

Montessori school fosters curiosity

By DENISE McDONALD
 "The atmosphere is so delightful, the children can't help but feel happy."

Such is the feeling expressed by Chris Sternat, founder of the Markville Montessori Schools in Markham and Stouffville.

"Every parent that walks in here says the same thing: It's such a wonderful environment for a child to experience the first joy of learning."

According to Mrs. Sternat, the first Montessori School was established in 1906 by Maria Montessori, the first woman medical doctor in Italy.

'Secret of childhood'

An excerpt from the book, *A Montessori Album* reads, "Montessori realized learning is a total life experience for all children. She appreciated their curiosity and their interest in exploring the unknown. She wished to penetrate the secret of childhood, knowing full well children of every land and culture develop in fundamentally the same ways."

"After observing a group of handicapped children, Dr. Montessori studied the works of Itard and Seguin in Paris, and later compared the children to a group of normal, healthy others," said Mrs. Sternat. "By comparing the two groups, she found certain things all young children could do. She determined what their needs were, while recognizing them as individuals."

Having taught the Montessori principles in the Markham area since 1976, Mrs. Sternat decided it was time to branch out into her own learning institution.

In 1984, she opened the first Markville Montessori on Hwy. 7, one of only seven A.M.I. (Association Montessori International) accredited, certified schools in Canada.

Opened two schools

The school later occupied the Hagerman Mennonite Church on 14th Avenue. The second opened Stouffville in 1985.

"I think the idea was prompted by my desire to offer the best quality program I could, implementing the understanding of Montessori, one that would continue the child's excitement for learning," said Mrs. Sternat. "I wanted to be able to foster in these children the attitude of being an individual, that they are who they are."

When asked what particular theories she employs at her two schools, Mrs. Sternat replied, "That's not easily answered in one sentence or two. It involves a special attitude towards the child. We respect their natural developmental stages universally, while using interaction to distinguish between a process and a program."

Continually learning

With students ranging in age from two-and-a-half to seven, Montessori provides an environment and opportunity for children to continually learn and discover with materials carefully matched to suit their particular developmental needs, Mrs. Sternat explained.

"The emphasis of this program is on the development of self-esteem and learning," she said.



Margaret Arsenault, (centre) an instructor at the three-year-old Gemma Cumbers. Stouffville Montessori School leads the children in a quick lesson. With her are David Fairborn, 4 and

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Mrs. Sternat cited one example to illustrate her school's approach: "If a child is going to use a pencil, he needs to prepare his hand in order to use it appropriately. When the child is ready for that activity, they are well prepared and therefore successful."

"Overall, we're allowing and encouraging the child to observe what is in their environment," she continued. "When the child perfects that ability to observe, real learning takes place."

Children practice

In order to achieve such distinctions in their environment, Mrs. Sternat said the children practice polishing silver, leaf washing, constructing words from the

alphabet, matching the pitch of bells and painting and cutting.

"By touching and observing their natural environment, the child begins to make its own distinctions," she said. "A child may one day walk up to a plant, feel its leaves and do the same to another, while all the time discovering the differences in the two."

In order to help the children feel more comfortable in their environment, Mrs. Sternat, along with Markham teacher Vicky Attwell, and Stouffville teacher, Margaret Arsenault, have transformed their classrooms into livingrooms.

"It gives them the opportunity to look upon it as their own place. And if they spill the paint or something, they know what to do to

clean it up without having to be afraid to make a mistake," she said. "Or if it needs to be cleaned, they'll automatically get the dusts out."

Open house

In comparing her format with nursery schools, Mrs. Sternat said Montessori's attitude leans more towards teaching the child who he is and what he is, and the role he plays in the community.

