

### A Word from Our CEO

*"We must look to the children as a vehicle for bringing change to humanity." — Maria Montessori*



Dear City Garden Community,

Welcome to the 2025-26 school year!

Last week, we welcomed students back into our buildings, and I am filled with optimism and excitement as we kick off the new school year.

Throughout the summer, our team reflected on two core principles of Montessori education: the **Prepared Environment** and the **Preparation of the Adult**. These ideas are more than classroom strategies; they are ways of being that shape how we teach, learn, and grow as a community.

*A Prepared Environment* is intentional. It is beautiful, orderly, and designed with the learner in mind. At City Garden, this means more than child-sized shelves or thoughtfully chosen materials; it means creating spaces where every child is seen, valued, and supported to thrive. It means our hallways, our classrooms, and our community gatherings reflect belonging and possibility.

*The Preparation of the Adult* is equally powerful. It calls on each of us — guides, leaders, families, and neighbors — to continually grow in patience, understanding, and awareness. It asks us to examine our biases, nurture our curiosity, and meet each child with compassion and respect. When we do this inner work, we model for our children what it means to be a lifelong learner and an engaged citizen of the world.

As you read this issue of *The Gardener*, you'll see these principles in action — in the joyful energy of summer learning, in the dedication of our newly certified Montessori guides, in the creativity of our Friday Enrichment Program, and in the steadfast commitment of our staff, board, and volunteers. You'll see a community that believes in children's brilliance and works every day to cultivate equity, love, and possibility.

This is the work you make possible. Because of you, City Garden continues to grow into a place where children, families, and educators flourish, *together*. Thank you for preparing the ground with us, season after season. The year ahead is already full of promise, and I am so grateful to be walking this path alongside you.



Christie Huck  
CEO/Executive Director  
City Garden Montessori School

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## Celebrating our School Teams

*People* make our mission come to life, and our *people* are doing amazing things!

- Our building principals, **Kisha Young and Amy Willems**, are providing bold and steadfast leadership and have prepared the environment for a strong start to the school year for students, staff, and families. They will be joined this school year by **Kay Howard, our new EAEC assistant principal**, who started out 13 years ago at City Garden as an assistant guide and then went on to obtain her Masters in Education, worked for many years as an elementary and middle school teacher, and led City Garden's EAEC Summer School program for the past two years.
- This summer, 2 ECEC lead guides – **Sarah Johnston and Emily Peters** – **completed their Early Childhood State Certification**, which was the culmination of two years of coursework and tremendous effort. Kudos and congratulations to Sarah and Emily!
- Nine lead guides made big leaps toward obtaining Montessori certification – including 2 Early Childhood guides, 2 Lower Elementary guides, and 5 Upper Elementary guides. **Participating in a Montessori certification program is the equivalent of participation in a masters-level graduate program.** This is no small feat, and we are grateful for our guides' tremendous dedication.
- **Three staff members completed their second year of the SLU Rising Teachers program, and 1 staff member completed her first summer of this program.** This program includes intensive coursework and practicum experience that results in a bachelor's degree as well as a Missouri Teacher's Certificate.
- **Heading into the 2025-26 school year, we retained 100% of Lower Elementary and Upper Elementary lead guides from the previous school year.** The consistency and strength of these teams will have a significant positive impact on our students and the culture of the EAEC building.



## Celebrating the Retirement of Our Beloved Colleague, Debra Fox



After more than twelve years of extraordinary dedication to City Garden Montessori School, we celebrate the remarkable career — and well-earned retirement — of **Debra (Deb) Fox**.

Deb joined City Garden in 2013, drawn by her deep passion for our mission: children, education, and Anti-Bias, Antiracism (ABAR). With a rich background in management, human resources, and administration before coming here, Deb could have taken a different path— a friend offered her a job not long after she joined City Garden. But Deb's heart was already here. She turned it down, fully committing herself to the meaningful work and vibrant community she found at City Garden.

Though she had initially planned to retire years ago, Deb's love for the school, the mission, and the people kept her here for several more years than she expected. Over that time, she touched nearly every part of our organization, working alongside guides, administrators, and board members with equal amounts of warmth and skill. Over the

years, Deb earned the nickname of “Fancy D,” because she made every event, meeting, or gathering classy.

Her recent retirement celebration was filled with laughter, hugs, and heartfelt tributes from every corner of our community. From board members to parents and staff, the affection and admiration for Deb were palpable — a true testament to the impact she has made.

Deb, thank you for your years of service, your unwavering dedication, and your belief in what’s possible when we nurture children and cultivate equity. While we will miss you dearly as a colleague, we look forward to seeing you at future events, cheering on City Garden as one of our most devoted fans.

