

The Great Friendships: Across Continents, Over Time,
Living Montessori

Presented by Celma Pinho Perry at the AMS Living Legacy Reception held in her honor, March 31, 2005, Chicago, IL.

As I see all of you here today, I realize once again how many connections bind us together as Educators.

Slowly, we become...we become through our encounters: no one is an island! We need **the other** to become ourselves. It's in the depth of personal encounters that we become the person, the educator we are called to be.

It's a slow process! It was while studying Martin Buber's work that I discovered how much my life was a constant reflection of my relationships:

I-THOU, I-IT.

Indeed, each encounter throughout these 50 years of adulthood made me *me* – and made me open myself to life!

I arrived in Europe in 1952, still a joyful and a lively teenager! The days were long... I remember my mentor, Mere Marie, going to the garden with me while I jumped rope until I was tired enough to go to sleep...It's under her shadow that Lubienska de Lenval, the assistant of Maria Montessori during the 30s, met me as I observed children at work. Sensing my interest, she followed my development as an educator until she died in Belgium a couple of months after my last visit. With her and her students I discovered Montessori's thoughts and work.

Most encounters are not planned. They just happen! Father Pierre Faure, a Jesuit, arrived in Brazil in 1956, looking for someone to direct a demonstration class for the teacher education seminar he passionately directed. I was just 24 years old and I had never done anything like this before. **Accepting the challenge**, I discovered through him how to freely, constantly, and with no fears, engage in the work of educating.

The classroom work became my life.

Faure opened my eyes to the importance of **thinking**, of exchanging ideas, of studying. He became my guide, for many, many years.

After studying for a long time abroad, arriving back in Brazil I felt like **a foreigner** in my own country. But intense dialogue breaks down walls. I dove into the culture and somehow from this experience I learned to be me wherever I went in the world, and discovered the "thou" in whichever cultural situation I found myself.

My first big friend in the U.S. was **Cleo Monson**, who was the first national director for AMS, back when it was a two-person office. How can I forget the simplicity, the kindness, the knowledge she had of Montessori in America! Her office in this unique building facing Broadway and Fifth Avenue was a place I cherished. Later I would bring my husband for a “first visit into AMS.” Through Cleo, I appreciated the genius of **Nancy Rambush**, enjoying my contacts with her, as they always provoked thinking.

It was at Alcuin, in Oak Park, that I was going to meet Dome Petrutis, and Mr. and Mrs. Varnas, the pioneers of Montessori in Chicago. Trained by Maria Montessori, they knew Lubienska in 1934, the year I was born! If I did not know yet what it was to be a Montessorian, they demonstrated it for me, as they were the models of giving, of thinking, **of following the child**, beyond any difficulties, faithfully. I deeply admired them, and through them was introduced to the Lithuanian culture and community.

In Canada, working with Dome for the University of Laval, I experienced funny things. One of my favorite stories took place on the last day of our leading the observation class for the adult students to see Montessori in action. At 10:45 am, Dome came to me and asked, “Where is the snack for the children?” I quickly responded, “I will bring it at the last minute. Let’s just prepare the table.” She was puzzled. What was I to give to the children on the last day? Why wouldn’t I tell her what I had? Very quiet, I maintained my secret. “I will bring it, do not worry.” I was hiding because I had 30 cupcakes with white and pink icing left over from the party the day before...questionable nutrition, just fun! I knew that she would never give them to the children...so I hid them. When I came to the table with the cakes, all the little children were sitting with their juice and waiting...she saw the cakes, looked at me, stood up, got her hat and left saying, “If you want to kill them, do it all by yourself!”

I felt almost guilty...our 60 trainee students observing! Anyway, the children ate their cakes, survived and happily left with their parents. Taking deep breaths for a minute to compose myself, I told the trainees: “Follow Dome...you had a good example of how to protect the little ones.” And from that day on I really tried never to compromise!

The “personalism” of **Emmanuel Monnier** was very much the air I shared with all my friends in my days in Paris in 1961. His influence was going to orient my work, giving sense to our Montessori pedagogy. **Education indeed happens only in a personalized encounter**. We do not educate children, or students. We assist Mary, Peter, Stephen, each one on his own. This passion to discover each child, each person, has brought to me my biggest joys in teaching. When I take time to observe, to understand, to communicate with someone, a real **I - Thou** relationship happens, and I am the one who is changed by the relationship, I am the one **who becomes**. I am so lucky to very often encounter, in different continents, my old students.

