

Creating Community

A Conversation with Carole Wolfe Korngold

Over the past 10 years, one of the 50 or so AMS-affiliated teacher education institutions has consistently produced about 10% of the teachers certified by the American Montessori Society. The same institution initiated the first teacher education course in the country for the infant-and-toddler level and one of the first elementary-level programs. And that same institution is presently pioneering again—this time a reading readiness program to help parents work with their very young children called “Montessori Home.”

The Center for Montessori Teacher Education/New York was founded in 1979 by Carole Wolfe Korngold, who is still its executive director and motivating force. Described by those who know and love her as “awesome,” “cuddly,” and “a pixie,” Korngold has been designated as the 1999-2000 “Living Legacy” by the AMS Scholarship Committee, in recognition of her contributions to the organization and to Montessori education in general.

Her experience as a school administrator stretches back to 1966, when Korngold was instrumental in founding the Montessori School of Albany, NY. She has also served as early childhood director at the Caroline Montessori School, White Plains (1972-73) and was founding director of the early childhood bilingual program (English and Hebrew) at the Westchester Day School, Mamaroneck, NY (1973-82), and the Montessori Children’s Center at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, White Plains (1991-present).

About Carole . . .

When I read about Carole Korngold’s accomplishments—children and parents touched, schools and teacher education programs launched, communities all over the planet introduced to Montessori education—the magnitude and scope of these achievements are awesome. But what I find especially extraordinary about her work is measured on a much smaller scale: it is the personal attention she gives to each task, the warmth she brings to each relationship. Carole is truly brilliant at being with people. She makes them feel special and, from that positive place, brings out the best by giving opportunities to do well, be creative, expand their abilities. She empowers people every day. *Robyn Breiman*

Korngold’s connection to teacher education spans the past 30+ years, as well. When she helped to found the Early Learning Training Center at the State University of New York, she served as the program’s first administrator (1968-71). She was also involved in teacher education through the Montessori Workshop Associates, Greenwich, CT (1973-79), and served as director for the AERCO-Ithaca Montessori Teacher Training Program (1977-80).

A member of the AMS board of directors 1985-91, Korngold served as president from 1989-91, following 3 years as chair of the continuing education subcommittee and 2 as co-veep for public affairs and communications. Since becoming a representative to the AMS Teacher Education Committee in 1976, she has chaired the screening committee and task force for the infant-and-toddler level, as well as participating as a member of numerous other committees.

Through CMTE/NY’s association with the College of New Rochelle, NY, Korngold is an adjunct instructor. When Chaminade University invited CMTE/NY to offer “satellite” courses in Honolulu, Carole held an adjunct faculty position there (1985-93). Past satellite locations have included Adrian, MI, and Dayton, OH (infant-and-toddler); Altoona, PA, Albany, NY, and Anchorage, AK (early childhood); Albany, NY, and Philadelphia, PA (elementary). Currently, CMTE/NY offers early childhood and elementary satellite programs in Toronto, Canada, and Phoenix, AZ, and an early childhood course in New Jersey.

To me, Carole is the embodiment of the Montessori philosophy. She has been gifted with the ability to look at the past, present, and future of the Montessori movement. She is both a friend and colleague to all. It has been an honor to know and work with her. *Joan Daly, SSI*

Carole is . . . such a strong woman of vision—truly an inspiration. . . such a compassionate, warm woman—truly a mentor. . . such a funny and fun-loving woman—truly a friend. It has been an honor and a privilege to work and play with Carole. *D’Neil Duffy*

Carole was my first introduction into teacher education. She helped me to look past the surface mechanics of teaching and encourage

Korngold speaks with pride and great satisfaction of her diverse experiences as a national consultant, which have encompassed public and private schools, childcare centers, business, HeadStart, and programs for the homeless and children with special needs. Among the organizations she has worked with since 1973 are two native American tribes in New York, public schools in Anchorage and Yonkers, two programs for children with disabilities, and three public agencies.

