



## Montessori community saves school

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When Flathead Valley Montessori Academy lead administrator Jeff Pernell announced, last week, that the school may not open this fall, because of seemingly insurmountable financial difficulties, it seemed as if a dream was coming to an end.

Jeff and his wife Stephanie had invested their life's savings--and more, besides--in order to bring their dream of providing middle school education for Flathead students, within a Montessori environment, to life. With no other Montessori middle school in existence in the Flathead Valley, they were convinced of that success was inevitable.

However, their decision to use the historic St. Catherine's Catholic Church building as the central structure in their new facility cost substantially more than they initially believed it would, and a full year of unsalaried teaching meant that everything was on the line. With only four students enrolled during their pilot year, in the fall of 2006, the academy was off to a slow start.

Consequently, as the fall of 2007 approached, the need for at least 21 students became the prerequisite for staying afloat, and that number was still a long way off. Though most schools start small and later expand, the Pernells had begun their academy with enough room to accommodate their growth for years to come. In retrospect, they feared that the decision to do so would be their undoing.

Now, they faced the crushing reality of having to inform parents that the school could not open for the new school year. In their minds, and in the minds of many Flathead residents, the FVMA dream was coming to an end, despite the newly completed facility, which they had invested their whole lives in.

What the Pernells had failed to take into account was that the FVMA dream encompassed more than their own vision for the academy. In fact, it soon became evident that the academy was not just their dream but also a dream shared by the entire Montessori community and many Flathead residents who not only believed in school but had been willing to support it, both financially and in a host of other ways.

As soon as their situation became common knowledge, the Flathead Montessori community came together in an overwhelming show of support, insisting that the community would not allow FVMA to fail.

Among the major supporters of FVMA have been Terry and Sally Welder, who serve as educators and administrators at the Kalispell Montessori Center. Three years ago, Sally piqued the Pernells' interest by stressing the need for a seventh-through-eighth grade Montessori program into which the elementary Montessori students could enter upon graduating from the Willow Glen Montessori campus.

Terry was quick to suggest to the Pernells that there were other options for resolving their dilemma, besides closing FVMA's doors and selling the building. In fact, the Willow Glen elementary campus has already grown beyond its capacity and has been forced to turn down some requests for enrollment. If the Pernell's would expand their curriculum beyond middle school enrollment, the Willow Glen campus would gladly refer potential elementary students to FVMA.

"I think what we were failing to do was to look at all of our options with enrollment," Jeff said, last weekend. "Our break-even point is still 21 students. Currently, with just the middle school portion, that's probably not going to be possible, for the next few years.

"The Willow Glen campus has been very supportive. Of course, we were never going to be in competition with the elementary school, but as it turns out they are actually overfull. Their initial reaction, when they found out about our financial situation was that there are more options for the FVMA campus than just the middle school. They suggested the idea that we offer an elementary program."

That idea, he admitted, represented a revolution new concept in the way that he and Stephanie looked at the academy.

"We were so set on the middle school curriculum that difficult to see anything else," he confessed. "What we're being told, now, is that we can probably count on at least 15 fourth-through-sixth-grade students in the next year, which is something that had never occurred to us. We had always looked at FVMA as steppingstone from elementary."

Yet, support for FVMA has not come from the elementary sector alone. The parents of students currently enrolled at the academy, as well as other members of the community, have come forward to offer whatever assistance the Pernell's may need in helping the new Somers campus succeed.

Mark Morgan, whose son has newly enrolled at FVMA for the fall of 2007, recalled his reaction to the Pernells' initial decision to call close the school, in which he was not alone.

"When Jeff and Stephanie made the decision that couldn't do it, all of us said, 'No. That's the wrong answer'" Morgan recounted. "My son was there when they told me that it wasn't going to go, and it was pretty emotional. They said that they couldn't do it, financially, and I said, 'What do you need to make this happen?' For the first time in my life, I'm in a position where I can help out, and I want to help make this happen.

"These two people have their lives wrapped up in this thing. These are people who are dedicating their lives to helping kids succeed. I have a seventh-grader, who is starting on Tuesday, and he's one that I think can really benefit from the attention and the relaxed atmosphere of FVMA, which is an atmosphere that will let these kids succeed where their talents and strengths are. It has to succeed. It cannot be allowed to fail."

While compelling, Morgan's words reflect the sentiments of each one of the parents whose children have enrolled at FVMA, several of whom have volunteered to help finance the school above and beyond the tuition of their children. In fact, like the students themselves and other members of the community who believe in their Montessori philosophy of education, these supporters have already volunteered time, labor, materials and equipment to help with the construction and remodeling of the academy.

Having already invested in the dream, they weren't about to walk away from it. Nor would they walk away from the Pernells, whom they applauded for having the courage to initiate that dream and inspire others in the process.

"We wouldn't have gotten as far as we did without the help of so many people, who believed in us and still believe in what we're doing," Jeff said. "People have donated materials and equipment, as well as their time and talents to this project.

"We're very fortunate to have people like Derrick Swanger, who donated so much time and energy into the program, and a lot of the grandeur of what you see in that building was his vision. Cornerstone Construction gave us a break and helped us with the project. Glacier Nursery donated some trees and Montana Rockworks donated a couple of pallets of rock. I could continue listing all of the companies and donors who really wanted this to happen."

In addition, Chris Delby, whose daughter enrolled at FVMA last year and will be attending for her second year, designed the playground that will be used for the preschool section of the academy. Delby has designed playgrounds professionally, including local school playgrounds, with dynamic features like the giant T-Rex at Russell and the large wooden ship at Edgerton. K-G Contracting, who paved the FVMA parking lot at cost, has even agreed to donate a large, paved racetrack for playground.

"We're not going to just walk away from it," Jeff said. "The last thing that we want to do is let down the people who have put so much into this.

"My biggest regret is not letting people know where we were at, a lot earlier. We were so in the mindset that success was immanent that it was difficult to say we were having trouble. The result is that we came back down a notch on the human level, and people got to see that we are human. We've been in a pressure cooker of stress, and we're trying to work for the good of the community.

"We really put out there that we needed help, and the community stepped up and said, 'We're here to help. How can we do that? We believe in Montessori and we're willing to donating our skills and resources.' Our parents stepped up and said, 'We want the best education for our kids and this school is what's going to provide it. How can we help?'"

Thanks to the help that they have received, FVMA will not only have a 2007--2008 school year with an expanded enrollment of grades four through nine, but the Pernells also anticipate having to hire a third teacher for the 2008-2009

school year.

That's quite a change from the outlook of just one week ago. It's also proof that FVMA is far from dead.