

## Montessori School of Lemont grew out of help the Kiwanis gave to an immigrant family

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*Norine Colby, left, founder of Montessori School of Lemont, with her daughter, Therese Colby, the school's executive director. (Susan DeGrane / Daily Southtown)*

The Montessori School of Lemont is using Zoom and Google Meet to teach 125 students age 3 through eighth grade, who remain at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Working from their classrooms, teachers maintain their same schedules.

Younger children even have the same naptimes along with a remote view of their favorite cozy corner. But there's flexibility too.

“With recorded lessons, students can fit in a walk on a sunny day and return to their lesson later,” said Therese Colby, executive director of the not-for-profit. “It's very important the wording for what we're doing is not e-learning. We're operating in a virtual classroom.”

The students are fortunate in that they have the necessary equipment, WiFi setups and dedicated teachers, Colby said. They're lucky in another way as well.

“Their school exists thanks to people who decided to help others,” she said. Colby would know.

A [\*\*Daily Southtown story last year\*\*](#) about local Kiwanis efforts to attract new members featured a 1950s photo of Kiwanis of Southwest Chicago members, including an unidentified girl, age 11 or so.

That girl was Norine Gibbons, now Norine Colby, 76, the mother of Therese Colby and the founder of Montessori of Lemont.

Norine said her path to success is due in part to support she and her family received early on from Kiwanis.

“My parents came from Ireland, around the time when businesses put up signs that said, ‘No Irish need apply,’” Norine said. “It went along with the idea, ‘Last here, last hired.’ Times were hard for my family and my father was a proud man.”

For several years during the 1950s, Irv Goldberg, owner of Golden Shoes, then located at 68th and Halsted, provided footwear for Norine and her four siblings. The shoes came as a result of donations originally solicited from Kiwanis.

Norine continued to buy shoes from the Golden Shoes store Goldberg later opened in Palos Heights. And she strongly associates Goldberg, now deceased, with the Kiwanis of Southwest Chicago chapter, which also provided her toys and fun activities at a special holiday event.



*Kiwanis of Southwest Chicago president Fred Steers, left, and Kiwanis members Al Greenberg and Willard Nelson, enjoy a moment of fun with Norine Colby in the mid-1950s. (Ridge Historical Society)*

Norine's father, John Gibbons, worked as an alternate bus driver for the Chicago Transit Authority. Her mother, Mary Gibbons, worked as a housekeeper. Help from Kiwanis, at the insistence of nuns from St. Margaret of Scotland Elementary School in Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood, enabled the family to devote more resources to educating their children. "My parents put a high priority on education for us because my dad had no education and my mom only two or three years," said Norine, who graduated from Academy of Our Lady High School in 1961.

Working as a waitress and administrative assistant in the insurance industry, Norine earned a bachelor's degree in education from St. Xavier after 12 years. She later earned a master's in education psychology from Purdue University and began work on a doctorate in education from Loyola University Chicago.

While still a college student, she read a Chicago Tribune article about Virginia Fleege, founder of the Midwest Montessori Teacher Training Center in Evanston. Fleege's "Early Childhood Geography & History Manual" provided the basis for lessons in Montessori classrooms.

"I decided then and there if I ever had children, I would want them to be taught with the Montessori approach. That was my first exposure to Montessori," Norine said.

"What appealed to me most was that with a conventional school the teacher is the center, but with Montessori the student is the center. The teacher is there to help the student polish their skills, to provide support on his or her learning journey and to help cultivate a lifelong love of learning."

Norine married Frances Colby in 1966. Therese, their only child, was born in 1968. While Norine checked out Montessori schools for Therese, she also signed herself up for training and certification as a teacher at the Midwest Montessori Training Center.

By the time Therese was 2 and old enough to attend Beverly Montessori, Norine was serving an internship at a Montessori School in Oak Lawn.

In 1974, when Therese entered first grade at Marie Montessori Elementary School in Hometown, Norine was co-teaching the class of 11 students. Portraits of mother and daughter even appeared on the 1974-75 class roster. Both have remained intertwined with Montessori schools, and especially Montessori of Lemont, ever since.

Norine stayed with Maria Montessori Elementary through several name changes and relocations. When parents decided to disband the school in 1979, she took the reins as executive director. The school moved to Blue Island, then to a community center in Lemont, then to a church.

With a donation of 7.5 acres from Joe Bonfitto, the parent of student Nick Bonfitto, the school moved in 2001 to its permanent location, 16427 W. 135th Street in Lemont.

Today, the campus features modern buildings, plenty of room to play and exercise, a walking trail and learning pond. Students ordinarily attend classes in age groupings, not strictly with age-same peers. They select hands-on projects to work on, rather than following rigid lesson plans. And they don't receive conventional grades.

Instead of speeches, they make presentations like the ones on the “Shark Tank” reality TV show. They raise vegetables and chickens on an onsite organic farm and sell the eggs and produce to pay for field trips and school programming.

Norine saw the school through numerous changes and expansions. She even guaranteed financing at one point, doing without and maxing out credit cards for a time, according to Therese.

In 1991, Therese, then 23, joined the staff as one of the youngest Montessori administrators. In 2013, she assumed Norine’s responsibilities as executive director.

Norine still teaches Latin to seventh and eighth graders. As mother and daughter, the two women are close, but while at school, they address one another as “Mrs. Colby.” Therese is married but opted not to change her name. Just as the other teachers, Norine is having to adapt her Latin lessons for distance learning.

Will she ever retire?

“And do what?” she asks. “I’m continuing to learn and to help my students learn. This is my life.”

*Susan DeGrane is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.*