Congratulations on your retirement, Deb! You’ve made City Garden bloom in countless ways.

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## Celebrating Longtime Board Members Donna Smith, Sysco Deuanepenh, and Susie Shelton-Dodge



In June, three longtime board members, **Donna Smith**, **Sisouphanh (Sysco) Deuanepenh**, and **Susie Shelton-Dodge**, transitioned off the board after serving the City Garden community in transformative ways.

Donna Smith came onto the board in early 2017 after being engaged in public school governance for many years, including serving as a member and chair of the Ladue School District and representing the Special School District as legal counsel in the desegregation settlement. When introduced to City Garden, Donna immediately connected with our mission for equity, which Donna has prioritized both in her work to leverage New Market Tax Credits to create affordable housing and in her volunteer work. Donna immersed herself in the work of the board and the Governance Committee, helping us to professionalize our governance structures and to deepen our impact in St. Louis and beyond. Donna served as board chair for eight years, leading City Garden through our \$16 million EAEC facility project, expanding our school from 275 students to 620 students, and navigating the challenges of COVID-19. Over the past nine years, Donna led City Garden through significant change while keeping our students and our mission at the center of all



decisions.

Sisouphanh (Sysco) Deuanephenh joined City Garden's board after attending an Anti-bias, Antiracism (ABAR) training with US Bancorp Impact Finance. He was moved by City Garden's commitment to making Montessori education accessible to all children and by our efforts to integrate ABAR into all aspects of the organization. Sysco, who is a director of finance with US Bank, first joined City Garden's Finance Committee and then came onto the board. Sysco served as treasurer for eight years and as board chair for one year. Sysco led City Garden in increasing our budget by nearly \$10 million and in securing over \$8 million in tax credit revenue. He helped us professionalize our financial systems and ensure our budget reflects our values.

Susie Shelton-Dodge first connected to City Garden in our early days as a charter school when she led an annual Montessori evaluation of our program as part of our yearly review by St. Louis University. Susie is a lifelong Montessori educator with over 40 years of teaching, administrative, and training experience. She has been the director and director emeritus of Hope Montessori Education Institute for many years and was recognized as the American Montessori Society's Living Legacy recipient in 2023 because of her outstanding contributions to the Montessori community. Susie joined our board in 2019 and has consistently brought her Montessori lens to every board discussion and decision. Susie has helped City Garden support several guides in completing Early Childhood Montessori certification and provided critical guidance as City Garden launched our Elementary Teacher Education Program.

These three board members have played invaluable roles in guiding our school's growth and strengthening our mission. Because of their leadership, countless children and families have been able to learn, thrive, and belong.

**Please join us in extending our heartfelt gratitude to these extraordinary leaders who have given their time, talent, and wisdom to City Garden Montessori School. We look forward to staying connected as they remain a vital part of the City Garden community.**

## News & Notes

### **From Petting Zoos to Planetariums: A Summer of Discovery and Learning at City Garden Summer School**



City Garden Montessori's EAEC Summer Learning Exploration (June 9 – July 3) was a joyful, engaging, and enriching experience for students and staff alike. Our staff had the wonderful opportunity to connect with new students during our summer programming, understanding their unique learning styles and assessing where to begin fall instruction.

Each week brought new adventures – from science expeditions and animal studies to global explorations – woven into a curriculum rooted in Montessori values and social-emotional development. Students enjoyed making new friends while engaging in outdoor play, special treats, arts and crafts, and gym and art classes, all while independently exploring their classrooms. Activities like Freeze Pop Fridays, water days, visits from [The Bird Sanctuary](#) and [The Travel Petting Zoo](#), and a student-created cardboard arcade brought laughter and learning together in meaningful ways. Our Junior High students had an exciting experience with a mobile game truck.

One highlight of summer school was Space Expedition Week, featuring daily visits from [Challenger Learning Center St. Louis](#). Students learned about rockets, launched their own creations, and concluded with an immersive planetarium exploration.

Research shows that high-quality summer programs help prevent learning loss, especially in reading and math, and promote continued social-emotional growth. Just as importantly, City Garden's summer session ensured children had continued access to meals, safe and stimulating environments, and the sense of connection that supports whole-child wellbeing. For many working families, summer school also provided critical childcare and consistency during the long break.

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## Cultivating Excellence: City Garden Guides and the City Garden Montessori Institute

This summer, we were thrilled to welcome our fifth cohort of guides to our City Garden Montessori Institute: Teacher Education Program (CGMI:TEP).

This intensive training includes academic coursework, in-depth classroom practice, and mentorship – rooted in Montessori philosophy and equity-centered teaching. Their achievement is a testament to their professional dedication and to City Garden's commitment to excellence in public Montessori education.