I remember still today the first time I met **Cele and Louise**, two board members of the new Seton Montessori School. I had a little bundle of wheat on my coffee table as a simple decoration. Cele recognized it and commented on it, and because of this

relationship, because I perceived that she had somehow touched **my essence** through this little sheaf of wheat, I signed my contract in 1965, the last contract I ever signed, which gave me forever a place to be. Recognizing the other, being recognized as we are, creates links that are the base for big enterprises. Seton and MECA, were born at that moment.

These unique encounters direct all that happens in our lives.

How many real friendships I still have from contacts I made through Seton and MECA! These days I look in my heart, at each one, I celebrate each, and I give thanks....

The variety of stimuli easily available around the city of Chicago is difficult to find somewhere else.

Friends, the **Feys** who passed away so many years ago, and the **McLaughlins**, brought me to the Chicago Symphony where I have maintained a subscription.

Friends also introduced me to the University of Chicago, to Loyola, to the lake...to the suburbs. I love Chicago because of the friendships I found here. **The place where we live is people!**

Back when I was 14 years old, I was asked in a geography class to give the names of the **Great Lakes**. I had not studied and moved my eyes up and down, trying to remember but with no success. My good old teacher told me, "Never mind, Celma, you will never go there anyway." This happened in 1948 and as I arrived in 1964 in this city, I looked at our lake like an old friend! I made it, Lake Michigan! And I felt so welcomed...

Loyola had an outstanding professor of philosophy, **Bernard Boelen**. It was in one of his classes that I first met **Desmond Perry**. Living alone, working intensely with little children, parents, student teachers, made me suddenly long for a companion. Now, after 32 years of a life together, of intense dialogue, I still remember Boelen's words, "All beginnings are fundamentally mysterious. Every true beginning has a creative moment for it brings something new into birth. The reality of beginning is a phenomenon of profound mysteriousness and baffles the mind, which is still open to experience and capable of wondering. The beginning of philosophy, the beginning of thinking, is wonder."

Our lives and our experiences deepen as we maintain a real dialogue and together *wonder*...I owe **Desmond** for his never-ending support, kindness and love over all these years of professional life. With his quiet and reserved attitude, intense intellectual life, he supports my work and together we are always celebrating life somewhere!

"All real living is meeting," says Martin Buber.

I also learned, after years of experience, that it is not necessary to look for results. As we put all our strength to discover, to see the Other, each Person whom we meet, the results come naturally.

All these **great friendships** through **time** and **space** (so many years, so many miles around the world) have made me the person you have today as a **Living Legacy**.

May my legacy to you be a strong call to be yourself, open to a Real dialogue with others, as it is through relationships and dialogue that we become, that we serve. Having lived Montessori, we are to mentor others...

As Buber again says it, “Only in his whole being, in all his **spontaneity**, can the educator truly affect the whole being of this pupil...His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he **has no thought of affecting them.**” The non-utilitarian spontaneity of authentic inspiration is the most effective and growth-provoking discipline.

Let me take a moment to thank the **AMS Board** for giving me such an honor, as well as the Living Legacy committee, my friend Dottie Feldman, and all the ones contributing to scholarships. **Marie Dugan**, as our interim executive director, showed us, during just a few months, **the art of giving**. Let me thank also the Illinois Montessori Society, which through the years, and now in the person of **Carolyn Kambich**, has brought to our work so many possibilities.

My thanks to my very unique friend, **Carolina Gomez**, who is not here because of her heavy obligations as a leader of the Generalate of the Ursulines.

Thanks also to my two children, **Anna and Cristina**; observing them mature has been, and continues to be, one of my most rewarding and most **demanding** experiences of my life.

To each one of you, whom I met through these years of intense work: Let’s celebrate our discoveries, our contacts; let’s accept perhaps difficult moments. From the bottom of my heart, I thank each one of you for all you brought to my life.

And as **Johnny Carson** said in his last appearance, I ask you to:

“Accept a really heartfelt thank you!”

Good night.

Let’s Party!

Chicago, 31 of March 2005
Celma Pinho Perry