

Strong Women Doing Good Work

by Lauren Southern Godwin

The year is 1977. The place is Pensacola, Florida. A small preschool facility following the Montessori method with a sand dollar as their logo was opened. It quickly outgrew its surroundings and over the next several years went from a church hall to a school building on Lillian Highway. This school, known at the time, as Montessori Early School, is still going strong today. The school added a grade a year until reaching 8th grade. Today, students aged 18 months through 8th grade are served by the school (the only Montessori accredited program in Northwest Florida) in two Pensacola locations. The Montessori School of Pensacola has been serving the educational needs of the Pensacola community for more than 43 years, and amazingly, is still run, on a daily basis, by the same three women.

Educator/teacher, Kathy Turtle (with one of her own children in 1978 and another in 1981), started the school and was

joined by business administrator, Mary Gaudet, in 1978 (along with her three-year old child). The two women were joined by a third, Maria Mitkevicius, in 1980 (along with her two children). The three women have given their lives to Montessori School of Pensacola (MSP) and have seen it grow and change and move over the years. Every day, they can be found on-campus, touring prospective families, or in the classroom with students. Their commitment to the school, the implementation of Montessori education, and the positive and individualized support of students is miraculous. A parent of a student in the Upper Elementary (4th-6th grades) said, "I can always trust that Kathy, Mary, and Maria have the best interest of my child as a priority. Anything they do will exceed what other schools are doing- because they are Montessori and they love the kids"

The three school owners have been



Montessori School of Pensacola founders Kathy Turtle, Mary Gaudet and Maria Mitkevicius celebrate the school's 40th anniversary.

faithfully following the dictates of Maria Montessori for over four decades. Maria Montessori developed her methodology in the early 1900s. She was an Italian physician turned educator. Today, Montessori schools can be found on every continent (except Antarctica). The cornerstones of Montessori education include respect, integrity, independence, community service, responsibility and critical thinking in multi-age groupings. Maria Montessori taught that education should be "an aid to life."

MSP has also hosted Montessori teacher training for teachers from Escambia County, as well as teachers from the Southeast, including Tallahassee, Mobile, Birmingham, and New Orleans. It has provided community events and lectures by educational experts, columnists, and more over the years reinforcing the goal of the three