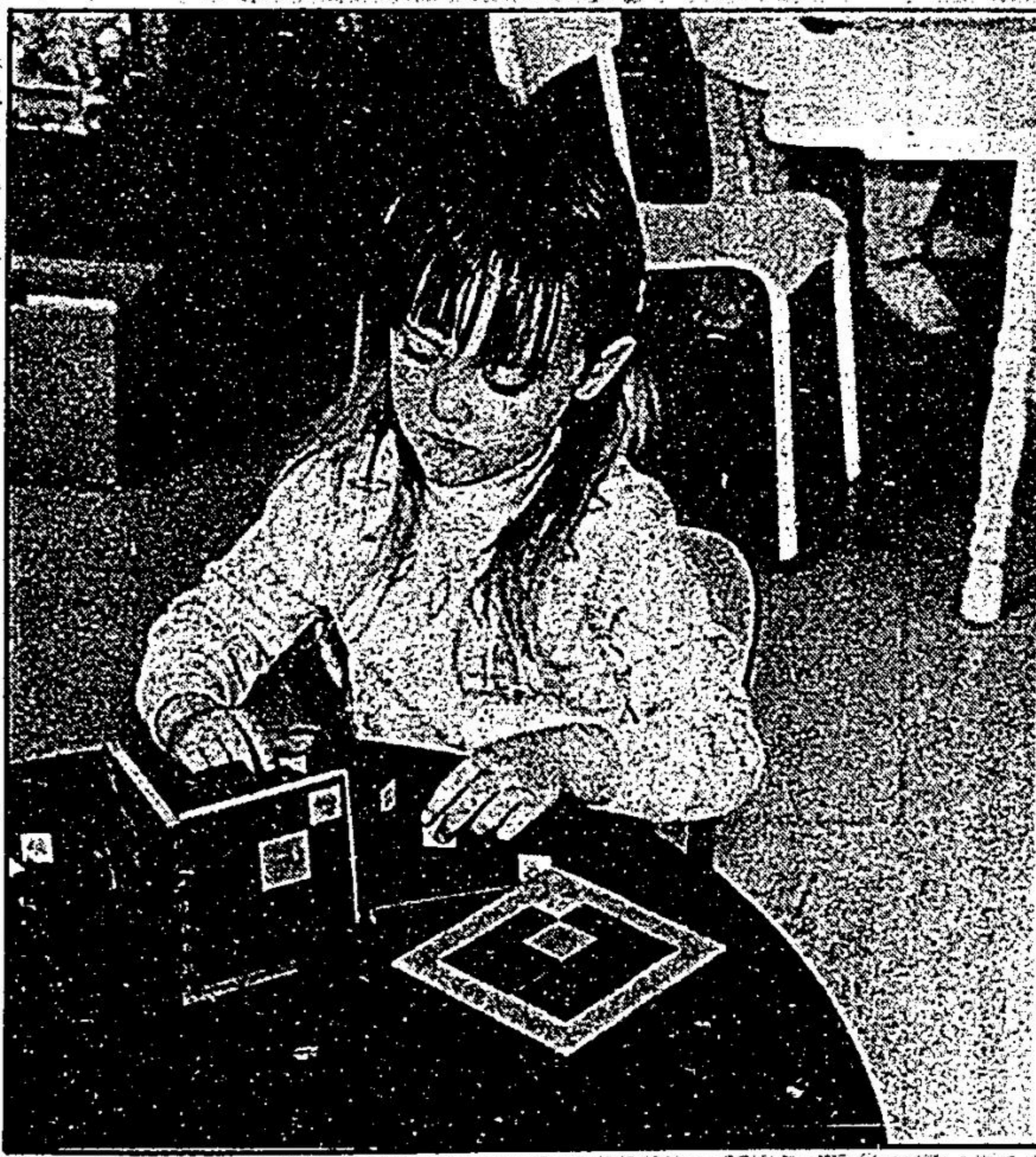
In honor of its fourth year in operation, the Montessori School of Stouffville, 254 Sunset Blvd., will hold an open house March 10.

"I really like working with the children," commented Mrs. Sternat, "they've been a personal evolution for me."



Karen Attwell, 4, works on her own at the Stouffville Montessori school. The children learn about how they fit into their community, as well as practising motor development and social skills.

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Heather Dickie, 4, works with blocks at one of the work stations in the Montessori classroom. Children are encouraged to develop their self-esteem at school.

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