WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The choice of a Montessori education for our children is different from what most parents choose. How will it impact our children’s future?

ME Alumni brings you the first of our “Where are they now?” interviews of Montessori East Alumni. We plan to feature a variety of people, one per term in the newsletter. We hope you enjoy them.

Today's Alumni, Antonia Ross was a little early for the Montessori East Primary School, which began with seven pupils in 1997 in Vaucluse. She finished at our Vaucluse pre-school in 1995.

Where are they now?
Antonia Ross Age 23
1993-95: Vaucluse Montessori Pre-school
1996-2007: Years 1-12, SCEGGS Darlinghurst
2008: Gap Year
2009-present: UNSW studying Law and International Relations

ME Alumni: So you went to SCEGGS after Montessori Preschool. How was your transition to SCEGGS?
Antonia Ross: Smooth. I just remember getting used to a uniform and all the girls.

MEA: What do you value most about your Montessori experience?
AR: So much! I wish so much that I had been able to stay longer. They are such formative years and I often talk about it with my close friend Natasha Bartos, who has been a really good friend ever since Montessori. I loved having so many classes outside, and planting and growing things. It was great that we all had responsibilities, things that were our job, and we learnt such practical things, like tying shoelaces. It made us realise we could do things ourselves. Being able to choose our own activities was so good.

MEA: What are you doing now?
AR: I’m in my fifth of six years studying Law and International Relations at UNSW.

MEA: Tell us about what you have done since leaving school. How did you spend your gap year?
AR: I started with a gap year in 2008, and worked until July that year in restaurants to save to travel. I went to Guyana on a volunteer Youth Challenge Australia Project; six weeks educating people about HIV Aids, Family Planning and Sexual Health (with no prior training!) The men were generally reluctant to learn but the women, who had many children, were keen to ask all they could. The project village was a day and a half drive from the capital Georgetown, had no running water, no internet, no phone, no radio tower, and most food was cooked over a fire. The nearest phone and shop were four hours drive away. The phone was broken and the shop had virtually nothing in it. Food supplies given to the volunteers were insufficient, and despite being given okra by local villagers everyone lost weight, it was hot, we had no energy, and towards the end we ate plain rice twice a day. I then travelled for 4½ months in Brazil, Ecuador, Europe, Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam, returning in February 2009 just in time to start uni.

MEA: So you started at UNSW. I heard you spent time on Christmas Island. How did that happen?
AR: I spent two months one uni holiday volunteering with ALIV (Australian League of Immigration Volunteers) in the detention centre on Christmas Island. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. I was the Team Leader and ran the recreational programs for the detainees. Things like yoga, movie nights, games, and general support. Whatever we could do to help them, I feel it was worth getting up in the morning.

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MEA: How about your studies?
AR: The best year of my uni studies so far was spent on an International Studies Exchange in Guadalajara, Mexico. The biggest challenge was learning completely in Spanish. I’d like to do another exchange next year, for Law. In International Studies, I’m involved in an interesting research project with the Australian Human Rights Centre (AHRC) to improve the human rights of women anywhere in the world.

MEA: And I’d love to hear about the G20 trip.
AR: In April this year I went to the G20 Youth Forum 2013 in St Petersburg, Russia, as representative of UNSW. The lecturer for my final International Relations paper nominated me. This was amazing. It’s essentially a G20 for Under 30s, and there are some non-G20 countries there for greater regional representation. There were three areas of participation; the Conference, the Summit, and the Young Parliamentarians Debate. I was in the Summit, at a round table about the future of education. We produced a communiqué, “The Ideal Future of Non-tertiary and Tertiary Education Systems”. The Communiqué will be disseminated throughout the world and shared with the G20 Heads of State, the IMF, World Bank and the OECD.

My Montessori experience was really helpful, especially the way Montessori caters for different learning styles, and the opportunity for all students to make choices and learn outside. The G20 Youth Forum was an amazing opportunity to meet a huge variety of people from a variety of disciplines, academia, and business, from around the world.

MEA: How do you consider that your Montessori experience influenced the person you are today?
AR: I think Montessori has had a big influence on me, and especially my independence, and my willingness to travel independently anywhere. I think it really encouraged me to be independent in a supportive environment. I love personal growth and jumping in at the deep end and I think Montessori has something to do with that. Also, the focus on community engagement. I have always done community work, and that was very present at Montessori. The vertical age grouping at Montessori is excellent in that you happily mix with people who are older and younger than you, and I like that. Other schools aren’t like that; you’re not supposed to mix with people of other years. I much prefer the Montessori way.

MEA: Do you have a funny memory of Montessori you’d like to share?
AR: Yes, a lot, I remember it so clearly. One of my favourite memories is of Marcello (Harasty) and Mimi’s (Hayton) wedding one lunch-time outside. Natasha (Bartos) was the flower girl and William (Jensen) was the pageboy, and we made rings from the grass and flowers outside. I don’t think the teachers knew there was a wedding outside. It was so much fun.

The AHRC research project Antonia is involved in can be found here [link] and her recently published article here [link]

Antonia has generously offered to share her experience for the Alumni Mentoring Program which we are currently working on establishing. More about that coming soon.