

Keynote Address - Gretchen Hall
AMI/USA Refresher Course
Phoenix, AZ February 16, 2018

Sixteen years ago I attended my first refresher course, on the advice of a consultant. I was at once, awed and intimidated by the greater community and yet felt a connection to something bigger than my isolated work as a teacher. Since that day, I have attended every refresher course and my roles in the AMI community have evolved from teacher to administrator, consultant, trainer, presenter and as President of AMI/USA. From my experiences, I stand here today with a very different perspective of our community than from that naive teacher of 16 years ago.

It is from this perspective that tonight I would like to share with you a vision and an appeal.

From where I stand, the AMI movement in the USA is standing at a precipice - with beautiful vistas on the horizon and a terrifying view of the chasm below. How did we get here and how do we move forward is what we need to reflect on today.

At the core of AMI's mission is to preserve the legacy of Dr. Maria Montessori. We have worked hard to preserve that legacy and today we enjoy a reputation of quality implementation and high standards. Yet we have paid a price for this recognition. In preserving, we became protective. We fervently held onto the past and protected it from those who threatened it. Just as a mother protects her baby, the protection originated from a source of love and devotion. But as we know, too much protection is an obstacle to growth and over time we got in our own way. We became exclusive and were critical and judgmental of those who thought differently. Our movement became divided and fractured, even amongst ourselves. Individual needs were placed above the needs of the community. In protecting the past, we put the present and the future in jeopardy and we created chasms. A culture of "them" vs "us" evolved, a sentiment which is disturbingly reflected in our politics today. We began to measure others on how "Montessori" they are and we used the term "Montesomething" to discredit and devalue others. Classifying ourselves as "trained" and "non-trained" divided us further. We boast that our pedagogy lays the foundation for social cohesion, yet we have failed to achieve cohesion in our own community.

Dr. Montessori said: *All we need to change our fundamental attitude toward the child and love him with a love which has faith in his personality and goodness; which sees not his faults but his virtues.* Perhaps we need to reflect on our fundamental attitude towards each other.

Over time, we have pushed people away. Our membership is stagnant, our member schools are holding steady. Our training centers struggle with enrollment. AMI recognized schools comprise only 5% of the public Montessori schools, one of the fastest growing markets for Montessori education. There is a crisis in leadership as schools and organizations struggle to find leaders. New organizations are forming to fill the needs of the community that we can't address. We are teetering on the precipice and are in danger of falling.

Yet there is hope on the horizon.

- There are more trainers, training centers and course formats available, increasing access to prospective students.
- AMI Teacher Training courses are now linked to universities, providing students the option of

receiving Bachelor's and Master's degrees in conjunction with their AMI diplomas.

- Research is being coordinated across organizations to support the relevance and effectiveness of Montessori education.
- The Montessori Public Policy Initiative, a collaboration between AMI/USA and the American Montessori Society (AMS), is working with state and federal agencies to remove obstacles to Montessori education.
- Global School Accreditation, an initiative of AMI, is creating an inclusive path to support schools and teachers in establishing and maintaining high quality Montessori programs.
- The “Bold Goal” of amplifying social impact by tripling the number of trained adults in the United States, has entered the implementation stage after two years of data collection and planning.
- Finally, the AMI Affiliates in the USA have been working in collaboration for over a year and are committed to maximizing the impact of AMI in the USA.

We must continue to open our minds and our hearts to the future. We must drop our individual roles, identities, badges and acronyms. We must not be self-serving, but united in our service to children. We must build bridges between the chasms we have created. We must stand beside all who work for social justice and on behalf of children. That is our legacy and our mission.

So now, I will make my appeal in through a song, composed by the women at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the UK in 1983 in response to the development of nuclear weapons.

“Building Bridges”

*Building bridges, between our divisions.
I'll reach out to you, will you reach out to me?
With all of our voices and all of our visions,
Friends we will make such sweet harmony.*

The time is now. The best way to honor our legacy is to ensure our future. I'm reaching out to you; will you reach out to me? For I *know* with all of our voices, and all of our visions, friends, we will make such sweet harmony.