

How Maria Montessori Inspired My Mother

By Munir Shivji, MEd

Dr. Maria Montessori was a pioneering scientist, anthropologist, engineer, and educator, whose universal and scientific approach to the development of the whole child continues to inspire and transform us. This year marks 150 years since her birth, and in this issue of *Montessori Life*, as well as elsewhere, AMS is celebrating her legacy.

Maria Montessori's work inspired my family's contributions to society. My mother, Razia Shivji, was born and raised in Uganda. In 1967, the local Aga Khan Education Board invited Muriel J. Dwyer, an AMI trainer, to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to organize the first Montessori international course in child development and education in Africa. You can only imagine the spiritual transformation about to unfold for my mother as a student in this new program. Dwyer wrote an article about the course and her students:

One great discovery they made amongst the many was the joy and satisfaction of working with maximum effort, not for another but out of pure interest. This was a new and most revealing experience for them.... It took them weeks to understand that whilst I might suggest that they did various work I would never insist nor even ask if it were done, although I was more than willing to help them if they requested aid.... Every so often I had to return to Europe and the authorities were amazed that the students continued to work without supervision.... As the weeks turned into months we found that we built a very united and harmonious little community. (Dwyer, 1970, p. 16)

Fortunately, my mother was able to complete her Montessori teacher education studies before she was forced to flee Uganda, in 1972. President Idi Amin Dada Oumee, considered one of the cruelest despots in African history, ordered all Ugandans of

Asian descent to leave the country. My mother took her diploma, along with minimal personal items; she had to leave her albums behind. Eventually, she landed in the United States and ultimately used her knowledge and skills to bring Montessori to Shia Ismaili Muslim communities in Houston, TX, and beyond.

My mother understood the importance of education from the first day of a child's life. As an immigrant, she also understood what it felt like to be "othered," and she recognized the difficulties of starting over. The hope she felt from her first exposure to Montessori, combined with the deep empathy and love she felt for her immigrant community, led her to work with other women to independently advocate for their children's education through Montessori.

Inspired by the children and guided by Montessori's fundamental principles, these women built each other up, learned to speak English, and became teachers and leaders in their community. That legacy was passed along to my brother and me, and now we have the privilege of watching his children—

my 3-year-old nephews, Ayaan and Ishaan—begin their Montessori journeys.

This is just one story of how Maria's legacy transformed and inspired one woman. Imagine the countless individuals around the world who, by way of Maria Montessori, have created ripple effects of positive change in their families and communities. Maria Montessori gave our world a gift that will continue to live on. I am thankful that her work has become my own life's mission. Montessori has been a blessing to me in so many ways beyond the classroom, which is why I am honored and humbled to be part of our American Montessori Society.

Reference

Dwyer, M. J. (1970). Report from Tanzania. *AMI Communications*, Vol. 2-3. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Association Montessori Internationale, p. 16.



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