

Outdoor classroom takes local students back to the roots



By Brock Weir

As an educator, Maria Montessori was very conscious of the environment in which children learn. A healthy environment was fundamental to her philosophy and the Aurora school that bears her name has taken this philosophy to heart with the opening of their new outdoor classroom.

Hundreds of students, parents, teachers, and dignitaries gathered at the Aurora Montessori School on Industrial Parkway North for a twofold celebration: their annual fall fair and the formal dedication of their new outdoor classroom.

“After a few conversations and understanding benefits of an outdoor education, it was evident to PAC (Parent Active Community) that this would be a great addition to the learning environment at Aurora Montessori School,” said PAC member Jyoti Batra, standing at the hewn stone teachers’ table which rests underneath a shade structure.

Ms. Batra noted that teachers and students raised the first \$1,600 towards the outdoor classroom through a bake sale and a garage sale, and the fundraising only snowballed from there.

“What was originally a gazebo idea morphed into something bigger and here we are today, looking at this incredible structure. This project is a wonderful example of collaboration between teachers, the AMS, and our parent community. Because of all of you, our students will be able to enjoy many educational and fun events throughout the school year.”

The dedication of the outdoor classroom was a particularly poignant one for AMS owner Kian Kashani.

Thursday’s Fall Fair is formally known as the Founders Day Fall Fair in honour of his late mother, Sharon Kashani, who founded AMS in 1989. Ms. Kashani died aged just 49 and September 27 would have been her 63rd birthday.

“I am sure if she was here today, she wouldn’t necessarily be celebrating her birthday as much as she would be celebrating the young kids, students and families here,” said Kian. “She was all about revitalizing, rebirth and growth, and (these) grounds reflect that: a place of life, a place of change, and the fact that it is fall, and it is the season for change, it is nice to get that feeling that change is in the air.”

“I would like to celebrate the students who will hopefully make this classroom home and have memories here that they can cherish in the future. I would like to thank everyone here for their generous time and energy they have donated towards this cause, as well as all of the parents who saw fit to donate and support this. From my part as owner of the school, it is my pleasure to be able to support such initiatives that are formed and materialized from the grassroots of the school itself. This is not a vision that was born of myself, it was a vision by the teaching staff here at the school and it is absolutely beautiful to see it materialize.”

The circular learning space is outlined with hundreds of colourful stones, each individually painted by an Aurora Montessori School student. Ms. Batra says this personalized touch was inspired by a book called *There’s Only One You* which teaches kids about accepting and celebrating their individuality.

“You will see over 300 pieces of rock and it is for each student to find their place,” she told *The Auroran* following the formal ribbon cutting, noting that now the outdoor classroom is complete, the school has introduced a new outdoor studies curriculum. “We have got this environment and one of our teachers plans to put a whole lesson plan together. The benefits of outdoor education are evident across the globe. We have beautiful grounds and we wanted to utilize this in the best way possible and get children outside

to learn. As much as learning can be done inside, we can do that outside too and they get to enjoy the grounds as well as the benefits.?

Mr. Kashani expressed a similar view.

?We are all for the physical interaction of children with the environment, as opposed to a passive, technology-driven type of interaction with the world,? he said. ?If we can get kids outside and interacting with the environment, the elements, we just feel the quality of the learning that will take place will exceed that which would be on a passive medium like a tablet, an iPhone, or what have you.

I think the only way you can realistically measure the success of any curriculum or any type of learning that happens in the school is to see if it inspires interest in students. If you see that they have a greater interest to actually use the space and gravitates towards it, that enthusiasm usually translates into some form of curiosity and energy to pursue some sort of academic endeavour, that's what we believe in as Montessorians ? student-directed learning. If we can create a scenario where they are interested, we feel we have done 90 per cent of our work. They are the ones ultimately that are doing the learning. We don't learn them as some people say. They are the ones who are involved in their own success in life.?