

## New Montessori Academy opens

By Jacob Doran  
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After more than a year of work on the new Flathead Valley Montessori Academy, during which students were taught at other facilities, FVMA co-founders Jeff and Stephanie Pernell say there is light at the end of the tunnel.

The completed structure sits on north Somers Road, next door to Lighthouse Christian Home, where it awaits its first scheduled open house. The community has been invited to come and view the building's interior, between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. May 24 (today).

Those new to the Valley could easily miss the significance of the structure, being unfamiliar with the history behind the magnificent wooden arches that frame the central structure and commons area. However, for residents of the Bigfork community and former members of the St. Catherine's Catholic Church, those arches hold half a century of memories.



Volunteers work on new landscaping for the Flathead Valley Montessori Academy. The school made over the old St. Catherine's Catholic Church, moved from Bigfork to North Somers Road. Photo by Jacob Doran

Although it has undergone some major changes, including reconstruction of the removal and reconstruction of its external walls, the entire central structure of the Flathead Valley Montessori Academy rests upon the skeleton of the St. Catherine's church building — home to the Bigfork congregation for nearly 50 years.

When the congregation outgrew the building a few years ago, construction of a new building north of Bigfork ensued. When Pope John Paul II Catholic Church opened its doors two summers ago, the former property was sold to the Marina Cay Resort. Fearing that the historic building might be demolished, one of the former members intervened and placed an ad in the Mountain Trader to find someone willing to purchase and move the building to a new location.

Jeff Pernell, FVMA's head administrator, said that finding the building was both a blessing and a stroke of fate, since he rarely ever looked at the Mountain Trader. Pernell quickly saw the potential for incorporating the

structure into the future Montessori middle school building and determined to make his vision a reality.

The sale took place on the 17th of January, 2006 and the building was moved to its new home on Somers Road, last March. Today, it stands as the central feature of the FVMA building, which is scheduled to open its doors to middle school students and preschoolers at the start of the new school year, exactly 49 years after it was dedicated by the St. Catherine's congregation, with Father Malloy as its pastor.

"Montessori honors all cultures and many traditions from around the world," Pernell explained. "The fact that we can bring history into the classroom and that the classroom itself is a part of history is amazing. Knowing that students

and their families will benefit because of it really feels amazing.”

Last month, more than 30 volunteers turned out for a landscaping event, during which the campus surrounding FVMA was transformed from a barren desert into an attractive lawn with decorative trees and other plants. Since then, the parking lot has also been completed.

The remainder of the landscape, which was not sodded by volunteers, will be seeded in the coming months. In fact, this summer holds a full schedule of work, which the Pernells and local volunteers will perform both inside and outside of the FVMA building.

“We will be fully operational in time for school to start, in the fall,” Jeff said. “However, we wanted to have an open house, before school let out and the families are scattered due to vacations and traveling. This was a way for us to really invite the community in and try to connect with them before they leave for the summer.

“We encourage anyone who is interested to come have a look. We will also have another open house during the summer, for everyone who wasn’t able to come to this one.”

Pernell extended his invitation anyone with preschool-age children and those who are looking for preschool options in the area, since part of the building and campus will feature a separate preschool element. In fact, Chris Delby, whose daughter Kat attends FVMA, has volunteered to design a preschool playground for the campus.

Delby has designed playgrounds professionally, including local school playgrounds. Kalispell residents would recognize the giant T-Rex at Russell and the large ship at Edgerton, both of which are features that Delby designed.

The FVMA playground will likely include giant tires, a tire swing, traditional playground equipment and a paved tricycle path.

“It’s going to look really cool,” Jeff promised. “We will probably start work on the playground in June, and I expect it to take about a month.”

He also extended his appreciation for the work performed by other volunteers and for Derek Swanger, who assisted in acquiring materials and performed the wood work on the entryway flood using reclaimed wood that was salvaged from another project.

“People have been really helpful,” he added. “Even though the project has cost more than projected, we also got more space than we projected, and we still came in under \$120 per sq. ft. Considering building and what we’ve got there, we’ve been able to do really well. That’s due in large part to the community and to Cornerstone Construction, which is owned by Steve Tartaglino, whose son Brenton will be graduating from the middle school this year.”

Jeff and his wife will give a presentation during tomorrow’s grand opening, to inform the community of what has been accomplished during the past year. The FVMA students will also give a surprise performance, designed to recap the events of the 2006-07 school year.

“It’s been an amazing first school year,” Jeff said, proudly. “The community will appreciate what has been done with the old St. Catherine’s church from Bigfork, which now serves as the main education commons area, complete with a secluded reading loft.”

The new wings of the FVMA, Jeff explained, were constructed using reclaimed architectural salvage materials, to provide an open-style ceiling with exposed rafters.

“This school is special, and we wanted it to look and feel like no other,” he explained. “In Montessori, there is an emphasis on the educational environment, and I think we hit the mark.”

FVMA represents Montana’s first Montessori middle school, built specifically to serve sixth through ninth grade students.