

## Montecito School Celebrates 25 years in Los Altos

Montecito School is 25 years old this month. Nestled under sprawling California Oaks in Los Altos, Montecito has served as a preschool since 1962.

Founded by Jim and Molly Matthews, the school fills an acre surrounded by mature Oaks, Cedar, Pine, Loquat and Cypress. "I realize how old we are when I hear a parent of one of our preschoolers recalling when the parent was a preschooler here," Molly Matthews said.

"In those days Jim played the guitar, and I was pregnant a good deal of the time," Matthews said that the school was often confused in those days with its neighbor, MonteBello Nursery. "And today," she said, "we're sometimes confused with Montessori or Montecito Sequoia."

Montecito actually began as "Matthews Merynook." Jim Matthews had spotted an ad for the Becky Tuttle Nursery School site, in the Wall Street Journal, and he and Molly decided to buy it.

"We were an idealistic, energetic and struggling young couple and we both loved children," Matthews said "But we had a lot to learn."

"We started with a nucleus of about 12 children," Matthews said.

From the beginning the Matthews searched for an old estate, where their preschool could grow and prosper. "Ford Country Day School served as our model," she said. They found what they were looking for in the ivy-laced home of the Kruegar family on Grant Road. "It became our home, and our business and eventually evolved into our logo," Matthews said. "We moved all the school's supplies and equipment over the long New Year's weekend, and opened our doors the following workday in January of 1962." Jim and Molly lived in the back two bedrooms, and used the rest of the house for their school.

"The Town Crier's Bulletin Board section became our bible for advertising, hiring staff, and locating the myriad furnishings and supplies for classroom materials as

The Matthews chose earth tones for their school, rather than the primary colors so often used in private preschools. They chose earth tones to help maintain the natural beauty of the site, Matthews said. A local welder made the wrought iron and wood chairs and playground equipment.

"And I remember sanding and Varathaning hundreds of building blocks," Matthews said with a laugh. "We use those blocks to this day."

She said the setting of Montecito allowed her to indulge her love for backyard animals and exploring nature with children.

"A neighbor lady farmer provided us with chickens, pigeons, doves, bunnies and ducks," she said. "For the classroom we had turtles, fish rats, guinea pigs, reptiles, birds, and once a tarantula." Over the years Montecito has been home to a pair of turkeys, two young pigs, a lamb and exotic peacocks. As the student body grew, so did the number of teachers at Montecito. Betty Williams was hired in 1963. With 21 years of experience teaching in private school, Williams helped design a kindergarten program, and as time passed she became the first full-time director at Montecito. Her husband was also hired, and the two of them devoted more than a decade of their lives to the school.

In 1967 a second building was added to the school. "I love to tell people how we bought the building for \$100 and had it moved down Grant Road from what is now the Foothill Baptist Church site," Matthews said.

"The move cost \$1,000. That was an exciting day. The buildings look so similar it's difficult to know which came first." The second building gave Montecito its first legitimate office space. Montecito followed the public school academic calendar from September through June, and offered a summer program through August. Traditions such as October's Halloween parade, the Thanksgiving sharing, the Holiday sing in December began to develop. Summer school has always been camplike, according to Matthews. "For years, Jim, our three children and I would gather for a campfire dinner over our handmade giant stone barbecue pits," she said. "Jim would play his guitar, leading the children in song, and I would read a good-night story," she said.

"We gave the children a camp breakfast the next morning, of pancakes fried on the grill," she continued. "The children would all go home by midmorning and the parents were always surprised that their little preschoolers could spend the night away from home.

"Today summer school is a good deal more structured," she added. By the early '70's Montecito's staff had grown to 20. Jim was a practicing

attorney in San Jose and Molly was pursuing graduate work. Stanford and San Jose State Universities were sending their early childhood education students to observe at Montecito, as a "laboratory" school.

In the mid-70's the preschool experienced hard times. Maintaining enrollment was difficult since families with two full-time workers needed full day care, and some corporate day care was developing. However, the staff continued to grow with JoAnn Cook, Caroli Johnson and others. By the late '70's Montecito had a sensory integration therapist, a speech and language pathologist, and a licensed clinical social worker on staff.

In 1980 Virginia Quackenbush was hired as program curriculum director. "In 1984 we added a final classroom," Molly Matthews said, "and like 15 years before, a building came down Grant Road. The Rainbow Room is a modular unit with wood siding and pitched shake roof. It serves as a classroom and houses our first classroom Apple IIe computer for our 4- and 5-year-olds," she said.

Today Montecito serves nearly 300 families, offering 17 classes for children who are not yet in kindergarten. Kim Kludt and Paul Shay are the two male teachers on the staff. After 25 years working with the "little ones" of Los Altos, what does Molly Matthews feel?

"Gratitude," she said with a smile. "I am grateful to be able to work with the naturally open, loving and spontaneous young child."

The fact that many of the children she has worked with, are now grown, and bring their own children to

Montecito is evidence that her preschool has made a significant difference in our community.