A popular speaker, Carole has presented workshops on a wide range of educational topics for many schools, centers, programs, and organizations throughout the United States and abroad over the past 20 years.

Since earning a B.S. with honors from Syracuse University (1957), Korngold has completed AMS Preprimary Certification at SUNY-Albany (1968), an M.A.T. with honors and NY State Teaching Certificate N-6 at Manhattanville College (1974), and AMS Infant-and-Toddler Certification at CMTE/NY (1982).

In 1996, Korngold co-chaired the First Montessori World Congress in Rome, Italy, which was co-sponsored by CMTE/NY and the Associazione Centro Nascita Montessori, Rome. Another recent career highlight was her invitation by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to participate in the White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning in 1997. Along with Carole’s designation as AMS Living Legacy, both events were appropriate honors and suitable culminations for a life of service to young children and the adults who teach them. So many can say with Ginny Varga, Korngold’s close friend and associate of 20 years, “Meeting Carole, working with her, traveling with her, sharing in her family life, and becoming her friend have added excitement, joy, a sense of fulfillment and meaning to my life. Carole’s love and

the inner development of a teacher’s heart. For more than 22 years, she’s been mentor, colleague, and confidante. *Lilian Mullane*

Year after year I observe a phenomenon that continues to bring joy and energy to the Montessori community: Carole Korngold. Untiring in her efforts to support everyone who has chosen the challenges of teaching children as their life’s work, yet her busy schedule is never too full to stop a moment and reflect on a child. The smile which crosses her face with delight is etched in my memory to be held up again and again. The world’s Montessori community has been blessed with her tremendous vision and her boundless spirit. *Claudia Jensen*



Up on skis at age 5, Korngold says she learned about the “mind-body connection” and the importance of keeping active from her mother, Faye, now 87, who stopped skiing only a few years ago. Passing on the model, Carole ran in the NY marathon “awhile ago” with her daughters, K.T. and Jamie.

respect for people, young and old, is felt by all who are lucky enough to know her.”

Joy Turner: Carole, I heard a rumor that before Montessori came into your life, you were a head buyer at Bloomingdale’s! It seems like quite a leap to the education of young children; how did that happen?

Carole Wolfe Korngold: What you heard was true! But I took a sabbatical from Bloomingdale’s and moved up to Albany to have my children. And then I went to a lecture by Nancy Rambusch. She was such an inspiration that I wanted to be able to have her kind of experience, to be part of that world, for both my daughters and myself. There was a need in that community for a Montessori school, so we started one with a group of parents and I worked as the administrator—the Montessori School of Albany.

JT: It’s still going, right? And do you ever go back to visit?

CWK: I do, and it’s wonderful. They now go through age 12 and they just celebrated their 35th anniversary.

JT: How did you happen to become involved with a teacher training center?

CWK: One of our teachers, Irene Krull, was active with AMS. She had a friend, Jim Loomis, who was a psychologist with Head-Start in Harlem and wanted to train his teachers in Montessori. So we started one of the earliest AMS programs, in conjunction with the Psychology Department at the State University of Albany. David Elkind did our Child Development, Hilda Rothschild taught Philosophy, Rosa Packard and Lilian DeVault Kronke did Language, and Nancy Rambusch did Math. I remember that we had set up all these wonderful golden bead materials, after going down to the docks to pick up our equipment ordered from Eu-

rope. Then Nancy came in and announced she was going to do something new and different—Unifix cubes!

JT: Sounds like typical Nancy!

CWK: But she was inspiring, she really was.

JT: She was a great teacher, I think. She gave the Philosophy section in the program I took in Los Angeles in 1964. Now, were you teaching in the school at that time?

CWK: No, because I had no Montessori background. I took the training after we started that program in 1968.

JT: Tell me about being in a classroom; when did that begin, for you?

