

## Meet **Christine Simonson** and **Trie Smith**, Co-Directors Countryside Montessori, Kirkland, Washington

based on an interview by Bonnie Neugebauer

Based on a commitment to partnership and a determination to make things happen, the story of Countryside Montessori is filled with laughter, respect, and serendipity.

Trie Smith brought her newborn son to work at a Montessori school in North Seattle, but when he became a toddler she knew she needed a different plan. “None of the programs I visited were good enough for my son! What I really wanted was to open my own school, so when I met a woman ready to finance the venture, we became partners. That was in the days when banks were reluctant to lend money to women; but after many rejections, we found our way to a female banker with a young child — and got the SBA loan. I knew this was the right thing to do; I just couldn’t give up until it happened. We bought three acres and a wrecked building in an area where the need for child care was high, and opened our program in September 1983.

Christine Simonson: “Six months later, I came rather reluctantly to the scene. I was home with my children and needed something, but I didn’t think child care would be it. Trie called so many times that I had to see Countryside. From the first moment, I knew this was the place I wanted to be. I immediately felt a deep sense of responsibility to be here. When I walked in, Trie said, ‘It’s about time you got here,’ and she handed me the keys!”

Trie: “I decided early on that I wanted a business partner. My original partner was unable to let go of her original school and make the move, so I encouraged her to sell. I knew I wanted Chris-

tine to be my partner even before I met her.”

Christine: “This isn’t a strict Montessori program. Montessori was a scientist. She kept what worked and discarded what didn’t. We try to do the same. The world for children today is different and we need to respond to that. Montessori didn’t work with babies — we enroll children at three months. Creativity is also important to us but wasn’t to her. We are Montessori trained and use Montessori materials in a structured learning environment.”

Trie: “I have loved Montessori for a long time. It’s so organized and the children are so happy. Respect and responsibility are the focus of our work and relationships here. We start early working with the children and by age two or three they have the words and know how to problem-solve. New children are welcomed into the community and taught by other children how to work and relate to each other.”

Christine: “Many of our staff have been here almost as long as we have. When we choose staff, we look for people who have that connection with children. It’s inborn; you can’t train it into people. You can tell if they have it by how children relate and react to them. We look first for people with that natural gift and then we look for the training and education they need. In order for children to do well, we need to give staff what they need to treat children respectfully.”

Trie: “We train staff to give children as much attention as they need when they

have a problem. This builds trust when children know they are loved and cared for. We work together to create a *focus of concern* on any child with special difficulties. All the staff in the school are involved in helping that child. For example, when we enrolled a child who was hard of hearing, the whole staff learned sign language. Then we meet with parents to see if we need to reach out to other resources to address the child’s needs.”

“We’re also here for staff. We treat them with respect and honor. Everyone is here for a purpose. It makes it like a family. Home for the child must be home for the parents, too. In fact, children are usually ready to move on before their parents.”

Trie: “I like to have an audience. I need to share. I like being married. I need to have a partner. I don’t want to do everything, but it’s hard to delegate. Others will do things to their own expectations, not mine. Their perceptions will never be mine. My job is to give information, trust, and feedback. When you delegate, you can never take it back and redo it. And it’s a mistake to give away the things you really enjoy doing.”

Christine: “We’ve learned to be very up front about what we like and don’t like. Trie doesn’t like to take time to chat. She’s efficient and organized. She likes teaching, shopping, meeting, working. I like the people — helping people see a different perspective whether they’re parents or staff. People here know that when they want to get a new perspective, they come to me; when they want something done, they go to Trie.”

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Trie: “When people look for a partner, they usually want the other person to be just like them, but that won’t work. We need to partner with people who see things differently. We want to have fun; everyone should enjoy what they’re doing. We respect and admire each other. We’re nothing alike, but we accept and tolerate each other’s idiosyncrasies.”

Christine: “Trie is like a wizard in a huge black cape, flying through the sky in the universe of ideas, with me grabbing onto the folds of her cape. She’s spinning off all these ideas and tossing them to me. I discard nine out of ten of these ideas. The others I implement. I am quality control. I take the idea apart and decide whether it fits or it doesn’t. I can make anybody’s ideas better, but I can’t come up with my own. Trie is the engine and I keep everything oiled.”

This deep understanding of partnership transfers to staff, parents, and children. Every classroom is staffed by co-teachers so that everyone has someone to share with — an audience. Trie and Christine believe that everyone needs to talk or they’ll burn out.

Christine: “This is a place where children can be who they are. We don’t try to shape them into anything different from that. Growing up in this program, they transition to school with many of the skills they will need for success.”

Together, Christine and Trie have created a sanctuary, a place that is safe, both emotionally and physically, for themselves and for the children, staff, and parents who make this their place.