

the montessorian

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A Portrait of Passion and Perseverance: *Greta Neimanas*



What do you do when you retire from the only job you've ever known at 27 years old? That's the conundrum Near North Montessori alumna Greta Neimanas ('02) recently faced as she ended her career as a professional cyclist.

After collecting an entire trophy case of awards during her 11-year career, including three Para-cycling Track World Championships, five Paralympic silver medals and 10 U.S. titles, Greta made the difficult decision to step away from competing in the sport she loves. A series of bike-related concussions led her to conclude that the risks of racing no longer outweighed the rewards.

"Every athlete knows that they need to retire at some point," Greta said. "You know you can't compete forever but everyone envisions how they want to retire: winning the biggest race, dropping the mic and walking away. No one wants to retire due to injuries. No one wants to be told you can't continue."

Still wanting to stay in the cycling world, Greta is now embarking on an entirely new career as a coach.

"I've never pictured myself working in an office or wearing slacks to work," Greta said. "For me (coaching) feels like a somewhat natural progression. I've always enjoyed teaching but I don't necessarily feel like it's showing people what to do as much as having them find their own way. I want to share what I've learned and hope they can take that, put their own spin on it and make it work for them."

Greta's entire career was about making things work on her own terms. Born without her left hand and part of her forearm, she swam, played soccer, skied, kayaked, went scuba diving and took tumbling lessons. Her introduction to track cycling started in high school, when her grand prize winning entry to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago's essay contest, "What Ability Means to Me," took her to the Paralympic Games in Athens. Seeing the strength and speed of the cyclists convinced her to try it herself. Just two years later, she was training at the U.S. Paralympic National Team camp in Chula Vista, Calif. In addition to medals, recognition followed. Just last year, she was nominated for an ESPY— often referred to as the "Academy Awards" of sports — in the category of Best Female Athlete with a Disability.

For Greta, a large part of finding her path and pursuing her dream was being exposed to a Montessori environment that nurtured her interests and encouraged her to explore.

"(Near North) taught me how to be an independent thinker," she said. "The Montessori style of education allowed me to be self-guided and work on my own and figure things out. That's something that's stuck with me all these years and I use all the time, every day. Learning how to figure out your own problems is invaluable."

As she transitions away from the only career that she has ever known, Greta still welcomes personal challenges. They just won't involve a finish line and podium.



"I think that a lot of people overlook the character and personality aspect of sports," she said. "People get tied up in stats —how many touchdowns, how many hits — but they forget how powerful sports are for humanity, for teaching character and life lessons. And those are the things that I value more than 'pedal this many times per minute' and 'shift now.' Being able to impart that is much more of a challenge."

"I've lost far more bike races in my career than I ever won," Greta said. "But a loss is only truly a loss if you don't learn anything from it."

Nuestro Pequeños Hermanos: *The Start of a Lifelong Relationship*



ST. IGNATIUS STUDENTS CHRISTIAN F. AND NNM ALUMNA ERIN DOYLE ('13) WITH TWO PEQUEÑOS.

Nuestro Pequeños Hermanos (NPH) is much more than just a spring break service trip to Honduras and, as of this year, Guatemala. Although the magnitude of the weeklong experience may be difficult for junior high students to absorb when they're busy cooking in the kitchen, reading stories to the pequeños and helping out at the farm, it's an experience that stays with them for the rest of their lives. For proof, just ask the Marland and Doyle families, both of whom have made several return trips since graduating from Near North.

Maddie Marland ('15) still remembers the moment on her first trip when she and her mother Jessica took a group of Casa Suyapa (children eight and under) on a walk to get dessert and one boy, Daniel Isai, came up, grabbed her hand and spoke with her the entire way there and back. Aside from the special experience, the moment remains vibrant in Maddie's mind because she and her mother would later sponsor Daniel as their ahijado (godson) in addition to the two ahijadas (goddaughters) they already supported.

"After developing friendships with the kids on the ranch, it was very difficult and emotional for me to leave the ranch at the end of the week," Maddie recalled. "After my second trip there, I started asking my mom when we could come back, even though I wouldn't go to Near North anymore. She didn't know the answer to my question, which gave us the idea to do a trip for the alumni."

Putting that thought into action, the Marlands are returning to Honduras in late June through early July. Former NNM students and parents are welcome to join the trip.

Like Maddie, Kelly Doyle ('12) also felt a strong desire to return to NPH after graduating from Near North. Instead of an alumni trip, however, she instead decided to create a relationship with NPH at St. Ignatius, her new high school.