CWK: When we moved back to New York, I really had to make a decision whether I would stay in Montessori or go back to merchandising. I decided—and I tell my students this every year—I decided there had to be more to life than just convincing people they should get a black patent-leather handbag every spring. So I did my internship with Sr. Marion Schuman at the Caroline Montessori School in Westchester.

JT: At some point in the dim past, I remember seeing Hebrew movable letters you made out of wood. How did that come about?

CWK: That was when we started the Montessori program for the early childhood level at the Westchester Day School, which is a Yeshiva. That was very exciting for me, and it’s still going!

JT: A good number of programs have started because of you, Carole. You must have a “founder” gene! But who are the people who have inspired you, on your Montessori journey?

CWK: There are too many to list all of them, but let me mention a few. The very first was Leslie Kilbride, who came from Scotland with her husband and children to be our teacher at the Albany school. It was from her that I felt the working spirit of Montessori. And then Hilda, wonderful Hilda [Rothschild]. And Bretta Weiss; she was national director while I was president of AMS, and she gave me such great support and leadership.

And then there’s Ginny Varga, who has great wisdom based on experience, the continued love of learning, and a delightful sense of humor. She has the genius of not only accepting all people but also assisting them in developing to a new level of competency. This is true for people in all stages of development—an infant learning to pull up or beginning to walk, a teacher learning to see the toddler with a new understanding of the need for consistency, the parent learning to accept the new independence of the child, or her fellow educators who look to her for their own continued growth.

The other people who have inspired me are my colleagues, the faculty I work with at CMTE/NY. They have supported and shared my visions and dreams as we worked together to see many of our goals achieved. And right beside me all this time was Frances Oldi.

JT: You were one of the first to be drawn to the infant-and-toddler level. Why has it held such a strong attraction for you?

CWK: I like to joke and say that it’s one group of students I’m taller than! But through Ginny Varga, I found the development of the youngest children fascinating. And I’ve always believed that children’s success is directly related to how they were interacted with when they were infants—which is certainly what research is showing us now. Training teachers for this level was an opportunity for me to feel I was contributing to a new opening in education; it was a very big challenge—and I do like challenges!

JT: There are a lot more infant-and-toddler programs than there used to be, but still not very many considering the need for them.

CWK: More and more are needed and, sad to say, the care is still terrible! A recent *Newsweek* article described the effects of both center and home daycare on children whose welfare mothers had to go back to school or to work and had to take what they could find for childcare. Many of those children are developmentally delayed! It’s scary! The investigators found children sitting in front of TVs or wandering around aimlessly. This is an important issue for me. Montessorians, because of their great respect for individual children and for spirit, should be the ones operating childcare. We know what we’re talking about when we say



"We are now five generations of strong women," says Korngold. The four pictured here are Carole, Faye (mother), Sarah (grandchild), and K.T. Carole's daughter Jamie (right) is a rabbi in Calgary.



respect. Never picking up a baby without telling her first what we're going to do, waiting until the baby looks at you so you're not interrupting what the child is doing or looking at. You don't see that in most programs or in home care.

JT: What about your own childhood, Carole—what were the things that influenced you?

CWK: Well, first of all, I come from a family of very strong women! At present, we are five generations of daughters! And someone once said, when you have a good thing going, keep it up! My mother and father always told us we could be anything we wanted to be, so I think this was a message I carried with me all through my life. At 87, my mom is still active and very involved.

JT: Does she still ski?

CWT: She stopped a few years ago, but she still plays tennis and golf and walks extensively. The whole idea of keeping active, the importance of the mind-body connection, is something I really did get from my childhood.

What inspires me most about Carole is the thrill she gets out of the successes of the people around her. So many times I've seen her eyes sparkle when someone told her about an exciting project or a solution to a problem or a new idea. Her immediate response is, "How can I help? What can we do?" Her enthusiasm and generosity have fueled the development of many an innovation. I celebrate Carole Korngold because she celebrates people every day. *Biff Maier*

Carole has more in common with Peter Pan than the pixie haircut and impish personality. Like Peter, she helps people fly. Carole inspires, challenges, cajoles, and believes so strongly in us, her colleagues and friends, that we aspire to our very best. What we confide to her as dreams, she dares us to make reality. . . . Carole's pixie

JT: How about your immediate family; are they involved with Montessori?

