

Villa di Maria Graduates 10

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Tao + Lee Assume Villa di Maria Project



In the architectural plan for campus revitalization, each new classroom gains a covered outdoor area off the classroom.

Tao + Lee Associates, an architectural, planning and interior design firm with strong international experience and a long respected St. Louis family history, took over the \$5 million Villa di Maria Montessori School campus revitalization project.

Construction on the first phase of this project breaks ground Aug. 1 on the school's six-acre campus in residential Kirkwood and includes a new elementary classroom building, an open air pavilion and pool house.

This first phase will complete in 2017 after about a year of work, according to Helen Lee.

For the project, Lee, along with her husband, Peter Tao, the architectural firm's founding principals, described their concept

using a minimal, traditionally influenced architectural style with gabled buildings, a response to the school's desire for the buildings to fit in with the surrounding residential neighborhood.

Delayed last year when cost problems arose, the project as designed by Tao + Lee exhibits a similar but more open plan in the 7,000 square foot elementary building integrating three classrooms, a small library and common areas with fewer barriers.

The project scope still includes outdoor pool facilities and learning pavilion, both modified to conform to budget and integrated with the elementary building style, Lee said.

Lee committed to a collaborative approach for the project and to work closely with the client and the contractors, BSI, to ensure consensus on the project direction. She said the firm will consult

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Tao + Lee *continued*

on the budget and related issues to avoid any recurrence of the \$2 million projected budget overrun which resulted in a delay from the original start date last August.

From the original scheme, Tao + Lee changed paneling and metal work to siding which is more conventional architecturally and fits more easily and completely into the residential context of the neighborhood. The firm also did away with a projected rain screen for the elementary building and took the plan to a more functional, open approach.



Peter and Helen Tao, a distinguished husband and wife architectural team, take over management of the Villa di Maria campus revitalization project.

Unlike most classrooms in the greater metropolitan area, Lee indicated that the new ones at Villa di Maria will each pair with individual, covered outdoor classroom areas.

Phase one in its entirety encompasses, she said, three classrooms, three designated outdoor classrooms, coatroom, vestibule, mechanical area, toilets, kitchen, janitorial space, pool house, locker rooms and storage areas.

Tao + Lee Associates opened in St. Louis some 20 years ago after the husband and wife team returned to his hometown from working for larger firms in New York and London, England.

Tao's father, a building design engineer and graduate of Washington University, founded and owned William Tao & Associates here until 1988.

Both Tao and Lee hold masters of architecture degrees from Columbia University, New York, N.Y, where they met. In 2015 the City of St. Louis recognized the architectural firm with a Business of the Year Mayor's Award. Also, in 2015, they were awarded the Business of the Year award by the Asian American Chamber of Commerce and recognized by Who's Who Diversity in Color for their business and community leadership.

Villa di Maria's Laura Ceretti-Michelman, head of school, pointed out that the school possesses a narrow time window each year when construction can occur without disrupting school or their summer day camp operations and impairing the safety of the children.

"Any construction or expansion work at Villa di Maria must begin soon after the Camp Pagnita day camp ends on campus in early August and complete before the start of the next camp session at the end of the following May.

"Interior building work can occur during the summer, but we cannot allow heavy equipment moving around outside during camp. Sadly, we missed our window for this school year as a result of a poor exchange of information and bids in excess of the desired budget," Ceretti-Michelman said.

This phase one of the capital revitalization plan begins a complete redevelopment of the 6.2 acre Montessori school's campus at 1280 Simmons Ave. As part of this first phase, BSI will finish most of the infrastructure and utility work for redevelopment of the whole site.

At the completion of the whole revitalization plan over approximately five years, the school will boast six classrooms, employ 18 individuals and educate approximately 150 to 180 students.



New more open plan elementary building will give Villa di Maria three classrooms, a small library and common areas.

Villa di Maria 2016 GRADUATES

Jackson Sartain
son of John and Elaine Sartain

George David Muehlemann
son of George and
Teresa Muehlemann

Cecilia Anderson
daughter of Dave and
Melissa Anderson



Isobel Allen (Bella)
daughter of Cora Allen

Ava Cook
daughter of Cody and
Nicole Cook



Gabrielle McAuley (Gabby)
daughter of Aidan and
Reghan McAuley

Neel Weltken
son of Andrew Weltken and
Shamim Ansari

Enzo Nemens
son of Eric Nemens and
Sierra Cortazzo



Alexander Mahfood (Xander)
son of Sebastian and
Stephanie Mahfood

Noah Hartzler
son of Katie Mack



Capital Campaign Starts with Planning

Villa di Maria's capital campaign to fund the school's campus revitalization project started in earnest in early June.

In a new role, Maria Burr, a parent of three children at the school who worked as an assistant in one of Villa di Maria's three primary classrooms, will help organize the capital campaign alongside Head of School Laura Ceretti-Michelman.

Now in the silent phase of the campaign, a time for planning and advance gifts, Burr expects the public phase to kick off in late autumn after construction and the school year begin.

