

At Crossway, equity is a family affair

An interview with CEO Kathleen Guinan

BY NCMPS STAFF

Crossway Community, a residential educational program for women and their young children in Kensington, Maryland, opened in 1990 as a wrap-around center, integrating an innovative adult education initiative, a Montessori-inspired early childhood program, and a community center.

Since 1992, when Kathleen Guinan became the CEO of Crossway, she and her team have been applying Montessori theory and practice to implement a revolutionary approach to social change. The program builds social capital through intergenerational learning. For two decades the organization has operated an educational program for families living on the campus, while also serving diverse families from throughout the region through high quality early education and a vibrant community center.

We're applying Montessori theory to a systems-based practice of social reform

NCMPS was able to sit down with Guinan to ask a few questions about the mission and vision driving her work. *(This conversation has been lightly edited for clarity and concision.)*

NCMPS: Conversation within the Montessori world has recently turned quite emphatically toward issues of equity, social justice, and social reform. And Crossway has been engaged in the

work, now, for decades. Can you say a bit about what makes Crossway's approach to equity unique?

Guinan: We're not trying to add an equity lens to Montessori. In fact, we think that's a backwards way to think about the work of social change. We're applying Montessori theory to a systems-based practice of social reform. We focus on potential, prosperity, and sustainability—and our practice is centered on the family.

Lots of programs that do work similar to ours think of themselves as ameliorating poverty. We don't. That's a deficit orientation, pointed in the wrong direction. Do we provide housing assistance to families who need support? Yes. But we're not a homeless shelter. Do we help families who are facing challenging circumstances, which may involve trauma or substance abuse or early pregnancy or domestic abuse? Of course, but we don't view these families as dysfunctional. We work with—in partnership with—parents and chil-

dren who need support. And, let's be honest, all of us need help.

NCMPS: Why is a multi-generational approach so important?

Guinan: Early in my career—even before Montessori—I came in contact with Murray Bowen and his work at Georgetown University. What I learned is that we all function as part



Kathleen Guinan

of relationship systems, and extended families are the primary system for humans. In other words, families are where we all first learn what it means to be in relationship. And healthy or unhealthy relationships can set the course for our lives. The women who come to us are from all races, classes, and cultures. We have women who have masters' degrees, women who have been trafficked, women who are refugees. What they all have in common is relationships.

So, what does that mean in practice? It means that no single part of the system can be effectively supported without considering the system as a whole. Children are always connected to their parents, who are connected to their parents, and all are connected in various ways to extended families. We cannot, in other words, rescue children from their families. Lots of approaches to poverty amelioration attempt to do that, and that's not a recipe for success.

At Crossway, we work together with parents to help them better understand their own family system – not just

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what's challenging about it, but, more important, what's working. Who are the people she can count on? How can she establish meaningful connections, and keep the relationships active as a form of support? How can she better manage difficult relationships? Disconnection can sometimes be the main way people cope with relationship challenges, but what we have learned is this sort of "cut-off" is actually even more damaging and alienating, and can lead to other, destructive attempts at coping.

As adults, learning how to manage relationships is crucial to taking control of our lives. At the same time, the families who are part of Crossway Community include parents who are in relationship with their children. And when we see our children thrive, we are—all of us—inspired. Our Montessori environments show parents what's possible.

NCMPS: Can you talk about why systems thinking matters in this work? What are some ways it shows up in practice at Crossway?

Guinan: Maria Montessori was a systems thinker. So was Bowen. Both got that all things are connected—biology, anthropology, psychology, peace—and thinking about one without the other is a recipe for failure. Montessori gives as a wide, science-based, vision of how human development takes place and what we, as adults, to can to support it optimally. For Montessori, the system is the universe. For Bowen, the system is the family.

NCMPS: Similarly, asset versus deficit-based approaches are central. Can you say more about why a resource — as opposed to treatment-based—model is so important?



The foundations of a healthy family system

Guinan: When we talk about interrupting generational cycles of poverty, we are not talking about “fixing” broken people. That’s the treatment model. Poverty is not a pathology. It’s a complex condition that produces cascading negative effects. Hunger, homelessness, a lack of basic security leads to anxiety, hopelessness, and desperation. The kind of stress that results from those physical and psychological conditions, particularly if there is no buffer, produces long-standing negative impact, especially on developing children. Our approach—which is both the Montessori approach and the Family Systems Approach—is to assist the family in re-setting their lives so that they can become a source of support in a community. The fuel is the love that parents have for their children.

Kathleen Guinan is a social justice activist, community organizer, and the CEO of Crossway Community.

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