

The Montessori motto: learn by doing

New director
of international
school starts year

BY BROOKE EDGE
FOR THE POST

The greatest sign of success for a teacher ... is to be able to say, "The children are now working as if I did not exist."

Maria Montessori used these words when describing her goal of guiding, rather than instructing children in a school environment designed to serve them, not the teachers.

In many ways, Susan Sears Smith is taking this approach in her new role as head of the International Montessori School of Prague (IMSP).

"My job is to support the school and make it appear as if business is the same but still find my own way," Smith says.

Smith, 55, came to Prague and IMSP three years ago as a certified Montessori teacher. Prior to beginning her life in child education a decade ago, Smith served others in a very different role, as a natural foods chef and cooking teacher in Colorado. After volunteering at a center for infants, however, a new pull took hold.

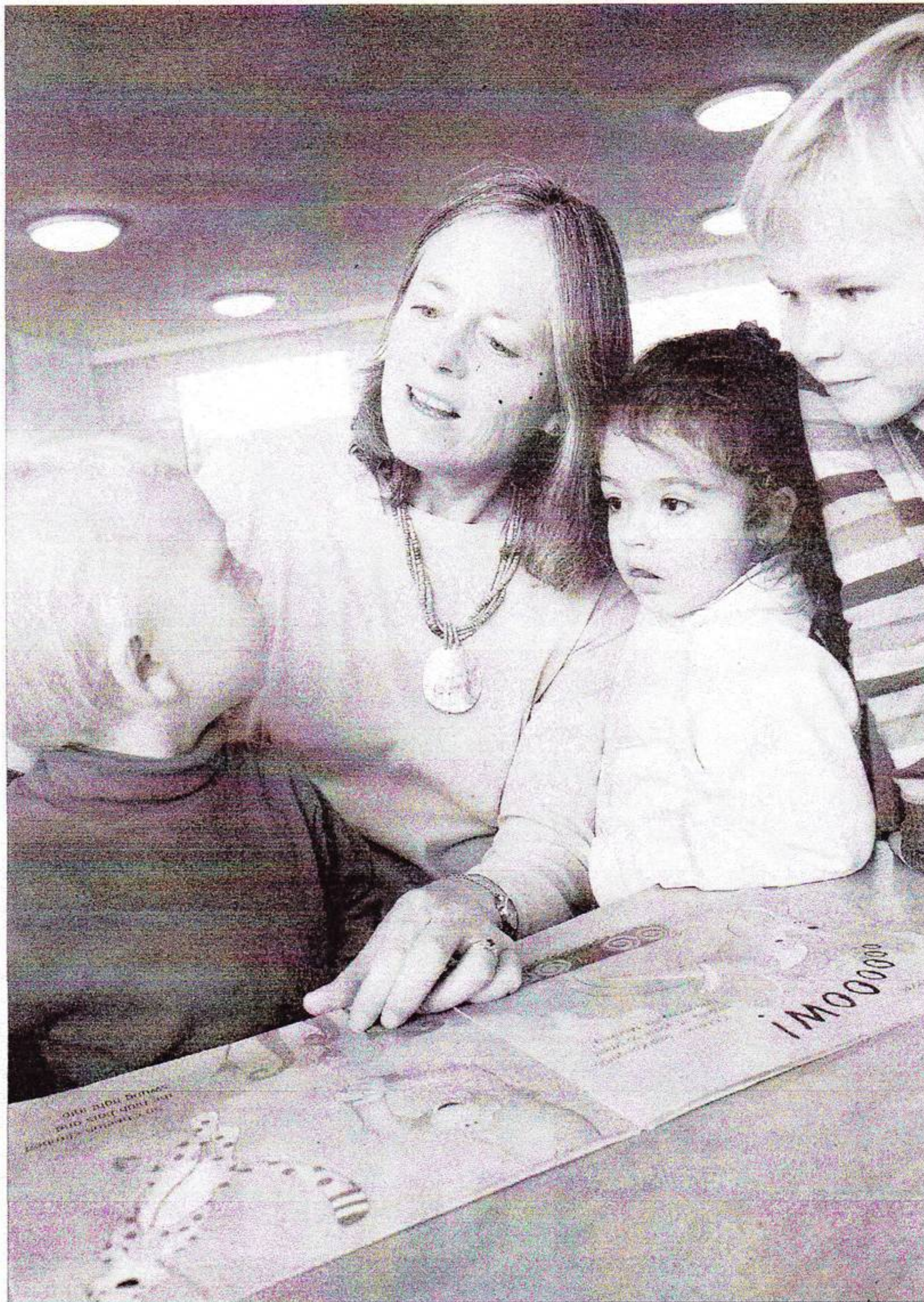
"The more I worked with children, the more excited I felt," she recalls. Smith downshifted to part time at her company and went back to school to study education administration.

