

ITALIAN HERITAGE & CULTURE COMMITTEE OF NEW YORK, INC.



A Salute to Italian & Italian American Women

Honoring Dr. Maria Montessori

An Internationally Renowned

Educator and Physician - 1870 -1952

Maria Montessori is best known for her innovative method of educating children from birth to adolescence. Her philosophy is still in use today in a large number of public as well as private schools throughout the world. The essence of the Montessori method consists of teaching students ways to develop their own skills at a pace they set for themselves.

Maria Montessori was born in 1870 in Chiaravalle, Italy. As the first woman to graduate from the University of Rome La Sapienza Medical School, Montessori became the first female doctor in Italy. She was a member of the University's Psychiatric Clinic and became intrigued with trying to educate children with special needs in Rome. In 1896, after a lecture she gave at the Educational Congress in Torino, the Italian Minister of Education was so impressed that he appointed her director of the Scuola Ortofrenica, an institution devoted to the care and education of the mentally challenged. Using her method, the children not only passed the state exams but had above-average scores, an achievement described as "the first Montessori miracle." Montessori's response to the success of bringing these challenged children to the level of "normal" children was to study even further the potential of normal children.

She was asked to start a school in Rome, and Casa dei Bambini (Children's Home) opened on January 6, 1907. In this child care center in an apartment building in a poor neighborhood she focused on teaching the students ways to develop their own skills at a pace they set for themselves. This "spontaneous self-development" articulates that when the child is ready to learn new and more difficult tasks, the teacher guides the child's first endeavors in order to avoid wasted effort and the learning of wrong habits. It has

been reported that the Montessori Method of teaching has enabled children to learn to read and write more quickly and with greater facility than has otherwise been possible. The Montessori Method of teaching concentrates on quality rather than quantity.

By 1917 there was an intense interest in her method in North America. In 1925, Dr. Montessori was invited by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to introduce her ideas throughout the Italian national school system. But by 1934, Montessori had found the brutal totalitarianism of Fascism incompatible with her sensibility, so she moved to Spain. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, she moved to the Netherlands.

In 1939, the Theosophical Society of India extended an invitation, which Dr. Montessori accepted. She was accompanied on the journey by her only son, Mario Montessori. This trip heralded the beginning of her special relationship with India. With the help of her son, she conducted courses called the Indian Montessori Training Courses. These courses laid a strong foundation for the Montessori Movement in India. In 1949 she returned to the Netherlands and died there in 1952, after a lifetime devoted to the study of child development.

"Scientific observation has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment. The task of the teacher becomes that of preparing a series of motives of cultural activity, spread over a specially prepared environment, and then refraining from obtrusive interference. Human teachers can only help the great work that is being done as servants help the master. Doing so, they will be witnesses to the unfolding of the human soul and to the rising of a New Man who will not be a victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society."

—Dr. Maria Montessori

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