During the 2016-2017 school year, Villa di Maria will celebrate its 50th anniversary, so Burr plans to coordinate events and projects in line with this theme to raise the \$5 to \$6 million needed for the campus revitalization.

She holds a bachelor's degree from St. Louis University in mathematics with a minor in physics and worked for 10 years as an actuary.

"I'm excited about my new role and the transition because it allows me to support Villa di Maria and Montessori education," Burr, who is currently enrolled in the assistants to infancy course at the Montessori Training Center of St. Louis, said.

Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN)

HEADED TO THE GATE at Lambert Airport for an early morning flight, Villa di Maria fifth and sixth graders, accompanied by upper elementary staff Rebecca Callander-Liddy and Melissa Anderson, set off for New York City. The students picked up internet research skills, persuasive writing techniques, time management, public speaking and parliamentary procedures in preparing for MMUN.



Montessori Middle School Opens Aug. 29

Recognized as a seminal moment for Montessori and education in St. Louis, the Montessori Adolescent Program, commonly known as MAP, opens this autumn in the Grand Center area at 3840 Washington Ave.

August 29 heralds the first day of school for the Montessori middle school, the baby, brain child, heart's desire of Melissa Anderson, Laura Ceretti-Michelman and other Villa di Maria parents including Sarah Baiocchi, Wayne Prichard, Jess Whiat and Sara Krenski. Baiocchi, Prichard, Whiat, Krenski and Ceretti-Michelman all now sit on the MAP board.

The idea for MAP started forming in Ceretti-Michelman's mind some time ago, flowing from longstanding conversations in the Villa di Maria parent community.

Beginning with pre-enrollment tours at Villa di Maria, parents invariably ask what options exist for their children beyond graduation from Villa di Maria at age 12. "Over time groups of parents talked about and worked toward creating a middle school. We decided to solve the problem and answer the question of what comes next by carrying through what earlier parents had discussed and toiled over," Ceretti-Michelman said.

Initially, that led to an exhaustive search across the greater metropolitan area for property, for the best and most feasible location, for available space, for an interactive, diverse educational area in line with the tenets of Montessori. "We wanted a supportive neighborhood with much to offer adolescents, growing and developing and following their independent interests in and outside the classroom.

"We found a geographical need for an urban Montessori middle school and adolescent program east of Interstate 270. We wanted to set affordable tuition and refrain from establishing an elite or exclusive environment. Montessori is inclusive and

offers much, so we knew we wanted to be in the city," Ceretti-Michelman said.

After the group consciously chose the Grand Center area, Ceretti-Michelman and her husband, Jeremy Michelman, bought an architecturally significant building for the school at 3840 Washington Ave. Renovation under the direction of SPACE Architecture and Design started almost immediately to revamp the building's first floor, approximately 3,000 square feet, which will accommodate the inaugural class of 10.

"We're improving the first floor and creating the MAP space but leaving the artists' lofts upstairs. Construction is underway, and we are on target to open the school's doors in late August," Ceretti-Michelman said.

In addition, the board purchased the necessary classroom materials and hired a qualified team to work with the children. "We are ready to go."

Ceretti-Michelman said Grand Center offers much for the education of the students. "In addition, to the Channel 9 Network, St. Louis University, Powell Hall, the Fox Theatre, Grand Center has transformed into a vibrant area with resources and opportunities in step with Montessori education.

"Students will take advantage of the Pulitzer Museum, the Contemporary Art Museum and the St. Louis University Art Museum...and MAP, close to CORTEX. The students will benefit from the area, and the Grand Center area will benefit from them."

She pointed out that Montessori works best for self-motivated children who exhibit the ability to work independently and demonstrate a work ethic with confidence. "Montessori children understand that trying and failing makes for part of the learning process, and they possess highly developed executive functions."

"In the adolescent years, children change hormonally. It isn't smooth sailing with their bodies during these years; in some ways they are big toddlers. They need a different environment at this age.

"We mustn't talk at them but guide them to experience and learn by doing purposeful work and by providing opportunities to make a positive impact on the community that surrounds them. Adolescents must figure out where and how they fit in the world.

"Montessori and MAP will help the students become more independent and empower them while providing a safety net. We will foster greater learning and provide the best environment for them as individuals to develop. I have no doubt that they will each ultimately have a positive impact on and actively contribute to the world around them."

THE STATE OF VILLA

152 ENROLLMENT,
DOUBLED
OVER 3 YEARS

70 PRIMARY
82 ELEMENTARY

20 NEW FAMILIES

28 NEW CHILDREN IN 2016

87% RETENTION RATE

NEW CONSTRUCTION
STARTS AUG. 1,
COMPLETES JULY, 2017



montessori adolescent program

Stan Gellman Graphic Design created the logo above for the new Montessori Adolescent Program (MAP).

On Aug. 29 the new middle school opens to the first class of seventh graders. Each year MAP plans to add a grade through 12, so they expect to hold their first high school graduation in 2022.

Six Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) affiliated Montessori primary and/or elementary schools operate in the greater metropolitan St. Louis area and one other adolescent program at Chesterfield Montessori. Metro East Montessori plans

to open a middle school in the fall as well, Ceretti-Michelman said. At this time no Montessori high schools exist.

