

# APPLYING MONTESSORI THEORY TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF POVERTY: A UNIQUE MULTI-GENERATIONAL MODEL OF TRANSFORMING HOUSING, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY FOR AT-RISK FAMILIES

by Kathleen Guinan and Linda Hansell

*The authors accept urban reform as their main calling with their aim being to break the poverty cycle with a multi-faceted, educational, and family-centered approach. The authors speak about providing a broad range of education programs and social services including low-cost housing in comfortable apartments for single mothers, early childhood educational programs, adult education programs, career coaching and job skills training, family support referrals, a home visitation program, a children's garden, whole-family practical-life orientation, and a community center.*

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**Kathleen Guinan** is the founder and CEO of Crossway Community. She has more than twenty-five years of experience initiating and managing programs serving families and seniors across socioeconomic lines. Kathleen Guinan is a leader in the effort to transform transitional housing programs, homeless shelters, and domestic violence centers into communities of learning using Montessori principles to bring about social change. Under her leadership, Crossway Community has repeatedly earned national recognition, including Fannie Mae's Transition Award for best practices in supportive housing, a designation as a "Community Solution for Education" by USA Today, and participation in the Yale School of Management Non-Profit Excellence Program.

**Linda Hansell** is the director of program and resource development at Crossway Community. She has over twenty-five years of experience designing and implementing programs that increase educational opportunities for underserved populations. She worked for fourteen years at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education directing innovative educational programs for Philadelphia public school students, including a cross-cultural city-suburban school partnership program, and a large-scale tutoring program in which Penn students were engaged in one-to-one tutoring of pupils in Philadelphia schools. She developed and

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Dr. Maria Montessori's revolutionary vision of optimal education was deeply linked to an equally powerful vision of social reform driven by the potential inherent in children. By following the child, by attending to their needs, respecting their interests, and guiding (not dictating) growth, we come to see the possibilities of a better world. It is this spirit of hope and possibility that animates the work of Crossway Community, and is exemplified in Crossway Community's work to end the cycle of poverty for low-income single mothers and their children. Founded in 1990 and located in Montgomery County, Maryland, the core of all of Crossway Community's programs is the belief that education is the key to success, and that every family, regardless of income or other factors, deserves the opportunity to succeed.

Crossway Community is a unique, nonprofit, educational venture that views the integration of children's and family social and economic development as essential for ending the cycle of poverty. By offering a multi-faceted, family-centered, residential approach infused with Montessori principles and practices for adults and children, Crossway Community provides a path to financial stability for low-income single women with children who seek to emerge from poverty, homelessness, and domestic abuse.

Several purposeful program features make Crossway Community unique in its work with vulnerable families, including an integrated set of programs and services for children and adults across three generations, provided in one residential location, and the use of Montessori principles across all domains of the organization.

#### **AN INTEGRATED SET OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES**

Crossway Community provides a broad range of programs and services for its constituents. These services include housing for low-income single mothers and their children in attractive apartments in a residential facility, a Montessori early-childhood education program,

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*taught a related course called "Tutoring in Urban Schools: Theory and Practice." Linda holds a PhD in education from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA from Williams College (MA).*

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an adult education program (the Family Leadership Academy), career coaching and job skills training, practical life-skills coaching, individual and family support and referrals, a home visiting program, a Montessori children's garden, and a community center.

### **The Family Leadership Academy**

The Family Leadership Academy (FLA) is a residential, comprehensive educational program for single mothers who have experienced domestic abuse, poverty, and homelessness, and who seek to improve their own life and that of their children. Mothers and children in the FLA stay in apartments at Crossway Community for three or more years, as they work towards post-secondary degrees or training, enter the workforce, and become financially independent.

The FLA adult education curriculum provides experiential training in five content areas: 1) family and social stability (including parenting education); 2) financial literacy; 3) education and career development; 4) health and safety; and 5) practical life skills. The program requires participants to take coursework in risk prevention, parent education, and workforce skills. While at Crossway Community, the

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mothers become employed and increase their education while developing good work habits and skills. They learn to manage their own campus apartment and household budget, and they become fully engaged in their children's education. Participants also receive practical life-skills coaching and home visits by Crossway staff members. The FLA gives these women the tools they need to become effective parents and prepares them to succeed in education and in the workplace. The concept of environment as the greatest teacher is embedded throughout the curriculum.

## **Crossway Montessori Children's House**

Crossway Montessori Children's House is an on-campus Montessori school that enrolls both the children in the FLA families and children of families from the surrounding community who choose a Montessori early childhood experience for their children. Crossway Montessori School serves children who are the ages of three months to six years.

Crossway Montessori Children's House aims to cultivate curious, compassionate, self-directed, socially responsible citizens who work collaboratively, respectfully, and peacefully as interdependent learners in a diverse community. The integration of children from neighborhood families and children from the families in the FLA builds social capital among the children and families in the FLA.

In addition to providing the traditional Nido, infant community, and primary Montessori classrooms, the Children's House also provides an all-day Montessori experience for three- and four-year-olds. Montessori all day is an extension of the home environment. After the three-hour Children's House morning cycle, the children play in a beautiful outdoors environment. Then they have a full hour for lunch, which encompasses family rituals: The children share responsibility for setting the tables and for cleaning up after meals, and they use china plates, glassware, and cloth napkins. After lunch, some children rest or nap while others resume working with Montessori materials and activities. The afternoon portion of the day provides the all-day child with opportunities for outside play and care of the outdoor environment.

