

LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

The Montessorian

“Finding Montessori was like finding the truth,” Curt Chamberlain says of his introduction to Montessori education in 1974. He trained with the famed Ursula Thrush and landed his first internship at Berkeley Montessori School. At the time, BMS was the oldest continually operating Montessori school west of the Mississippi: the opportune place, he thought, to plant his roots.

Curt would spend the next 14 years rising through the ranks at BMS from intern to teacher to ultimately, head of school.

What BMS was, he embodied it. His natural inclination toward children was as obvious as his commitment to Montessori. But marketing a thoroughly Montessori school was a challenge.

“Nobody knew what an elementary Montessori education was all about,” he recalls. “People just associated it with early childhood.” In 1990, the Strategic Planning Committee began plans to extend the elementary school and, eventually, start a Montessori Middle School.

Aside from figuring out how to market his



The most recent heads of school to serve TBS/BMS: Mitch Bostian (top left), Janet Stork (top right), Lee Davis (bottom left), and Curt Chamberlain (bottom right).

expanding Montessori school, Curt worried about something more: where to house it. At the time, BMS rented its space from a building owned by the Calvary Presbyterian Church at Milvia and Virginia. “We were maxed out there,” Curt recalls. “There was nowhere to add classrooms.”

A solution to that problem presented itself in a very unfortunate fashion. It was August 1994 and Curt remembers receiving a knock at his door and hearing this from a neighbor: “I just wanted you to know that your school is on fire.” A fire had started in the building’s gym and engulfed the upper floors. Thankfully, nobody was injured, but it was a tremendous loss for BMS.

“All of this wonderful Montessori material that had been around since the inception of the school was gone.” Curt also laments that all of the many classroom animals, which were intricate to teaching Montessorian zoology, were lost. It was a challenging time indeed, but the tragedy fast-forwarded the relocation that would be necessary to support expansion. Incredibly, just four weeks after the fire, Berkeley Montessori School welcomed students for the 1994-1995 school year on its new campus at the Hillside Primary School on Leroy Avenue.

Curt left BMS in 2000 after 26 years of service. “We had all these wonderful hopes and dreams. We put everything we had into these programs,” Curt proudly proclaims. He held fast to his



Curt Chamberlain 1990 - 2000



Lee Davis 2000 - 2006



Janet Stork 2006 - 2010

Mitch Bostian 2010 - present

Montessori principles for the majority of his headship but did not with regard to one critical decision. When it finally came time to open the Middle School in 1995, Curt hired a non-Montessorian named Gretchen Griswold to head the fledgling division.

The Driver

"I didn't know anything about Montessori. Nothing." Even still Lee Davis felt an initial kinship to BMS -- partly, she admits, because the school was on Leroy Avenue and Leroy was her father's name. There were many pluses to that building on Leroy Avenue. It was surrounded by giant redwood trees, a huge playscape, and plentiful green space. Complete with high ceilings and the expansive windows, Hillside was full of character. It felt like there was history in that building. But the campus was far from perfect. There were holes in the floors, fleas in the carpet, and flooding was an irritating fact of life. The campus's intractable flaw was that it straddled the Hayward fault and thus presented a safety hazard.

Lee's first directive from the Board was well articulated: "Find us a new space!" She happily accepted the challenge.

Six months after she signed her contract, a new location was secured. For that, she credits

the legwork that was done before her arrival. However, many in the community credit Lee for successfully seeing the school through the design and construction of the new campus as well as an ambitious mid-year move.

First came the capital campaign.

"We had to raise a million to have in the bank in order to prove we could support our bond,"

"I wanted everyone to know, walking through the door, that this was their school – their place."

Lee recalls. She refused to break ground until the campaign reached its goal and the loan was approved. She took care to involve the entire community in the new building project. Students were empowered to ask questions of prospective architects. "Where are the bathrooms?" they were always sure to ask.

1310 University Avenue was going to be the first campus the school actually built from the ground up. "I wanted everyone to know, walking through the door, that this was their school – their place."

Construction was completed in 2003 on time and on budget. "The Move," as it was called, took place during the two-week February break and involved a massive swap and purge. Pouring

buckets of rain greeted the faculty the day the moving trucks arrived. In a display of diligence and resilience proven during the last hurried relocation, the move down the hill was almost seamless. And now that they had settled into their new forever home, the school's focus could shift from "the site" to "the program." Enter Janet Stork.

The Change Agent

"You're either on the bus or you're off the bus."

Many faculty members cite that proclamation as their earliest memory of Janet Stork. She delivered that line during one of her first meetings as the head of school. Along with a bold attitude, Janet also brought a bold, new educational philosophy. Janet had strong progressive school credentials and was a self-described "pedagogical nerd." She introduced approaches to education that were rooted in brain-based research.

Her arrival signaled a pronounced and unapologetic move away from the school's firm Montessori tradition. Harvard's Project Zero and the Reggio Emilia approach were at the heart of the new identity Janet had conceived for BMS.

"Janet was the first person to ask people to look at their practice," current ECC teacher Maureen Beck recalls. "She wanted people to

decide what parts of Montessori were invaluable and what parts were details that were getting in our way.”

Though Reggio and Project Zero were similar and complimentary to the Montessori method, they were not Montessori; that was reason enough for many of the school’s traditional Montessorians to get off the bus.