CWT: My daughters are both Montessorians, in their own ways. Jamie, whose travels have always taken a new and exciting route, is now a head rabbi in Calgary, Canada, and works to build a sense of community in her congregation. K.T., a writer who has published articles on Montessori, is instrumental in our new "Montessori Home" venture and the mom of my delicious grandchild. Sarah, who is 3 now, allows me to see the wonders of our world fresh and new. Her life bears witness to the empowerment and love Montessori education can give to a child. And, of course, there's my husband, Bob, who has traveled this journey with me and helped me develop my dreams, my vision, and my personal and professional commitments.

JT: I know how much that kind of support matters. Carole, what do you think about the attitudes of Montessori teachers and schools toward working with parents: have they changed over the years?

dust is her ability to help us believe in ourselves, to find our vision and give it flight. I like the me I see in Carole's eyes. She makes me dream more, dare more, do more. She helps me fly. *Sheila Reed*

Carole's commitment to children and to the adults who serve them is a model. She truly is a "living legacy." *Cheryl Smith*

Time and time again, Carole has put in my way opportunities for both professional and personal adventures. . . . One of the pleasures of being in the CMTE/NY community with Carole is that she works in a truly collaborative way with her staff, honoring the questions, process, and ideas of all. *Holly Stoehr*

Carole has a special gift for developing a sense of belonging and community among

CWT: Not enough! Today's society is not easy for families; it's hard!

JT: It may never have been easy. . .

CWT: But it's much more chaotic! Family lives are very busy. I think television, computers, and the Internet bombard us with so much more information than we can absorb. The media are so visible and the news is so negative and scary; it doesn't seem like a very safe place. Our children need families and schools where they feel protected and cherished, our families need schools which treat them as partners. And then we have teachers: overworked, underpaid. How do you get the two together? It's a major problem. But you have to work toward building community; you can't include a child in the school unless you work with the family.

JT: What are the best ways for Montessori schools to do that?

CWK: In a "President's column" I wrote back in 1991, I listed some of those things—a weekly coffee time for parents with the administrator, social gatherings so parents can meet other parents, making breakfast available so parents can eat with their children before going to work, a special rocker for use by mothers with infants, siblings joining each other for lunch, a monthly potluck with free childcare, preparing dinners once a week for parents and school staff to take home. I especially like that one.

JT: That reminds me of Montessori's vision of a communal kitchen; the family orders dinner in the morning and at the proper time it's sent up to their apartment by dumb-waiter (Montessori, 1964).

those who know and work with her. Her warm, caring concern for people has touched the lives of many, helping thousands of children, parents, and aspiring teachers to become all that they could become. I have never known any other human being who so loved people. Carole is, and will always be, a living legacy for the Montessori community, the CMTE staff, and me. Congratulations! *Gimmy Varga*

Carole lives her commitment to Montessori Education through her dedication to community-building at every level of her work. From the warm and caring environment she creates for students and staff at CMTE/NY to collaboration with national and international colleagues, Carole consistently models Dr. Montessori's vision of a peaceful world community. *Bretta Weiss Wolff*

CWK: I also think we have to make a special effort to include husbands and fathers and single men who are partners, because men don't participate much in the school unless there's a special push to have them involved. And the other thing is that our teacher education programs need to develop a course in better understanding today's parents, so that we really make an effort to deepen the regard of the Montessori school for the situations families find themselves in. Perhaps that is an idea for a traveling teachers' symposium. But I do know we have to start slow, with a few people, and keep working hard at it. And I know how difficult it can be; I haven't even been able to institute all these things in my own school.

JT: Tell us about the high points of your Montessori life. What have they been?

