

PROFILE OF A GROWING URBAN SCHOOL: THE LUMIN EXPERIENCE

by Terry Ford

This fairytale-come-true began with an idealistic public school teacher just out of college who lived in the neighborhood of her students. In stages, working with a community organizing group consisting mainly of concerned parents, Terry Ford founded what is now called Lumin Education, a network of campuses serving more than six hundred children in a Montessori setting. Her hard-hitting, positive spiritual values bring premium Montessori education into a successful implementation for the most needy children.

There are two points that I want to make as I tell this story. First, the way to make Montessori accessible to more children is based on some of the same principles as a Montessori classroom. Second, creating Montessori environments for more children from all different backgrounds doesn't take a superhero; it can be done by ordinary people like you and me. Here's the story of how it happened here in Dallas.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, in fact, almost forty years ago, in a small neighborhood just east of downtown Dallas, lived several families who were increasingly concerned about their children. These children were growing up in a neighborhood full of violence, drugs, and gangs. These same kids were, all too often, failing before they ever got out of elementary school.

Terry Ford is the executive director of East Dallas Community Schools in Dallas, TX. After four years as a bilingual first grade teacher in the Dallas Independent School District, Terry founded and continues to oversee East Dallas Community Schools, an organization with a thirty-four-year track record of successfully educating young children from primarily low-income families. For more than three decades, Terry and her team have worked relentlessly to implement the philosophy of "Start Young, Involve Parents."

This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled The Social Relevance of the Montessori First Plane: Engaging Families, Building Partnerships, and Finding Common Ground with the Wider Early Childhood Community in Dallas, TX, January 15-18, 2015.

One of the parents was a young mother named Rocio. Rocio had two sons, Alejandro and Javier. Alejandro was in elementary school and struggling. His grades were bad and he was beginning to get into trouble, skip school, and was acting defiant. Javier was just three years old and Rocio was desperate to figure out how to help Alejandro and make sure that Javier didn't follow the same path.

Another mom, Deidra lived a couple blocks away. Her husband was in a wheelchair, unable to work, and her son had just been held back to repeat first grade. Just down the street lived Valerie. Valerie had stuck with her husband Pete through his being a motorcycle gang member in Philadelphia, a drug addict in California, and now their family had finally turned the corner. Valerie's husband Pete became a carpenter and they moved to Dallas. They were raising their two youngest children and their baby grandson and had kept their daughter out of kindergarten because they were concerned about the environment in the public school system.

Valerie talked to lots of neighborhood moms. Their most immediate concern was that summer was coming. They had the dilemma that parents had to work and while they were at work, there was no



supervised place for their kids to play safely, so the kids were either outside and exposed to the influences on the streets, or they were locked up in the house watching TV for the summer. Valerie and her friends started working with a community organizing group called the Bois d'Arc Patriots. I was a member of the Patriots because just a few years before, I had moved into the neighborhood, fresh out of college and all excited about beginning a new job as a first-grade bilingual teacher.

My landlady lived across the street from me and was horrified to learn that I was welcoming neighborhood kids to sit on my front porch and sing songs while I played the guitar. I was devaluing her property values by having children of color (that was not the term she used) on her property. So she evicted me. It was the Bois d'Arc Patriots that helped me understand the rights I had as a tenant and, since tenants have so few rights, helped me find a new duplex to live in.

It was also through this community organizing group, the Patriots, that we met another neighborhood teacher, John Fullinwider. Valerie, Deidra, Rocio, John, and I spread the word that we were starting an all-volunteer summer program. By the end of the summer we had space donated to start a school. It was no surprise that it was donated because it was a shared space with a methadone clinic. We had raised three donations totaling \$1,750. I quit my job with the public schools and everybody pitched in to make it work. A junk yard dealer let us go through his piles of junk to find metal frames that we could use to build tables. Parents found a Dallas public school dumpster full of books that we salvaged. I remember breathing a huge sigh of relief after the licensing inspector left our building. "You're required to have a telephone," he had told me. "It's right here on the wall, sir," I replied. What I didn't tell him was that the phone was as dead as a doornail because we couldn't afford the service.

