

# Elizabeth Seebeck and Oglesby Montessori

**A tireless supporter  
of public  
Montessori**



BY **HANNA RICHARDSON**

*Elizabeth Bryan Seebeck, a passionate supporter of public Montessori in Chicago, passed away at the age of 55 on October 11th, 2019, after a thirty-three month battle with ovarian cancer.*

*Seebeck was in particular a champion of Oglesby Montessori, a PK–6th grade Montessori program at the Richard J Oglesby Elementary School on Chicago’s south side. Inspired by her own children’s experiences at Near North Montessori, one of the oldest and most prominent private Montessori schools in the country, Seebeck spent years driving donated materials to the school when it had none, advocating for the school and public Montessori in Chicago, and organizing the Oglesby Foundation which she founded to channel financial support to the school.*

*Hanna Richardson worked at Oglesby from the beginning and shared this remembrance.*

Elizabeth was a passionate educator who lived and breathed Montessori. There is a lot to love about Montessori— independence, concentration, joy, the golden beads, the movable alphabet, the Great Stories, and so much more. But the real spark, the real root, of the approach is in the joy of and respect for children. And in all the Montessori work I’ve done, over many years, I’ve



*But most of all, she loved the children*

learned that this is something you can’t teach adults. Either they have it or they don’t. And Elizabeth had it.

Nine years ago, I was one of several new Montessori guides joining a public school on Chicago’s south side. I did not know what I was getting myself

into, working for a large district, but I did know that I loved children, I believed all children deserved Montessori, and that this was the next step on my journey.

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Let me tell you, it was hard! I was to set up a new classroom with 30 children, all starting on the same day, with no materials and no assistant. And I got through the first day. No one got hurt, but it was NOT Montessori. I thought I'd made a bad choice. I cried all the way home.

After a couple weeks like this, I was headed upstairs to commiserate with Ta Promlee-Benz, the new elementary teacher—I knew she'd understand! As I was walking down the hall, I saw this tall, slim woman with olive-toned skin

She pointed at Ta. "She taught one of my boys at Near North and when she told me she was doing this I asked her if I could come down to help. So here I am. Helping! I used to be a teacher too, so this is right up my alley." And she smiled. And all my anxieties sort of melted away. Elizabeth had this way about her. She just exuded this calm, natural ease that brought a gentleness to everything.

Elizabeth did everything in her power—and it was so much—to make sure that we had everything we needed

## She just exuded this calm, natural ease that brought a gentleness to everything

and long dark wavy hair walking in and out of the Ta's room, moving in boxes of materials. My first thought was "She must be from downtown. I wonder what strings Ta pulled." (Because I sure still didn't have any materials!). But as I got closer, I noticed she was in jeans, boots, and a pale green long-sleeved shirt, kind of half tucked in, in a disheveled way. And she was squatting to shove materials here and there. And she was laughing as she talked. And at that moment, I knew—this lady had nothing to do with downtown. She was NOT from central office.

Ta noticed me but kept on working and I stood there watching, but this other woman turned my way and stood up. She walked over and stood facing me, hips leaning to one side, and as she tucked her hair behind her ear with her left hand, she stuck her right hand out and said "Hi, I'm Elizabeth.

to make Montessori happen here on the south side. She bought and materials, gathered resources, and set up classrooms. She planned, funded, and attended outings, field trips, and even camp. She helped start a school garden, and she made lunch. She found families medical care, transported them to appointments, and drove children to school. She fought for us downtown when they threatened to shut us down or keep children from napping. She organized parents when they weren't being heard. She spoke to parents and administrators, and brought the press to our doorstep. She talked about Montessori all the time, connected us to the Montessori community, and sent us to conferences. She took photos. She shared laughs. She lifted us ALL up. She invited us all into her home.

But most importantly, she loved the children.

Elizabeth became so much more to me than random woman I met in Ta's classroom in those early days. She was my mentor. She was my friend. She was like family to me. She never once let me down. She always gave so much of herself. Without her, the Montessori program at our schools on the south side of Chicago would not have been what they were. As an educator, I would not be what I am. Elizabeth gave so much of herself to Montessori and the Montessori community has gained so much from her investing in us. I am so thankful she believed in the philosophy. She made the lives of so many of us better.

*Hanna Richardson is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School in DC.*

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