As part of her studies, Smith was obligated to observe different methods of education and discipline at various schools. When she sat in on a Montessori class, she immediately found her niche.

"I had never seen what I saw that day ... kids acting independently and excited about learning," she recalls. "I'd never seen kids so active, so engaged."

Clearly, the visit left a deep impression on Smith, who still marvels about watching well-behaved children roaming freely, rather than being confined to desks, and studying as they wished — whether independently or in collaboration with their peers.

And so, after logging 250 hours of classroom observation and spending "two grueling summers" in training, Smith finally received her diploma of certification in the method. She worked as a Montessori teacher and administrator for four years in Colorado before getting the



Susan Smith reads a book with some of her young charges at the Montessori School.

itch to go abroad.

She accepted a job at an Australian Montessori school, but the post fell through. An online listing for a teacher at IMSP got her thinking about the Czech Republic — the location would be good for travel, and some of her family had roots in south Bohemia. A few months later, Smith and her husband arrived in Prague, and she started teaching.

By all accounts, it would seem she is well regarded at the campus.

"Susan has a quiet authority that marries well with the principles of the school," reports Jennifer Stason, the head of the school's parent association. "She works diligently to maintain the standards set by her predecessor and to continue improving wherever possible. I

believe her strength lies in her ability to get things done."

IMSP was founded in 2002, and is the only school in Europe to have received accreditation by the American Montessori Society. It enrolls 72 children from toddler through 12 years of age, with approximately 30 percent Czech students, according to Smith. IMSP adapts its English-based curriculum to Czech school system requirements, ensuring that Czech students receive the language training they need.

The school impressed Smith from the start. IMSP, she says, "really follows the Montessori philosophy." The name "Montessori" is not trademarked or legally associated with any one organization, so it is possible to use the name

without necessarily following a certain method, Smith is quick to explain.

The Montessori method is based on the educational theories developed by Maria Montessori, an Italian educator. In broad terms, the method is dedicated to the development of the child as a whole — academic, physical, emotional, spiritual and social. Through teaching methods and classroom organization that are notably different from those found in "traditional" schools, the Montessori system aims to cultivate independence and self-confidence within students.

"A big cornerstone is respecting the child," Smith says. She explains that guidance strategies are more about talking rather than telling, having a conversation with a child

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so the young individual can figure out a solution on their own.

"Susan as a teacher has a gentle way about her that is very nurturing," Stason says. "She has also brought with her a special appreciation and love of nature, which she passes on to the children with the forest walks that they enjoy together."

Recently, while visiting in the toddler classroom, Smith assisted some children with getting ready to go for a walk. Rather than putting on their jackets and boots, however, she and the other teachers knelt down and asked them what else they may need — mittens, hats? The teachers then watched as the kids worked out the problems of zippers and laces themselves. The process took longer than it would have with adult help, but, according to Montessori philosophy, this is all part of shaping self-reliance.

In her new position as head of school, Smith says, "the well-being of the children is my primary role," thereby "supporting the teachers" is an essential goal. Though trained as an administrator, Smith's years working in the classroom give her insight into what teachers want from their leaders. Particularly, she says, "I try to maximize people's time." Unnecessary meetings are a bane of any job, and education is no exception. Smith focuses on establishing partnerships and connections between teachers at IMSP, encouraging motivation and development within the school's "terrific staff."

Smith has signed on to serve as head of school at IMSP for at least two years. Still just as inspired by the Montessori method today as she was when she first encountered it a decade ago.

"Hopefully," she says, "I will be working until I am 85."