In October 2024, our Lower Elementary training program earned accreditation by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE), the international standard-setting and accrediting body for Montessori educator preparation worldwide.

City Garden Montessori School asks every lead guide to hold both the Missouri state certification and the Montessori credential. This rare, rigorous standard guarantees our students receive the highest-quality education.

We are deeply proud of all our guides, who embody lifelong learning in service of their students.



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## City Garden Featured in *Schools That Believe* Documentary

We are thrilled to share that City Garden Montessori School is featured in a new video documentary series, *Schools That Believe*. The series highlights schools that are reimagining what's possible when we center children's brilliance and create learning environments grounded in love, equity, and belonging.

[CLICK HERE](#) to watch the first episode.

This moment is possible because of you – our amazing community! Your passion for high-



quality, accessible early childhood education – and your investment in our work – make this kind of recognition possible. You help us nurture a school where every child is seen, known, and supported to thrive, through joyful classrooms, inclusive practices, and our deep commitment to Anti-bias, Antiracism.

Thank you for believing in our students and for helping us build a more just and loving future. We're honored to share this moment with you, and we hope you enjoy the show!



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## Reimagining Fridays: Enrichment Program in Full Bloom

At City Garden Montessori School, we believe learning should spark curiosity, honor student choice, and build real-world skills.

Beginning this fall, City Garden students will dive into hands-on workshops that go beyond the traditional classroom – from karate to art exploration, choir, outdoor education, sports, STEM, and more, each Friday afternoon. Students can select enrichment classes that match their interests, allowing them to build new skills and connect with their community in fresh, exciting ways.

While students are immersed in exploration, our guides gain dedicated time for professional development and lesson planning, helping them prepare the thoughtful, high-quality learning environments our children need.

**Here's where you come in.**

We're looking to grow the range of experiences we can offer our students, and we know our broader community is filled with talent, creativity, and wisdom.





- Do you have a skill or trade and want to make a difference in the lives of City Garden students?
- Can you spare a few Friday afternoons each quarter to volunteer with our students?
- Do you know someone whose unique skills could light a spark for young learners?

Send your ideas or interest to Kristin at [kristin.whalen@citygardenschool.org](mailto:kristin.whalen@citygardenschool.org).

Together, we're cultivating a school where learning never stops, and where community members play a powerful role in helping children bloom.

## Celebrations

### Staff Highlight: Norman Williams

Meet **Norman Williams**, one of the hearts of City Garden.

Since 2017, Norman has brought joy, care, and deep commitment to our students through his roles as Building Support Specialist, Music Teacher, and now Lead Guide.

His passion for nurturing young minds and strengthening our community is both inspiring and contagious. We are grateful for all the ways he helps City Garden bloom!

[CLICK HERE](#) to watch a short video on Instagram of Norman sharing his thoughts on the Montessori method.



## Upcoming Events -- Mark Your Calendar!

## Fall Affair: A Passport through the Garden Saturday, September 20, 2025, 5-7:30pm



An inspiring evening of Montessori experiences, community connection, and a powerful call to action to support equity in education at City Garden. Tickets are \$60 per person - register today.

[Register Now for Fall Affair](#)

Join us and be inspired by the incredible growth and possibilities taking root at City Garden!

### 2025-26 ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

#### FALL

##### FALL AFFAIR

*A Passport Through the Garden*  
Sat, Sep. 20, 2025 5-7:30pm  
City Garden's E&EC, 4209 Folsom Ave.

**Join Us:** Tickets are \$60 per person or with Sponsorship

**Get Involved:** Volunteer for the event or join us and bring friends.

**Sponsorship:** Become a City Garden Sponsor, donate an item for the auction, or join us that night and let us inspire you to give in the moment.

##### MILES THAT MATTER

*Montessori Run for City Garden*  
Sat, Oct 4, 2025 8:30-11am  
Saint Louis University's Track

**Get Involved:** Register to run, join the planning committee, volunteer that day, or come cheer on participants.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite runner shirts, water, or post-race treats. Donate to a runner for their team's fundraising.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

##### TRUNK OR TREAT

*A sweet, joyful family celebration*  
Sat, Oct 25, 2025, 11am-2pm  
City Garden's E&EC, 4209 Folsom Ave.

**Get Involved:** join the planning committee, volunteer, or bring the whole family to tell jokes and play tricks.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite the event, treats, arts & crafts, or decor.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

##### LIGHT UP CITY GARDEN

*Celebrate the season of joy*  
Thu, Dec 18, 2025, 4-6:30pm  
City Garden's E&EC, 4209 Folsom Ave.

