

The Experiences We Live

Travelling. Living in other countries, on other continents. Learning about and living in different cultures. Eating different foods. Forging lifelong friendships with people from all corners of the globe, in every new place you call home. It's a bug that gets in you that you just can't shake.

It's the life of an ex-pat. It's exciting, new, different. It changes you in ways you could never imagine, stemming from the experiences you live every day and the people you meet.

When we moved from Zurich to a small village called Friedrichsdorf, just outside Frankfurt, Germany, our oldest daughter Priscilla was a little over two years old, and our middle daughter Virginia was six weeks from being born. At this time Priscilla had lived on two continents and in four countries. She wasn't quite old enough for school, but it was time for us to begin exploring our options. Our search was complicated by the fact that Priscilla has Down syndrome, which meant that we had to find a school that taught at least partially in English and, more importantly, one that would accept her.

As luck would have it, in little Friedrichsdorf, there was a bi-lingual Montessori school called the Rhein-Main International Montessori School, or better known as RIMS. We had been turned away by just about every other school in the greater Frankfurt area, but RIMS welcomed us with open arms. They had never enrolled a child with special needs, but they were excited about the prospect of beginning their journey to become an integrated school. Just by their reaction, which was one of openness and shock at what the other schools were saying to us, we knew this was the place for Priscilla, and us. It was also about five minutes from our house, which made it even better, and Priscilla's younger sister Virginia also began attending RIMS at two and a half.

As parents putting their child into a program we knew little about, we felt the need to really understand what was happening in the classroom. We went to all of the parent education meetings, we got involved in the school's volunteer activities, and we went to the parents' nights out. We did this over and over, throughout the two plus years that we were there as a family.

Our learning curve was steep, while at the same time sustained and additive. The more we immersed ourselves in the school and the experience, the more we came to understand and value it. We found that it isn't much different than being an expat. When you're an expat, the first few months are exciting and confusing. Trying to navigate new norms, a new language, strange government processes, meeting new friends, finding the best way around traffic, and all that goes into life, is a fun but sometimes frustrating challenge. It's not like going somewhere new for vacation, where you can cram information from the Lonely Planet and get by for two weeks. In order to assimilate, you have to stand back and observe, solicit advice from others, and just flat out try things a couple of different ways. All at the same time. It's not until after about a year that you finally start to feel that you get it, and it's not really until after about two years that you feel like you belong, that it is home. You have figured out how to navigate efficiently, and innately. Just as our children learn math by working with beads, or shapes by touching and feeling and fitting, or writing by manipulating the moveable alphabet, our best learning stems from the experiences we live every day. By participating, we gain ownership of our experiences.

Now, you might ask, why am I writing about living abroad and a Montessori school in Germany. What does that have to do with our Montessori school here in Wilton, Connecticut? Well, the answer is simple. We moved to Wilton BECAUSE of The Montessori School. When we knew our time abroad was coming

to an end, we had to start exploring educational options for our daughters, now numbering three with the birth of Charlotte. We were looking for consistency for the girls, as moving around is disruptive and transitions are difficult. From all we and our girls had gained from our experience at RIMS, we knew we wanted to stick with Montessori. When we first contacted Dana, we were nervous, since we had been turned away by so many schools in the past, but that was short lived, as just like RIMS, she too quickly welcomed us with open arms. We found the same warmth, acceptance and willingness that we had found in Germany. That was a welcome surprise, but even more welcome was the first day of school. The ease and comfort that our girls exhibited immediately validated our decision. As Priscilla said upon entering Heather's classroom that first morning "It's all the same!" and the transition became relatively seamless.

With that being said, an easy transition is a great reason to pick a school, but it isn't a good reason to stay. We stay, because the Montessori experience continues to provide the best possible opportunities for Priscilla, Virginia, and soon Charlotte. They are experiencing their education, not just listening to it. They are creating, manipulating, owning. They are not regurgitating. They are curious. They will one day do something new, just because it is new, and they will throw themselves into it. They will find what really interests and fascinates them, and they will make it their own.

It was RIMS that said yes, come. They opened a door for our family to experience a Montessori education and community, and ultimately brought us to Wilton and this school. And it is The Montessori School, and very importantly, the school community, that has kept that door open and allowed us to continue to learn from the experiences we live every day.

-Ian Graham