While not exclusive to matriculating Montessori elementary students, MAP will provide families and their teens with a Montessori learning environment which will help them reach their full potential as creative, critically thinking, socially conscious individuals, Ceretti-Michelman concluded.

Scholarship Seeds

With two children graduates of Villa di Maria, George Muehleemann believes every child would benefit from the Montessori Method at Villa di Maria, and he also believes in the power of classic word of mouth marketing.

So, with the support of Laura Ceretti-Michelman, head of school, Muehleemann, a contractor of large new homes in West County, recruited a committee of parents, past and present, to communicate the benefits of Villa di Maria and Montessori education one family at a time through what he calls a seeds scholarship program.

"Everyone I meet or know with a toddler, I start a conversation about Villa di Maria and its contribution to the education and development of my children and a community of others," he said.

Muehleemann and his committee plan to offer partial, limited scholarships to help parents defer the cost of sending their children to Villa di Maria.

"If a family I contact tours the school and enrolls their child in the primary program, I plan to provide a small stipend for each child, a partial rebate on the cost of attending Villa di Maria," he said.

If the new child stays at Villa di Maria, Muehleemann said he plans a second, somewhat larger rebate, which the family can use to reimburse themselves or to establish a spinoff scholarship or to buy a specific item for the school.

At this time Muehleemann and his committee do not ask for cash donations, although he admits they would not turn down money for the seeds program, but he said the committee will handle the limited scholarships on a person to person basis in an effort to sustain the growth of the Villa di Maria student body and to spread the benefits of its education and the Montessori Method.

"These seeds of scholarship represent the support Villa di Maria experiences from its community and the creative ideas that come from that community. George and his wife, Teresa Thompson Muehleemann, represent the best of our community in their dedication, generosity and creativity in helping Villa di Maria," Ceretti-Michelman said.

Ms. Megan Takes Up Residence

Thoroughly Villa di Maria and St. Louis focused, Megan Eilers, having completed her training at the Montessori Institute of Milwaukee in May, exudes excitement and commitment as she looks forward to starting as directress of the lower elementary classroom at Villa di Maria this autumn.

In the classroom Eilers, called Ms. Megan on campus, will shepherd about 25 lower elementary children, ages six through nine. This summer, she directs Camp Pegnita, the popular day camp held every summer since 1948 on the Villa di Maria campus, with 185 children and 40 staff this year.

Eilers said she feels that Villa di Maria and Camp Pegnita represent a second home.

She first showed up at Villa di Maria for primary school in the children's house and stayed through her primary and elementary years through the fifth grade. At 14 she returned that summer as a camp counselor, work she continued every year through high school and beyond. "Something always brought me back. Working at Camp Pegnita shaped my career," Eilers said.

She laughs about a photograph of her as a camp counselor holding a young child, Kelly Torrencet, now a camp staff member.

"My years as a student at Villa di Maria were the best. This autumn I know I can walk into the classroom and be transferred back into my childhood. The materials used are the same, and the buildings are the same," Eilers said.

Eilers contends that, despite much growth, Villa di Maria changed little over the years. "The outdoors and the landscaping evolved with specific changes on the playground. There have been some updates in the classrooms, but everything else, the warmth, the commitment, the community, feel the same.

"I suppose the biggest changes rest with the staff and the growth of Villa di Maria. I remember when the school, struggling, downsized. For a long time Villa di Maria held only two primary classrooms and cut back on the upper and lower elementary classrooms.

"Whatever was happening, the important things, the educational principles and all that I love about the school remained. It simply feels like my home."



As much as she loves Villa di Maria, Eilers admits that the upcoming campus revitalization may be a little tough for her. "But, I'm happy to see the school move in a new direction, get updated and avoid experiencing building failures. The heart of the school matters most. I know that the new architects took into consideration the homey feel we want to preserve."

Eilers left St. Louis and Villa di Maria three times—to pursue a bachelor of arts degree in psychology at Rockhurst University, Kansas City; to complete a psychology externship in Philadelphia, PA, working with adolescents with severe emotional and behavioral disorders at a residential treatment community for a year, and, more recently, to obtain her AMI elementary diploma in Milwaukee, WI, a qualification required to teach at Villa di Maria.

She also pursued qualifications in traditional education. With her course work completed, she expects to receive a master of arts in teaching from St. Louis' Fontbonne University this December.

Despite her traditional training, or, perhaps, because of it, Eilers, who loves children and sees them as her first priority, expressed dedication to the Montessori philosophy of teaching. **"Being in the classroom with children, you see that they love lessons and that the Montessori Method caters to the whole child by encouraging their social development and their creativity."**

Eilers and her husband, Steve, a financial analyst at Express Scripts, grew up with their families knowing each other well, but they did not date until college when they both attended Rockhurst.

Today, they and both sets of parents live in the Glendale/Kirkwood area. The couple owns a Pomeranian, named Pepper, and enjoys the outdoors, taking walks, playing volleyball, gathering at the pool with family and friends and taking advantage of local festivals and activities.