

international

The House of Flowers

Allison Lide describes how she came to set up a Montessori orphanage in Kabul and the profound effect it has had on the children

En route to a meditation retreat in 2000 I met a Montessori missionary – a Croatian woman from a public school in Washington DC. In our brief, intense conversation she introduced me to Cosmic Education and Montessori philosophy. I had taught science for six years, but these ideas seemed to address what had been missing. These principles of work and freedom pave the way for children to grow into who they naturally are - human beings with inner strength and a connection to others.

I was in Nepal at the time, having joined the Peace Corps in 1998. I had met my partner, Mostafa there just as he was establishing an NGO called Medical, Educational and Peace Organization (MEPO). In 2000 and 2001 he traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan and visited refugee camps where thousands of Afghan refugees lived wretchedly in plastic tents. There were no schools, but more than

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academics, these children needed the opportunity to develop, to strengthen their hearts and minds to overcome the trauma of their lives. I was reading Montessori's work by then, and felt Montessori education could serve that role like no other school; an intriguing idea but apparently impossible.

In 2002 due to civil war in Nepal, we relocated to Afghanistan. I found a job in Kabul with UNICEF, and we began settling in to that wonderful Afghan culture in a destroyed yet hopeful city. One day Mostafa came home with a new idea: we could start an orphanage where I could share Montessori principles with the teachers – a refugee camp school.

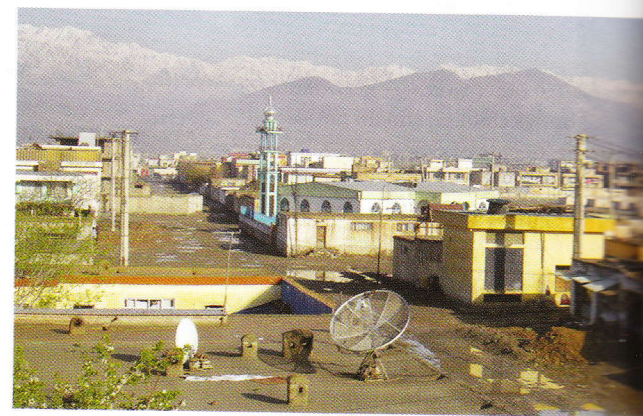
We collaborated with an Afghan NGO to get government approval and immediately rented a house. We bought bunk beds and household necessities. I began sharing what I understood of the Montessori principles with our new young teacher who, to my relief, got it.

Children came, referred by the Ministry, UNICEF, or neighbours, arriving malnourished, sick and traumatized. They were fed, bathed, and greeted cheerfully by the other children. They slowly joined the routines of the house, taking responsibility for their space and helping with meals and beginning to study. Almost without exception, within four weeks the changes were remarkable: the children began smiling with brighter eyes, a strong small handshake and confident greeting. They bloomed before our eyes. The House of Flowers was born.

By the end of that first year the House had grown to twelve bright-eyed children. My UNICEF contract ended in 2003 and I took the opportunity to get my elementary Montessori training



Top: Two older girls, Razia and her sister Nadia, as they work on the long bead frame and the stamp game (2006).



Above: View of Kabul from the rooftop of the House (2006).

Montessori lessons to Afghan culture and Dari language. Religious beliefs and a completely different history required identifying Montessori principles or 'keys' of the curriculum to develop lessons relevant for Afghanistan.

I returned to Kabul full of plans. The children and teachers were intrigued by the Timelines of Life and of Human Beings, and the geography charts. A generous and caring donor in New York began sending Montessori items from my wish list. At last, we had a bead frame, divided insets, decimal bead materials, and more. The teachers were amazed at the simple clarity of the concepts presented.

Since then, the Montessori nature of the House has continued to evolve. The children's difficult histories require an understanding of the psychological aspects of development: the Four Planes and Sensitive Periods, the role of Work, Normalization, Deviation, and Freedom. Some of the children have gone through long periods of deep anger, acting out, or depression, and we try to apply Montessori principles to meet their individual needs while setting the tone for the House.

Freedom has been a vital facet of the children's development. I shared with the teachers and staff the vital





Above left: Afghanistan, 2005.

Above right: The backyard of the House. Older girls write in their journals as boys play soccer in the background (2009).

make mistakes, to do things without help unless asked for. Having had so little control over anything in their lives, the presence of liberty and choice were critical to their inner growth and development of the will. These concepts were often difficult for the staff to understand or even believe, but through modeling and communication, all now recognize the powerful effect that freedom has had.

Another critical aspect is Practical Life, which is not classroom-based but means real responsibility in the House. The smallest children respond powerfully to work like carefully wiping the long tablecloth after meals, carrying dishes to the table, and folding their clean clothes. It visibly raises their sense of self, of contribution to the whole, and has a calming, stabilizing effect on them. The home-like atmosphere also provides them with the nurturing they desperately need. The House is naturally multi-age, ranging from 4 years old to early teens, and the older children readily care for the younger ones.

For the Second Plane children, intellectual and moral development is paramount. True to form, they crave learning about all aspects of culture. They learn and play with intensity, having been deprived of these things for much of their lives. They devour lessons in geography, health, science, history, math, poetry, calligraphy, and art, learning about their literary heritage. Several children, after their accelerated work, skipped one or two grades in the local school. Mostafa often conducted 'seminars', teaching medical topics such as how the ear works, or about vitamins and nutrition. When colleagues from the UN visited, the children listened intently and asked probing questions about the world. The broad scope of a Montessori education and exposure to other

cultures has been critical in the insular environment of Afghanistan.

For these Second Plane children, the staff organizes outings to the airport, the bazaar, bookstores, picnics, and the zoo. The children are given a weekly allowance, which they deposit in the 'National Bank of the House of Flowers', the in-house bank run entirely by the children. They created their own little store selling snacks and school supplies to each other and the

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Fereshta working: Four year old Fereshta (whose name means 'angel'), sweeping. Behind her on the wall is the First Timeline of Human Beings (2009).



staff and visitors, and issue library cards to each other. Real-world service work of giving to the poor in Kabul, and the daily challenges of living in a crowded, shared household provide opportunities to explore and develop moral standards.

These children are confident, self-

assured, attentive and responsible in ways that we never imagined possible. Reflecting on the House of Flowers as a Montessori-based orphanage, we may not have always been able to implement all of the Montessori materials and lessons, but despite this our Montessori experiment has proven to be a success as shown by the progress of the children. I feel the philosophical and psychological principles of Montessori education have been key in making the difference in our little home/school, in the lives of the children, and consequently in Afghanistan and humanity as well.

Epilogue

Mostafa and I left Kabul in 2006. Today, twenty-seven children continue to thrive at the House under the care of the dedicated staff. We call and email regularly, and this May, Mostafa returned for a brief visit. The House of Flowers remains an oasis of peace in the midst of the chaos and hubbub of Kabul. ■

(The House of Flowers is supported solely through private donations made to MEPO. For more information, see www.mepoonline.org, or email Allison and Mostafa at mepo_hope@yahoo.com)

Allison Lide is finishing her first year as an upper elementary teacher at The Montessori School in Connecticut in the US, after having lived overseas for the past ten years. She received her elementary certification from the FCISM in Bergamo in 2004. In Afghanistan, besides working with the House of Flowers, Allison worked with the Ministry of Education in teacher training and as a consultant for a women's literacy project. Since leaving Afghanistan in 2006, she and Mostafa have lived in Nepal, Ethiopia and Lesotho, where she has shared the Montessori philosophy with teachers at all levels