"After my trip to Honduras, I knew that Ignatius would be a great fit with (NPH)," Kelly recalled. "My main focus was sharing my experience with my new friends and, of course, returning to Honduras. Seeing the good and real impact that NPH makes, I decided that using this organization would be a great bridge between discussion and action."

At first, St. Ignatius administrators were not receptive to Kelly's NPH partnership proposal but, instead of quitting, she started problem solving. During her sophomore year she joined forces with her sister Erin ('13) and arranged a meeting with a Jesuit scholar who participated in a similar trip.

The St. Ignatius administration gave Kelly's NPH proposal careful consideration, but they eventually decided to focus on domestic service and social justice instead of traveling abroad. Still not deterred, the Doyle sisters organized a group of St. Ignatius students, including their brother Patrick ('15), to travel to Honduras last summer apart from the school. This summer, they're looking forward to taking even more of their current classmates back to visit.

Kelly is attending the University of Denver next fall and is already planning to try and start an NPH partnership at her new school. After she graduates, she hopes to return to NPH and be on-site with the pequeños for an entire year as a volunteer.

"With the empowerment that NPH provides, it is impossible not to feel like you can make a difference alongside the pequeños," Kelly added. "Donating a couple dollars to an overseas charity is good and it causes change, but NPH is transformative, it stays in the lives of every person that encounters their mission forever. NPH, especially the pequeños, have showed me that love is an ability to look beyond race, gender, socioeconomic status or any difference and accept the person simply because they are with you. It's a gift that I have received from NPH and I hope that I've been able to share it."

NNM graduates and families interested in visiting NPH in Honduras with school alumni are welcome to contact Jessica Marland at jessicamarland@gmail.com for more information. Travel dates are June 26-July 3.

Portraits of past NNM graduates

Near North students tend to find challenging and exciting careers after they graduate, but what are the underlying traits that connect such a diverse array of professions and experiences? To describe these common qualities, the school's academic directors created the "Portrait of a Graduate" to outline the ways in which our students are lifelong learners, have a strong sense of integrity and community, demonstrate concern for others, are civil and embrace leadership. This blueprint helps ensure that all NNM students have tools to succeed wherever they go. It's more than a skillset. It's who they are.



Near North Montessori's 2014 graduation keynote speaker **Elizabeth Hess ('99)** is the head of business development for DNS Capital, the private equity investment office of local investors Gigi Pritzker and Michael Pucker. If it wasn't for maintaining an open mind to new ideas, however, it's possible that Elizabeth would have remained an investment manager at Goldman Sachs and never started this new chapter in her life.

"Broadly speaking, it's not a traditional career path to walk into private equity at 30," Elizabeth explained. "I give Montessori a lot of credit. You're expected to participate and have an opinion and a huge part of my confidence has been walking into new jobs and being able to articulate just that."

Claire Denton-Spalding ('02) learned the importance of helping others long before she worked with Mujeres Latinas en Acción, a non-profit advocacy group that empowers Latinas, or matriculated to Princeton University to pursue a master's degree in public affairs. "At (Near North) I was never afraid to ask for help," Claire said. "If you went up to them, the teachers would help you work through a problem. From an early age I felt like my teachers wanted to help me and were there for me."

Taking that awareness of the needs of others into the real world, Claire intends to tackle immigration reform and policy work at the state level and empower people to find their own voices. "Most of the work I was doing with the community was very collaborative," Claire said. "I'm not going to lead an initiative where someone else could benefit more by being a leader. A lot of what I did was helping the people I met to become strong leaders themselves."



Ian Ballog ('02) is also making a difference within his community. As a physical education teacher at Burke Elementary in the Washington Park neighborhood, Ian is glad to take on extra responsibilities that reinforce his impact as a positive role model in his students' lives. He'll drive them to basketball practice, treat them to hearty meals and help them recognize their own strengths and abilities in what can often be a challenging neighborhood to live in.

"I think that one of the biggest things about Montessori is the people skills, the ability to relate to someone in an understanding matter and know where they're coming from," Ian explained. "Being able to communicate with anyone. Being part of a community. The freedom Near North gave me is something I'm thankful for and helped give me a broader perspective."