CWK: There have been many! Being president of AMS, of course, and being invited to and participating in the White House Conference. Co-chairing the Montessori International Congress in Rome with Grazia Honnegger. Representing AMS in Israel in 1980. The NAEYC conference in Washington, DC, in the early 90s, where I served on a panel about Montessori's impact on early childhood education with David Elkind, Lilian Katz, Peggy Loeffler, Ginny Varga, and John Chattin-McNichols. And travel! I've visited schools in Africa. After helping Dr. Lillian Moncada-Davidson start the Hilda Rothschild Foundation, I was able to visit the school it supported in El Salvador. Because of satellite programs for CMTE/NY, I was able to go scuba diving in Hawaii with K.T. and to see Denali, AK, with Bob. The staff teases me with "Every time you want a vacation in someplace special, you open up a satellite!"

JT: It was a creative way to see the world.

CWK: Absolutely! We could never have gone to many of those places on our own.

JT: Other high points?



Satellite locations of the training program have offered many travel opportunities. Here: Varga and Korngold in Hawaii, Carole and Bob in Alaska.



CWT: As you know, here at CMTE/NY we continually work on building collegiality among our faculty. A high point for all of us was last February; we had a 4-day retreat, actually in preparation for our on-site evaluation visit last summer, but it ended up being a wonderful time for study and a lot of fun.

JT: I know your faculty comes from all over the country; how many do you have now?

CWK: Counting some part-timers, I think about 50 people. And we all work pretty much together, you know, we come together at different times throughout the year, so Montessori has become much more than just a job. It really has affected both my personal and professional life. These people are really friends and it's very dear, very important.

JT: It's a special treat to get together. What do you predict for the future of American Montessori education in this new century?

CWK: I'd rather share my wishes than make predictions. Montessori education is very special, so we must reach out and share it with the world. We need to bring Montessori into the home. The need for quality childcare is desperate in our country, and we have an opportunity to see a major explosion of Montessori education as parents continue to seek alternatives to current childcare and school offerings.

JT: Is that because today's parents are more knowledgeable about what children need?

CWK: Yes, not all parents, but more and more of them are realizing the importance of the early years.

JT: And what about your own plans and goals for the future; any new projects in the works?

CWK: Well, our big project, of course, is Montessori Home, which has the goal of bringing Montessori infant-and-toddler information and materials into every home. You can find out about it at www.montessorihome.com.

JT: Any retirement plans?

CWK: No, but I wouldn't mind some more time for my grandchildren. I'm certainly for that! I want to continue to affect the lives of students and teachers and families all over the country and the world by bringing joy, professionalism, and a sense of honor to those working in this field. I want to change the way people view infants and toddlers and help expand Montessori education so that more people embrace the Montessori philosophy. I just want to continue doing what I do; I love it!

JT: We've been lucky in our choice of work, haven't we.



Korngold and some of the CMTE/NY faculty, which now numbers 50, posed here in 1991.



Co-chairing an international Montessori Congress in Rome with Grazia Honnegger (4th from right) in 1996 was a high point for Korngold.

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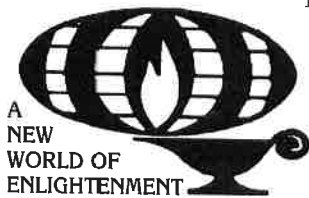


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CWK: I'm thinking of what our teacher education programs were like when we started, and how they've grown. We've come a long way—the people we've met, the people we've incorporated into our lives, the path that we've been on. May we have many more years of it to come!

Schools are the center of hope for many of our children. . . . By meeting the needs of all the adults and children involved, we are creating a school of learners. . . . working toward developing the identity of our children as multi-cultural citizens of the world, looking through other eyes and discovering other realities. . . . As educators we know that in the school setting children, families, and teachers experience more than education alone. Schools provide the human connection vital for our children of tomorrow. . . . The model for excellence in education is already here. It is called Montessori.

—Korngold (1991, p. 5)

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