Still, many remained and were more than game for the ride. Current Middle School Division Head MaryBeth Ventura describes the excitement of those years this way: “Janet came and we were on this rocket ship toward reaching our potential.” A new variety of families found its way to Berkeley Montessori School and Janet Stork was their main attraction.

Mitch Bostian recollects attending an open house as a prospective parent and being struck by the discussion of professional development. “I had never heard a head trumpet professional development,” Mitch says. That focus on continual learning among faculty is one that remains today.

The program was indelibly moving away from a comprehensive Montessori curriculum; that, combined with Janet’s non-Montessori new hires, completed the shift that began with a middle school that was never Montessori. At that point, the name change was inevitable. In 2009, the Board voted to change the name from Berkeley Montessori School to The Berkeley School.

The 2009-2010 school year began with an unprecedented newness. There were new faculty members, a new name, a new program, and with the move of the Kindergarten from the ECC to the University Campus, a new grade configuration. “It was kind of mind-blowing and

then, unexpectedly, we got the news about Janet,” Mitch recalls.

During the first all-school faculty meeting of the year, Elementary Division Head Zaq Roberts announced to everyone that Janet was sick and would need to take time off. Though Zaq fulfilled the role of Acting Head, Janet kept in touch through email and held on to many responsibilities. That continued interaction, along with Janet’s track record of besting all opposition, confused the reality that her illness was terminal. It seemed Janet, and maybe everyone else, assumed the cancer would eventually find its way off the bus. In the end, the cancer carried her away. Janet Stork died on April 5, 2010.

The rocket ship was without its captain and a cloud of unease blanketed the TBS community.

“It’s true that Mitch and Janet shared a common pedagogy, but Mitch made a point to articulate his own vision for The Berkeley School.”

The Answer

The year that Janet died, Mitch Bostian was already wearing three TBS hats. He was a parent, an English teacher, and the Middle School division head. The community offered him another hat: interim head of school.

Julianne Hughes, art teacher and then Board member, describes Mitch’s appointment as Janet’s replacement as the logical choice. People had the perception that Mitch, one of

Janet’s hires, had a deep understanding of her vision as well as the ability to carry it out. It seemed that Janet felt the same way. Before she fell ill, she took Mitch aside and expressed her desire that he would ultimately succeed her.

But succeeding a magnetic yet polarizing leader like Janet Stork would not be easy. The community was still wading through overwhelming feelings of grief and uncertainty.

“I spent March through June telling people not to worry,” Mitch recalls.

It’s true that Mitch and Janet shared a common pedagogy, but Mitch made a point to articulate his own vision for The Berkeley School.

Since taking over the headship in 2010, Mitch has improved the school’s visibility in the community and made strides to achieve long-set goals. TBS recently completed a multi-step accreditation process. The school has walked through the recent K-3 reconfiguration with ease and improved the articulation of a school-wide curriculum connection. Mitch has led the school through an incredibly dark time while humbly and patiently leaving his own legacy.

As Zaq Roberts puts it, “We fell down a flight of stairs, but we stood back up, with bruises and broken bones, and started climbing the stairs again.”

The rocket ship has landed and The Berkeley School is in the process of living out its potential.

Throughout its 50-year history, the school has continuously innovated to meet the needs of children. Montessori teachers have always understood the importance of putting the child first and though the school has gone through a significant evolution, the children still come first.

THE WAY FORWARD

At The Berkeley School, our faculty believe in the transformative power of seeing -- and feeling seen. They believe that children who feel seen will more readily develop resilience, confidence, and empathy: they'll learn from themselves, from their experiences, and from each other. This belief -- and the transformations that emerge from it -- have sustained our school for 50 years.

Knowing this, we jumped at the chance to engage in the CAIS/WASC accreditation process, which revolves around a newly revised self-study protocol. The process measures the school's operations against critical operational benchmarks while asking the entire school community to evaluate the educational program and its alignment with the school's educational mission and vision.

It's the same rigorous and reflective self-assessment that our faculty ask our students to do every day. We were confident that our school would learn and grow just as much from the process as our children do.

Associate Head Zaq Roberts and the Accreditation Leadership Team (Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator Sima Misra and parent volunteers Ann Buechner and Anne Baranger) led the school community through an 18-month self-study project that culminated in a comprehensive document described by the visiting accreditation team as "the most transparent we have ever seen." Using the document as a guide, the visiting team spent three-and-a-half days on our campuses,

meeting with members of every community constituency, observing in classrooms, and working exceptionally hard to help us see ourselves as clearly as possible in light of our goals and our mission.

At the end of their visit, the visiting team compiled a list of commendations and recommendations covering every aspect of the school's operations and program, and read them out to the assembled faculty, staff, and trustees. In addition to that list, the team gave our school a powerful message, urging us to move into the future confidently, knowing that our experience navigating change has made us strong, resilient, and self-aware.

That message was moving: a testament to the intentions our founding families set when they began our school in 1963, and to the efforts of families, faculty, staff, and trustees over the years since then. In fact, long-time faculty and staff discovered that the conclusion of the accreditation visit marked 10 years -- to the day! -- that children, staff, and families joined together to move grades 1-8 from the Hillside campus to their new (and current) home at 1310 University Avenue. Our celebration reflected the past (our 10-year moving anniversary), the present (our successfully concluded accreditation process), and our bright future. It was a fitting conclusion to a whole-school learning experience.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mitch Bostian". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mitch Bostian
Head of School