## **The Community Life Long Learning Center**

Crossway Community functions as a community life-long learning center by opening its doors to individuals and groups who want to utilize the facility to hold meetings, provide training, and run programs. Community integration is a critical component of Crossway's FLA curriculum. The Community Life Long Learning Center hosts civic, fraternal, educational, arts, and community groups for meetings, conferences, and rehearsals. Organizations participate as community partners to make the center a hub for adult and family education and to create and sustain meaningful relationships. Ad-

ditionally, the center maintains a food pantry, a clothing and diaper pantry, and provides resources and referral services.

## USING MONTESSORI PRINCIPLES AS A THEORY OF ACTION THROUGHOUT THE ORGANIZATION

### **The Prepared Environment**

One of the key principles of Maria Montessori's theory of optimal education is the prepared environment. In keeping with Dr. Montessori's belief that the environment is our greatest teacher, Crossway Community pays close attention to the aesthetic environment throughout the facility. Crossway Community is a transformative, place-based educational program for at-risk women and their young children. For families who have lived through abuse, neglect, and chaos, the calm created by an esthetically pleasing and orderly environment provides a healing atmosphere where individuals are able to grow and move forward in a positive way. As a residential program, the design and maintenance of the environment, both indoor and outdoor, lies at the center of Crossway's approach.

Crossway Community is guided by the principle that human beings thrive when they are surrounded by beauty. Therefore, residents' living, working, schooling, and socializing spaces are



carefully prepared to meet the practical as well as aesthetic needs of the community. Crossway Community believes that the physical environment strongly influences individuals' outlook and behavior, and a well-designed environment can create positive change and healing for those families and children who are the most vulnerable in the community. For children, the spaces are accessible, orderly, clutter-free, and inviting, and they enable exploration, concentration, and independence. For adults, both residential spaces and common areas are also orderly, light-bathed, and filled with beautiful, but simple furnishings. From the placemats used by the children for their breakfast and lunch in the classrooms, to the layout, arrangement and furnishing of the thirty-seven apartments on campus, to the construction of a new, commercial-grade teaching kitchen and communal dining area, the goal is to provide an aesthetically pleasing environment that promotes a sense of internal calm, self-efficacy, and self-worth.

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### **Practical Life Skills: From the Classroom Environment to the Home Environment**

Children in Montessori classrooms engage in practical life exercises that teach them to care for themselves, for others, and for the environment, as well as prepare them for other areas of the curriculum by building skills of order, concentration, coordination, and independence. Similarly, the mothers in the FLA receive coaching in practical life skills to help them become competent, confident caretakers of themselves, their children, and their environment. The women are coached on how to create family stability by developing healthy routines with their children around mealtime, bedtime, home and property maintenance, and care of the environment. They also receive instruction and coaching on how to cook nutritious meals, stay within their monthly budget, time management, and effective home management (shopping, banking, cleaning). The mothers are coached on how to prepare the home environment to support the

child's independence and to identify the child and family's needs (emotional needs, clothing, food) in a timely manner.

Crossway Community staff members visit each participant's home once a month to review how the family is doing on these practical life skills. The child's teacher also visits the family at home regularly to enhance the communication between the parents and the school and to reinforce the ways in which Montessori principles can be carried out at home, such as supporting the child's independence, making sure the child is present and on time every day, and is sent to school prepared with clothing, supplies, and lunch.

Nutrition education has always been a part of the FLA curriculum. However, a new program has been added this year to provide classes in healthy cooking, nutrition, and culinary arts. The cooking classes foster healthy life choices, improved family stability, success in school, and employment skills. Many low-income women and children are at risk of obesity, diabetes, and other health problems related to poor diet. The women in the FLA are learning how to cook healthy and nutritious meals for themselves and their children, and this foundation will prepare the families for a lifetime of healthy eating habits. By learning cooking and food preparation skills, the women are also learning a marketable skill. They will have opportunities to practice the culinary skills they are learning at community events held at Crossway throughout the year, as well as in an internship at a local restaurant.

Community suppers are meals prepared by volunteers from local community and civic groups and neighbors. These suppers are eaten communally with the families in the FLA. This program element is key to fostering social and emotional development.

#### **COMMUNITY, CREATIVITY, AND LEARNING FOR ALL FAMILIES**

Crossway Community's broad vision is to facilitate community, creativity, and learning for all families. Infusing Montessori principles and practices throughout all aspects of Crossway Community's programs for children and adults is integral to this vision. From an intensive approach to supporting vulnerable single mothers, to the beautiful environment maintained for all members of the community, Crossway views education as an "aid to life" for learners of every age.



Crossway's emphasis is on providing the highest quality early childhood education to a broad spectrum of families. The staff members at Crossway Community have applied Maria Montessori's vision of social change fueled by service to the child to their work with young mothers and family networks. Both the mothers and the children, who experienced severe anxiety in the past, benefit from a calming atmosphere, where they can walk through Crossway Community's vegetable and flower gardens or observe the artwork that decorates the halls. In providing a safe place for the mothers to experience new ideas and practice new ways of living, Crossway Community gives them the confidence and critical thinking skills needed to become successful, nurturing, and productive providers for their families. Through careful attention to, and application of, the Montessori principles of the prepared environment and practical life skills, Crossway Community serves as a model for poverty alleviation and fosters community, creativity, and learning for all families.

