

## *A Visit to Costa Rica*

• Joyce Gallardo and Teresa de Jesus Savel

In March 2011, we traveled to Costa Rica, Central America, where we visited five Waldorf early childhood initiatives throughout the country. We experienced this beautiful, army-less country's unique character and vision reflected in its peace-loving, conservation-minded people. Everywhere we visited, we were received with hospitality and heart warmth by our Costa Rican colleagues, for which we are most grateful. Here we will describe our visit to the Sea Heart School, which initiated our visit. A longer version of this article with further details and descriptions of our visits to the other four initiatives can be requested from the WECAN office.

### **Sea Heart**

The Sea Heart School (named after the sea heart pod, shaped like a heart, that drops from a tree in the jungle in Costa Rica and is deposited in the sea by streams and rivers, where it is carried to beaches all over the world) has a five-morning-a-week program, housed in a small, wooden, one-room house on an unpaved road one mile from the beach. This little schoolhouse has a certain endearing charm to it, with its paneless windows and wide shutters open to the soft tropical breezes and the filtered sunlight. Toys are somewhat sparse, but the teacher, Ellen McRobert, has been making several lovely new additions to the toy collection. The adjoining small house on the property serves as the living space for the teacher and two volunteers from Germany.

The outdoor play area is small and spaces to explore are few, due to the size of the property. Outdoor water play in this tropical climate is very popular at Sea Heart and basins of water are carried out onto the grass each morning for the children to play in. There is a sandbox for digging. Once a week the teachers walk to the beach with the children for a morning of play in the rivulets of salt water that have formed on the sand. Another morning, after snack, they walk to the botanical garden to play in the shade of towering trees and ferns, the fragrance and vibrant colors of the

tropical flowers and the scent of the fruit and spice trees providing an exquisite delight for their senses.

### **Languages spoken**

Eleven children, ages two years to five-and-a-half years, mostly boys, are enrolled in the kindergarten. This area of Costa Rica, Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, has become "home" for many expatriates, and the children come from culturally diverse families, many of whom are trilingual. German, Swiss German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, English, and Bri-bri—the indigenous language of the area—are spoken. Ellen, the North American Waldorf-trained lead teacher, speaks only English. Her assistant, Ashley, who moved to Costa Rica with her family when she was a child, speaks Spanish and English. Ancel Mitchell, the administrator and one of the school's founders, is a Waldorf-trained class teacher with several years' teaching experience.

### **Pedagogical theme**

We met with the teachers almost every afternoon to share our observations of the kindergarten morning, with a pedagogical question and answer time and conversations on the importance of the inner life of the kindergarten teacher. The underlying theme of our work with the teachers in each of the initiatives was the importance of tending and cherishing the living spiritual forces in childhood through the care and nurturing of the four basal senses, particularly during the first three years of the life of the child—the sense of life, the sense of touch, the sense of self-movement, and the sense of equilibrium or balance. (Each of the programs in Costa Rica has several children under the age of three). We shared many pedagogical insights from the work of Hungarian pediatrician Dr. Emmi Pikler and from the work of Dr. Rudolf Steiner. Teresa modeled conscious and respectful caregiving for the teachers during hand washing and drying, diapering, dressing, etc., always conscious of protecting and nurturing the lower senses, as well as the nurturing of the

relationship with each individual child. We noted that the teachers immediately implemented our suggestions the following day.

The positive and joyful reactions of each child as his teacher gently washed his hands in a basin of warm water that had been heated on the stovetop (there is rarely warm water from the tap in the bathrooms in Costa Rica) was enough to convince the teacher that it was well worth the extra time needed to heat water on the stove for hand washing. One child smiled widely and said, “*Ah, el agua esta calientito!*” (“Ah, the water is so nice and warm!”) Another child, who is just eighteen months, asked several times throughout the morning, after his hands and face had already been gently washed with a small washcloth moistened with warm water, to have them washed again. He wanted to carry the little washcloth around with him. In the bathroom sink, the children washed their own hands as quickly as possible, which left no possibility for creating a special moment of contact and relationship building with each individual child. This moment of the teacher paying exclusive attention to each child during hand washing and during diapering, of addressing him by name, of looking into his eyes as she spoke, became a cherished moment for the teachers in the kindergarten morning.

We gave suggestions for the artistic and nutritional presentation of the food served to the children—nourishing the children’s sense of life (and our own, as well) through the delicious-smelling aroma of the food we cook, the colors, the arranging of the food on the plate. The children helped in the food preparation—they kneaded the dough for the *tortillas*, they helped to wash *el arroz y los frijoles*, they chopped vegetables for the soup, etc. They also helped to set and clear the table, to serve the food, and to wash and dry the dishes.

## Parent meetings

At Sea Heart, as at each initiative we visited, a parent meeting was offered, a time of open sharing and questions from the parents in which overall their genuine interest and support of Waldorf education for their children was apparent. With this came the realization that there was much work to be done in order to better understand the Waldorf pedagogy and how to complement at home what the teachers are trying to create daily in the kindergarten. We spoke of anthropology as the pillar of Waldorf education and there was interest expressed by several parents in each of the meetings in forming a study group together with the

teachers.

Many of the issues that parents are facing in Costa Rica are the same as the ones we face in the U.S.—how to protect our children in a media-saturated world from the onslaught of electronic devices; even if we try to keep our homes media-free, there is always the friend’s house next door where parents set no limits. The academic pressure placed on older siblings by the public schools they attend is affecting their children’s health and well-being. What happens when their kindergarten child is of school age and there is no Waldorf-inspired school for them to attend? (There is only one school in all of Costa Rica that is striving to work out of the insights of Waldorf pedagogy and has a kindergarten and four grades).

After the parent meeting at Sea Heart, one mother, who is Afro-Caribbean, said, “I don’t know much about Waldorf—I’m a bush girl—all I know is that it has transformed my Fabio into a lovely child.”

## Birthday celebration and farewell

On our last day at Sea Heart we participated in a birthday celebration for one of the children. Ellen had made crowns for all of the children and a special crown and cape for the birthday boy. The whole room was filled with the beauty and fragrance of deep pink hibiscus flowers from the front yard and Ellen told a birthday story with lap puppets as the birthday boy listened wide-eyed from his mother’s lap. *Feliz cumpleaños!* was sung and everyone had birthday cake.

“*Feliz cumpleaños!*” “*Adios!*” “*Hasta luego!*”

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**Teresa de Jesus Savel**, who is Cuban-American, is an early childhood educator and founding member of the *Green Valley School* in southern Vermont. The school serves children three months old to grade six and works out of the insights of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, Dr. Emmi Pikler, and the natural world. Teresa has completed introductory and advanced training at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary.