outsider, the scene might appear disorganized — children are scattered throughout the room, some at tables, some on the floor, others having a snack, washing dishes, knitting or offering visitors a cup of tea.

Some are alone and others sit with friends while one, two or more Montessori-trained teachers migrate through the room stopping to work with individuals or groups of students.

Students are grouped according to program, with ages 3 through 5 in primary class, first through third grade in lower elementary, fourth and fifth grade in upper elementary and sixth through eighth in middle school.

The infant program includes youngsters from 8 weeks to 18 months old and the toddler program goes up through age 3.

Teachers will do brief lessons each day with an entire group of students, but then students will break off to work on the subjects to their own ability, geared toward each grade level.

"I like math because you go at your own pace," said Sam Brobst, 10.

This method has worked well for Sam, who started Valley Montessori as a toddler, left last year to attend public school in Pleasanton, then returned a month later.

Molly Cooper, 10, just joined the school this year after Livermore Unified's Almond Avenue Elementary School closed.

With the different structuring of the classroom, Molly said she likes Valley Montessori "a lot."

"I think it's more organized," she said.

Longtime student Shaina Braun, 11, said she enjoys being in the same class for three years in a row because the teachers get to know the students well.

"I think school's a lot of fun," Shaina said.

In addition to the alternative way of teaching academics, the school teaches children life skills and works to develop respect, a sense of independence and problem-solving skills in its students.

Students typically feel comfortable working with older and younger children, mentoring when they can and asking for help other times.

It is common for them to also feel comfortable with adults at the school, who they call by first name.

This comfort level may seem awkward when the students transition on to a regular high school, where they often learn that some adults treat children as though they need to be controlled.

The independence gained by children in the Montessori schools can help them deal with and understand varying situations, administrators said.

Livermore resident Evelyn Fletcher has three children at Valley Montessori and one who just graduated and started as a freshman at Granada High School.

"It's great," Fletcher said of the transition. "She was very well prepared for her classes."

The school, already certified by the American Montessori Society, recently became California's first fully accredited Montessori school by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Open enrollment for new students begins Friday . Staff admit the school isn't cheap, with prices ranging from a yearly tuition of \$1,770 to \$15,500 depending on the program.

Scholarships are available, and staff members can help families find other means of financial assistance.

Those interested in more information can call the school at (925) 455-8021 or visit [www.valleymontessorischool.com](http://www.valleymontessorischool.com).

"I feel like it's a gift to Valley," Jones said.