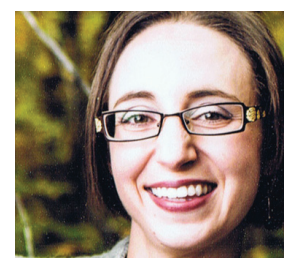


Alex Lo ('95) is the software engineering manager for Flatiron Health, a company whose mission is to make a difference in the fight against cancer by creating a dynamic software platform to connect research centers across the country. As cancer treatments and related data analysis continue to evolve, it is incumbent upon Alex to be pro-active in problem solving while prioritizing how to deal with available information.

"There's never a 100 percent correct answer," Alex said. "Over time there are just answers that are more correct than others. That's what difficult. When you make these value judgments no one comes out and says you're right or you're wrong...I think it's something that's hard to get comfortable with. It's a very Montessori way to operate though, to accept the ambiguity. It is about iterating while testing, getting the feedback loop taking you to the correct place."

Social worker **Gina Roper ('95)** recently opened up a private practice in Salt Lake City that focuses on "play therapy," which she describes as the language of children. For Gina, this was a natural extension of the formative learning experiences she had at Near North. "The thing that resonates the most in my work is the independence that you're given and the use of materials and experiential learning," Gina said. "When I do child-centered play therapy, that's exactly what I'm doing with kids. I give them the independence to lead me where they're going. I help them express what they need to express at that moment."

Although it may sound like fun and games, Gina knows how important it is to be both patient and authentic with clients to really understand what's going on in their worlds, especially if they're facing great adversity. "One of the things that I have to do is give people hope in the face of challenge, or support their hope and try to find it among the challenges," she said.



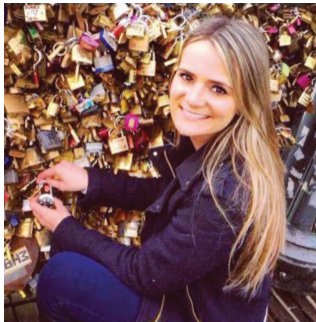
After law school, **Morgan Macdonald ('97)** practiced law in a variety of different sectors — large firm, clerkship with a judge, small firm, nonprofit — before reaching his current position as an attorney with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's Office of International Affairs. In this role he protects investors and helps to ensure fairness in markets. He also communicates with representatives from other



countries to make sure that policy agreements are mutually beneficial. He was undaunted by the job's steep learning curve due to the preparedness he gained from Montessori-based learning.

"What I got from (Near North) is the ability to adapt to a new situation," Morgan explained. "It gave me the ability to figure out what the goal is and how to draw upon my experiences and skills to get there."

Another thing Morgan received from NNM was his awareness of looking out for other people in the community. Whenever he has been able to in the past, Morgan takes on pro bono cases, typically ones involving immigration and tenant/landlord law. In explaining his public service-minded approach to being a lawyer, Morgan said he wants to help guide people through legal processes because there are a lot of rights afforded under the law that many people don't have the capacity to navigate on their own.



Angie Rose Randall ('00) values many things about her Near North experience, such as managing her own time and being taken out of her comfort zone. The thing she values the most, however, are the close bonds she was able to form with her classmates. "You learn a lot more than just what's taught at school," Angie said. "You have these processes and learn these life lessons. You can get an education anywhere but you can't get these experiences and friendships."

This sense of connection not only serves her personal life, but also her career as a marketing manager with Hyatt Corp., where understanding what customers are really saying is crucial. "A big part of what we do is called empathic listening," Angie said. "We frequently reach out to our customers to understand what they're looking for and need. We want to help them fulfill that, and often the needs are a lot deeper than what they first seem."



Lauren Wilson ('94), a social worker and lecturer at the University of Hawaii, learned the closeness of community as part of a 15-person graduating class at Near North. "There's always this sense that you have to bring the community with you or else you're missing out," Lauren explained. "That lesson, the sense of taking care of the younger kids and the physical classroom stuck with me. It's a good memory in my bones."

With her son and daughter enrolled in a Montessori school, Lauren sees the focus on community and caring for one another being nurtured in them. "The greatest gift (of attending a Montessori school) is that sense of responsibility to self, striving for your best and being responsible classmates."



As the cofounder and CEO of the commercial real estate software company Buildout Inc., current NNM parent **Vishu Ramanathan ('89)** has a goal to automate work as efficiently and meaningfully as possible to provide maximum utility. Last year alone Vishu's leadership helped Buildout to triple revenue and staff, bringing its total to 21 employees. As important as growth is, Vishu also sees creating a community as an important objective.

"I'm building a company and it's a very social thing to do," Vishu said. "When you bring people together you want to create an environment where they can all be successful. Doing that with Montessori values is so important because it creates a place where people are comfortable, engaged, take initiative and approach work with joy."