We wanted a Montessori school, but we couldn't afford a trained teacher, so Alcuin School pitched in with donated materials and advice for the first few years until we hired our first Montessori teacher. After three years in donated space, Valerie discovered an old, broken-down house on Wayne Street. Parents pitched in to

raise a \$3,000 down payment. It came down to the deadline for closing on the house and we had raised \$2,000. Remember Pete, Valerie's husband? Pete donated \$1,000 of his savings to close the deal. It was one of the most important, generous gifts we've ever received. We've been at that Wayne Street location ever since. For twenty years, we had one school supported by private donations. We grew from educating eight children in 1978 to one hundred in 1998. We begin with parent education when parents are pregnant and offer Montessori classes for 1-9 year olds.

As we grew, we not only built strong relationships with parents, but also with members of the larger community. I invited two of those members of the larger community to join us for lunch today: Lisa Simmons and Serena Connelly. Lisa and Serena are part of the Simmons family that has been so generous to Montessori on a national level. But back in 1986, when the foundation first made a gift to Lumin for scholarships, their interest was not in Montessori it was in supporting quality education for all children, particularly children living in poverty. I remember when Lisa first came to visit our school some twenty years ago. She loved seeing the beautiful classrooms and the children so engaged in their work, but what she cared about most was how it would change these children's lives.

We started tracking our students' progress, and thank goodness we did! Because in the mid 1990s, the State of Texas passed legislation that allowed a nonprofit to apply to open a public charter school. By then we had two decades of data documenting how well our students do after they leave us. We've continued to collect longitudinal data over the past thirty-seven years, documenting that, in neighborhoods that struggle with poverty, illiteracy, and high dropout rates, our students continue to succeed after they leave us at the end of third grade. 95% of those third graders go on to graduate from high school, and of those high school graduates 89% go on to college.

So the State of Texas was delighted to get our application to open a public school. But there was one requirement that we had to meet before applying: We needed to have a school building under contract. It was the Simmons Foundation and a handful of other supporters who stepped up to make leadership gifts that made it

possible for us to buy an old church building and convert it to a public Montessori school.

The founding director at our first charter school campus, Lumin Lindsley Park Community School, was Tom Loew. Tom has been the leader of that campus for seventeen years and has set the bar high for quality public Montessori education. Tom's wife, Mary Raudonis Loew, a legend in her own time, became our first public Montessori elementary teacher and also has been with Lumin for seventeen years.

Tom has led our charter school campus through major challenges. There are pressures based on public school regulations to do things that don't make sense, like isolating all the children who speak a language different than English in classrooms separate from kids who do speak English. How do you learn to speak English if you don't have classmates to practice with?

The biggest challenge that we face is the public school's emphasis on a standards-based approach (meaning, all children must master a specific concept by a specific age) as opposed to the developmental approach (based on our knowledge of how humans learn, which is often in leaps and bounds and then plateaus). Tom is committed to resolving these issues as an integral part of our Montessori classroom practice: to meeting both high Montessori standards and society's expectations.

Our other challenge is what Tom calls "Our Glorious Challenge": admission by lottery. When you enroll by drawing names out of a hat, and most of your kids are dealing with the issues that come with poverty, you get an incredible, diverse range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral abilities. We sweat blood and tears over these kids and we LOVE it! There is nothing more satisfying than hearing a child, who for the past six years has greeted you with silence every morning, as a third year elementary student, choose to respond to your greeting by saying, "Good morning, Mr. Loew. I want you to come see my research project." Or, seeing a child, whose IQ has been classified as 65, being accepted and welcomed by the other children in the class who understand that there are certain things that this kid is not capable of, but they recognize what a great hu-

man being he is. This kind of diversity gives us hard, hard work that is meaningful and an essential part of offering Montessori to a wider range of kids. After sixteen years of providing a free, public, charter Montessori education to hundreds of children, Lumin Education is known as one of the top early childhood education charter schools in the state.

A few years after the opening of our second campus, Mary Raudonis Loew, in addition to being a full-time teacher, led a team of Montessori school leaders in establishing MINT (the Montessori Institute of North Texas). MINT is Lumin's go-to AMI Montessori teacher training center. Two private Montessori schools, Alcuin and Westwood, donated space for MINT's teacher training. The Simmons Foundation and others donated funds for teaching equipment, scholarships, and infrastructure support.

It is through the community support from volunteers, foundations, and other schools that we have one of the best teacher training programs in the world right here in Dallas. There is no question that Lumin's success is based on outstanding teacher training.