**Get Involved:** join the planning committee, volunteer, or bring the family for cocoa, candy canes, and community. Sign up for the holiday wish exchange to make it merry.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite the event, hot cocoa and canes, or decor.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

#### OUR CULTURE OF GENEROSITY

##### A SEASON OF HOPE & PROMISE

*"The child is both a hope and a promise for humankind."* - Maria Montessori

**Make a year-end gift:** in support of excellent, equitable education. Double your impact this season - thru Dec 31, your gift will be matched.

##### DAY OF GIVING

*Neon, Wed, Apr 15 to Neon, Thu, Apr 16, 2026*  
A 24-hour fundraiser for equitable, high-quality Montessori education

**More than a fundraiser** - a chance to show what's possible investing in children and educators, with every gift matched 4-to-1 by our sponsors.

#### SPRING

##### MLK FILM SCREENING

*Spend this holiday "Day On" with a film and discussion*  
Mon, Jan 19, 2026

**Get Involved:** Attend for reflection, learning, and action. Volunteer for setup, tech, or facilitate a post-screening discussion. Contribute talents—photography, music, or spoken word.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite costs for film licensing, AV or Venue, speaker honorariums, discussion materials, or refreshments.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

##### SUNLIGHT & SOIL

*A Garden Gathering*  
Sat, Mar 7, 2026 5-7:30pm  
City Garden's E&EC, 1618 Tower Grove Ave.

**Join Us:** Tickets are \$60 per person or with Sponsorship

**Get Involved:** Volunteer or bring friends new to City Garden. Let us inspire you to sign up for or increase your monthly giving.

**Sponsorship:** Become a City Garden Sponsor, join us that night with friends, and let us inspire you to give in the moment.

##### CITY GARDEN BLOCK PARTY

*Beloved tradition for families, friends, and community.*  
Fri, May 1, 2026 4-6pm  
Rain Date: Fri, May 8, 2026 4-6pm

**Get Involved:** Help plan, volunteer that day, or bring the family for games, bounce houses, performances, music, food, and fun for all ages.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite the event, games, music, or food.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

##### PHOENIX ATHLETICS AWARD BANQUET

*Celebrate growth, teamwork, and spirit!*  
Thu, May 21, 2026 | 5:30-7pm  
City Garden's E&EC, 4209 Folsom Ave.

**Support:** Coach a team or support the cheer squad. Attend games and show your spirit!

**Get Involved:** Recognize City Garden's student-athletes with team highlights, awards, and a meal shared in community. It's a joyful evening of recognition, reflection, and community pride.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite a team or their team uniforms, the cheer squad or their uniforms, or support the award banquet.  
\$2,500 | \$1,000 | \$500 | \$250 | \$100 | \$50

#### OUR CULTURE OF INCLUSION

##### COLOR BRAVE

*Collective learning about identity, equity, empathy*  
Fridays 5:30-6pm  
Oct 10 and Nov 7, 2025; Feb 6 and Mar 27, 2026

**Details:** A space for honest conversations, deeper connections, and collective learning about identity, empathy, and racial equity.

**Get Involved:** Serve as a facilitator, greeter, or logistics volunteer. Amplify the series by inviting others and sharing on social media.

**Underwriting:** Underwrite the series, a single event, moderator fees, dinner, or childcare. \$15,000 | \$5,000 | \$2,500 | \$1,500 | \$500 | \$250

City Garden exists to **Redefine Education** by developing the whole child in an excellent, inclusive Montessori school, to **Reimagine Community** by creating spaces and systems that help to restore our collective humanity, and to **Reinvigorate Our World** by creating a culture in which individuals and communities thrive without disparities or barriers to success.

314-664-7646    1618 Tower Grove Ave., St. Louis, MO 63110    [www.citygardenschool.org](http://www.citygardenschool.org)

## Opportunities for Engagement in 2025-2026.

People engage more when they can see clear ways to make a difference. That's why we've created a year-round menu of opportunities for generosity — events, volunteer roles, and celebrations that connect you directly to the impact of your support.

Your involvement, through giving, showing up, or sharing your time, strengthens our mission so that every child at City Garden has what they need to thrive. **Discover where your generosity can make the biggest difference!**

## Opportunities for Engagement

Subscribe to the City Garden calendar at [www.citygardenschool.org/calendar](http://www.citygardenschool.org/calendar).

## Get Social with City Garden

Follow us on Bluesky [here](#).

## City Garden Montessori School Mission

City Garden exists to **Redefine Education** by developing the whole child in an excellent, inclusive Montessori school; to **Reimagine Community** by creating spaces

and systems that help to restore our collective humanity, and to Reinvigorate Our World by creating a culture in which individuals and communities thrive without disparities or barriers to success

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