For Vishu, this last aspect is especially important because of the professional and personal benefits. "One of the things that I think is the most interesting is how much I have learned again from Montessori now that I'm in this new phase of life," Vishu said. "I'm still learning how to be the best that I can and the whole child's now the whole grown-up. It's making me a better dad and a better boss."

Lawrence Tanzman ('03), an options trader for Citadel, has been using computers in almost every aspect of his life since he was a student at NNM. "I learned computer programming at (Near North) back when I was a first year in Anne Matern's 9-12 classroom," Lawrence recalled. "I worked with Janeen Cohen and Gabe Ginex on building different programs using Microworlds. I write computer programs now on a daily basis and work to help others develop programs as well."



Michelle Stearn ('07) wants to connect people. A recent graduate of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, Michelle is heading to Chile next spring on a Fulbright fellowship. Her project will create an open source database of the different initiatives and stakeholders involved in the conversion of waste vegetable oil into biofuel. It's an opportunity that will enable the communities to become much more self-sufficient.

This emphasis on community is something that Michelle's been aware of since her time in 3-6. "I didn't have an epiphany on the rug that I was



going to focus on community empowerment. It was rather a conglomeration of all those lessons that instilled me with a desire to uplift communities," she said. "I find that, wherever I go, I can't help but get involved in the community. I credit Montessori for that because I think that everything goes back to what's best for the community at large."

New kids on the block



Graduation is a time to celebrate everything students have accomplished during their time at Near North Montessori, but the three newest kids at the school may have a hard time learning those same positive traits. That's because the new kids aren't students. They're goats.

Three female baby goats known as doelings were born at Antiquity Oaks Farm in Cornell, IL in February and, after three months of weaning, arrived at their new home at the Farmessori in early May.

Although many students have interacted with goats during class trips to Nature's Classroom in Wisconsin, keeping goats year-round at the Farmessori will be an entirely new learning experience.

"Mammals usher in a whole new set of challenges," said Joe Phillips who will manage care for the animals at the Farmessori. "Goats are social animals so they need at least one other goat and they need sustained cardio to stay healthy. One solution is that the students will actually be walking the goats on leashes around the neighborhood. It's also a double benefit since in the absence of mountains, their natural habitat, the abrasion of the sidewalk works as an alternative way of keeping their hooves from getting too long."



"Goats are susceptible to disease and also can't get all the minerals they need from just their environment so their health will need to be managed very carefully," Farmer Joe added.

Unlike the Farmessori chickens that need special arrangements during the coldest days of winter, not even a polar vortex will faze the new goats. They're comfortable in cold, rugged climates. They're also excellent climbers and are quickly adapting to their two-story house designed by NNM parent Zach Adelman and finished with painting and light construction by students. The design includes special cave-like nooks for the young goats to rest and sleep in.

Several goat species were considered for the farm before staff settled on Nigerian Dwarfs due to their relatively small size and ease of care. Best of all, they produce a large quantity of milk that is high in fat, which will eventually be used at Sandwich Shoppe. "When you have high-fat milk you have good cheese," Joe said.

Like all mammals, the goats need to be bred before they start giving milk, so it will be a year or two before students see cheese on the Sandwich Shoppe menu. Production will be incrementally increased because, once the goats are bred, they'll need to be milked twice a day. Trying to avoid the problem of having too much milk, Farmer Joe is already planning ahead to balance Sandwich Shoppe's needs with production so that everything can be meaningfully used with as little as possible wasted.



Also coming to Sandwich Shoppe will be more eggs, thanks to six new fluffy chicks that hatched over spring break. The newest members of the Farmessori flock are expected to start laying sometime between October and December, more than doubling the current output of four resident hens. All those extra eggs mean a lot more options for Sandwich Shoppe and brings the Farmessori one step closer to providing for the surrounding community, whether it's partnering with a local restaurant or creating a community-supported agriculture (CSA) distribution model where people support Farmessori through money or labor and receive a share of the produce in return.

"Our goal is to build up to the point where we have a CSA agreement or perhaps we partner with a restaurant," Joe said "There's a lot of different ways to look at it. To me, that's the whole point: to look at the possibilities and look at the ways to problem solve. It's like taking practical life and transforming it into a multi-year evolving project. Real life as practical life."

NNM community members interested in volunteering at Farmessori are encouraged to contact Farmer Joe at jphillips@nnms.org.