Six years ago, again thanks to major support from the Simmons Foundation and others, Lumin opened a parent education program at a third site, which is a neighborhood identified as having the greatest number of children living in poverty and the fewest services to support these children. Our Lumin Bachman Lake program educates parents through weekly home visits. One of our most powerful parent education tools are two Montessori toddler classes in a donated church space where parents, through a one-way mirror, watch their children at work. They are amazed at what one- and two-year-olds are capable of.

In addition to private donations, we use Early Head Start and other public funds to educate almost two hundred children at our Lumin Bachman Lake program. The Bachman Lake parents have been so energized by the realization of what is possible for their children that they organized more than one hundred parents to meet with City Council and Dallas Public School board members, emphasizing the need for early childhood education. Their efforts resulted in the Dallas school board passing a resolution that the

next elementary school that opens in that neighborhood will have six classrooms dedicated to early childhood education.

Then this past fall, we opened a campus in West Dallas in cooperation with a neighborhood community center. The director of that campus, Charo Alarcon, came to Lumin Education some twenty years ago as a parent. Lumin sent her to training and Charo became a gifted Montessori educator, first as a toddler teacher, then as an elementary teacher, next as a parent educator, and now as a school director. So twenty years ago, I was the school director, greeting Charo who was a parent at our first campus in East Dallas. Now Charo is the school director, greeting parents at our newest school in West Dallas.

Our most recent exciting news is that thanks to all the great work done by Lumin staff, parents, and children, and again thanks to generous support from Serena, Lisa, the Simmons Foundation and others, we'll be opening additional classrooms at each of our current campuses over the next few years.

This is the story of how Lumin Education grew from educating eight children to more than six hundred children. It's a story with plenty of trials and tribulations made possible by ordinary people like you and

Montessori teachers, and successful school systems like Lumin Education, create opportunities for meaningful work with deep respect for the diversity of humankind.

me. It's a story based on Montessori principles. Just as Montessori teachers create classrooms where children build relationships of trust, Lumin Education has succeeded based on building relationships of trust with parents, staff, and the larger community. Just as Montessori teachers create classrooms where children have lots of opportunities to take initiative, Lumin educators support parents as they take initiative to make life better for their families and their neighborhood.

The final Montessori principle that I'll mention is my favorite: Montessori teachers, and successful school systems like Lumin Education, create opportunities for meaningful work with deep respect for the diversity of humankind.



Fatherhood Initiative, Bachman Lake Community School,
Dallas, TX

In closing, I have two things that I want you to think about. First, we at Lumin Education are excited about the recent surge of interest and growth in Montessori education, which was documented by research that was publicized just two days ago by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector. In this country, we are seeing exponential growth in public Montessori. It's critical that we look to organizations like NAMTA and the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector for support to ensure that these new programs are implemented with the highest level of quality Montessori.

Second, that surge of growth is reflected in our own expansion at Lumin. Two of our school directors, Jodi Campbell at our Bachman campus and Tom Loew at our Lindsley campus, are transitioning out of their director role and moving into new positions at Lumin to help ensure that we continue to implement top-quality Montessori as we grow to serve more children.

If you know of someone who would be excited about working as a teacher or school director or parent educator in our program, please encourage them to contact us. In fact, if it's someone you can recommend directly, send me an email: Terry.Ford@LuminEducation.org

And I'd like to ask Serena Connelly and Lisa Simmons to join me on stage. Lisa Simmons and Serena Connelly have made a powerful difference in Montessori education through their leadership at the Harold Simmons Foundation. Nationally, the Simmons Foundation has supported Montessori through the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and the Trust for Learning. Regionally, the Simmons Foundation has played a major role in Montessori teacher training by providing generous support to the Montessori Institute of North Texas, offering AMI teacher training and the Shelton School, offering Montessori teacher education courses with a specialization in strategies for using Montessori with children who are at risk for learning differences.

Locally, the Simmons Foundation has supported Montessori for almost three decades (since 1986), supporting projects that range from schools that are just beginning to introduce Montessori to an underserved population to public Montessori schools, such as Lumin Education, as well as private Montessori schools, such as Westwood. On behalf of the national community of Montessorians, we would like to recognize your generosity and present you with this gift, representing our gratitude for the many ways that you are expanding access to Montessori for all children.

