

Making Kids Feel Important
By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor
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Lucy Golden's practice helps her stay optimistic as she experiences successes and failures with at-risk kids.

Lucy Golden's classroom is one of those bland portables that have become a symbol of overcrowding in Florida schools. But what's inside is anything but bland. It's a place she sees as a cozy, intimate home: A place where students made their own tie-dyed curtains out of old sheets and recently threw a surprise party for her during Teacher Appreciation Week.

These kids at Pine Villa Elementary School in Goulds, a community that borders Miami, are in a Title I Montessori program. This means that most of them live at or near the poverty level. But here at school they're rich: Full of energy, curiosity and a love of learning. Here kids in first through third grade are eager about science and math, reading and writing.

Mrs. Golden stumbled onto the Montessori program at a time when her frustration with the traditional public school system was mounting. She had earned her degree in theater and education at Hunter College, in New York, where she graduated in 1984. She taught for three years in East Harlem and then for a year at an international private school near the U.N. Headquarters. When her family (which today includes her husband, Victor, and four children) moved to Miami nine years ago, Mrs. Golden, who also speaks Spanish fluently, taught ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) at both the elementary- and middle school-level.

"I was very disenchanted with the way my kids weren't learning," says Golden, who has been an SGI-USA member for 14 years. "I believe it was through my practice that I was able to find this path. I was at the right place at the right time."

During a teacher's workshop she saw a bulletin about a grant program to attend Barry University in Miami and train as a Montessori teacher. "I actually had missed the deadline for the grant, but someone had dropped out, so I got in," she says. "It was a true benefit because it was everything I was searching for."

For her internship and later placement, she had a choice between the Title I program and a magnet Montessori classroom, which would have included students from more varied economic backgrounds. She chose Title 1. "Maria Montessori originally worked with children who were poor and didn't have the same privileges," she says. "I really wanted to put the program to the test working with the Title 1 program."

Montessori, who was a contemporary of Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Einstein and a fellow peacemaker, believed that the path to lasting peace begins with respecting the dignity of each child. She also believed that children teach themselves. The Montessori teacher actually is a guide, whose responsibility is to set up a stimulating environment and provide an example of how to learn to the student.

For Golden, Montessori's ideal is a lofty one to live up to. She thus sees her classroom as the ideal place to do her human revolution, a place to constantly refine her character in the mirror of her students.

"In one sense, I intentionally chose this classroom," she says. "On the other hand, it's a natural place for me to be because I have a lot of anger myself. I can understand the anger they feel. I came from a troubled childhood and as a kid I was very angry.... I know my students well, and they're comfortable to be who they are for better or for worse.

"They see me as a human being, not a person who's perfect," she says. "A person who has her good days and bad days, who sometimes gets ill and doesn't have as much energy. They

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see me in a very natural way. Sometimes I get angry about their behavior, but behind my anger they know I really care about them. It's not like I scare them. I'm not a perfect teacher, but the underlying message they get from me is they are important and I care about them."

That message comes across clearly to her students. They have days when the challenges they face at home spill over into the school day, but they know Golden will strike a balance between overlooking this and requiring them to change.

"She's nice. She'll give us another chance," says Terrence Henderson, 8. "We love her. She helps us sound it [words] out," says Wynton Jones, 8. "I learned to read here and to write in my journal," says Michelle Palacios, 9. She holds up her journal and reads the story she has just written, an imaginary earthquake drama.

Lamar Dozier, 8, a third-grader who has been with Mrs. Golden for three years, is eager to share about his school work. "My favorites are the flower lessons and math," he says. "I've learned about different kinds of flowers. Some are poisonous and some are not. We went on a field trip, and I saw poison ivy. Now I know never to touch it."

And what does he want to be when he grows up?

"I don't want to get killed," he says earnestly. "I don't want to be a police officer or a fireman. I don't know what I'd do if someone pulled a gun on me. Maybe I could be an ambulance driver. I want to be safe."

Ulysses Hodges, 7, is about to complete his first year with Mrs. Golden. "He likes his teacher very much," says his mother, Lottie Hodges, who arrived to pick him up at the end of the day. "She really teaches them very well. He loves it and he's come a long way. He made the honor roll and had perfect attendance." Ulysses also has big dreams for the future: "I want to be a doctor," he says.

Many of the third-graders in Mrs. Golden's classroom have been with her for three years. The relationship which Mrs. Golden has developed with her students due to this consistency is one of the things which has impressed Stephanie Pope, Mrs. Golden's classroom assistant. Although she has worked in other schools and has six children of her own, this school year was her first experience in a Montessori classroom.

"It's been one of the most enlightening experiences for me," she says. "Each child progresses at their own pace.... The lessons are more in depth. It really makes you think.... And the Montessori teacher is essential. She can't be replaced by a regular substitute."

The most important attitude Mrs. Golden brings to the classroom, says Mrs. Pope, is confidence. "It all boils down to how the teacher sees herself," she says. "You have to have the confidence you're doing your best. She has a lot of confidence and she has instilled some of that confidence in me. She also took the time to show me how the classroom materials work. Attitude-wise, she is very, very positive. She's a very strong woman."

Mrs. Golden says she uses her practice to keep her attitude positive.

"It makes me more optimistic," she says. "When you're working with inner city children, it can be depressing — the reality of what they're faced with and the odds. For instance, three out of four African-American males end up in jail. That's my classroom. That's the reality right now. But I chant daimoku for them and I know that if I really instill confidence in them, they have a chance."

After four years, she has seen both successes and failures among her students, but she never gives up on them.

"If I wasn't practicing, I would be burnt out," she says. "I think I would be discouraged. But through this practice, I go through daily self-reflection. I question whether I was too strong with this child or should have given this child more positive feedback. I re-evaluate everything I do and redetermine to do better."

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