Class of 2016 parent reflections

It's always bittersweet to say goodbye as graduating families leave Near North and move on to high school. Several parents and families recently shared their thoughts as their 8th graders conclude junior high and transition to life as Near North graduates.

DEIDRA AND MICHAEL LUCAS: "NNM has given Perri so many things of lifelong value. We are thrilled for her to take her love of learning, her intellectual curiosity, her critical thinking skills, her respect and empathy for others, her independence, and her loyalty and love of her friends with her through her journey in high school. Her education at Near North Montessori has taught her to be open and accepting of differences in people. NNM has been a full partner with us in creating the foundation for our child to have an amazing life."

THE NAIR FAMILY: "Near North helped Rishi understand that learning through query is far better than studying by rote. He tried both and the results are very clear – he understood the subject matter a lot better when he asked questions and participated in discussions centered around a new subject. The ability to work in teams is a skill that most students learn in college or at work but NNM begins this process from day one and the ability to incorporate different ideas and afford critical thinking are key elements of a Montessori experience. He easily takes public transportation, can read maps and will encourage his high school friends to explore the rich diversity of Chicago."

THE NASH FAMILY: "NNM has instilled a sense of community, compassion and responsibility in our children and a lifelong joy for learning. We believe that NNM has helped Lizzie to grow and thrive both as an individual and as an important part of a wonderful, nurturing community. She is confident and resilient and ready to embrace the many challenges and opportunities that high school brings. Thank you NNM!"

THE WATERFIELD FAMILY: "Our main reason for sending Scottie to NNM was for him to learn to love to learn. He did learn to love to learn, not just math and reading but so much more. He loves the farm. He loves his school community and all its purpose. He really loves his teachers and will forever be curious in life. He will stand up for what he believes is right, and not just be an observer. Scottie feels his student life really started at NNM. He has blossomed into a young man full of drive, compassion, expression and opinions all due to the safe and challenging environment NNM has provided. We are forever indebted to NNM and all the staff for helping us shape Scottie into the sweet and kind young man he is today."

THE STOCKARD FAMILY: "Will has developed strong leadership skills, self-confidence, empathy for others and the ability to self-advocate."

SARAH WOOD-PRINCE: "NNM instilled an intellectual bravery in both my daughters. I've watched them travel throughout their lives with constant questions and wonder. Both are well on their way to independent, thoughtful futures. Thank you all so, so much. NNM supported me as a single mom and gave my girls consistency and love."

SUSIE HEATH-KELLEHER: "Ryan loves his school and his teachers and the respect he has for them inspires him to do well. He transferred to NNM in 7th grade, which was a tough transition for him, but the teachers, staff and kids helped him learn that he can do it, start over and recreate what he left behind. Secondly, and just as important, the Montessori methodology empowered him to be a leader, to lead by example and to feel the need for sense of community."



Signing off, one last time

After spending a dozen years at the helm of *The Montessorian*, NNM parent Peter Strazzabosco is stepping down from his volunteer post as editor with the spring edition. Although his name appeared in small print on the back cover, his fingerprints loomed large on every edition for an entire generation of students, through editing, writing, photography, planning, working with contributors and other tasks both big and small.

Peter fondly recalls all the alumni he got to meet and the wisdom he acquired from staff about Montessori theory, which expanded his appreciation for what occurs in and out of the classroom. He also enjoyed the unique insights the position occasionally afforded into the school's physical operation. An in-depth tour of the old boiler and swimming pool filtration system in 2004 is still imprinted on his mind. "Wow!" he said.

With all those editions under his belt and his kids Isabella ('13) and Leonardo ('16) focused on high school and beyond, it's now Peter's turn to contemplate his family's journey from the other side of the desk. Near North administrators and staff wish him well.

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Moving up, Moving on

This spring, NNM eighth graders gained acceptance to the following high schools. Most students were accepted to more than one school, giving them the opportunity to make a choice.

Alcott College Prep

Amundsen International
Baccalaureate

Beacon Academy

Chicago Academy for the Arts

Francis W. Parker School

GCE Lab School

George Westinghouse
College Prep

Jones College Prep

Lane Tech College Prep
& Lane Tech College Prep
Alpha Honors

Latin School of Chicago

Lincoln Park International
Baccalaureate, Double Honors
& Performing Arts

Lindblom Math and
Science Academy

Loyola Academy

New Trier High School

Northside College Prep

North Shore Country Day School

Ogden International
Baccalaureate

Senn International Baccalaureate
& Performing Arts

St. Ignatius College Prep

St. Patrick High School

Walter Payton College Prep

Whitney Young High School