

Alumni Spotlight:

Sam Slaughter

After Montessori graduation in 1999, I transitioned to Greens Farms Academy with my best friend and Montessori classmate, Matt Alkaitis. I spent two years there acclimating to life-after-Montessori before moving on to Wilton High School, which I attended along with another Montessori classmate, Bigi Sann. After high school I went to Harvard along with yet another Montessori classmate (we're everywhere!), David Andersson. I studied engineering, played lacrosse, and met a whole lot of interesting people.

I was stumbling down a path into finance while in college but at some point during my senior year I decided to decline a job offer at an investment bank to pursue a fellowship in Africa in 2009. I spent six months in Sierra Leone and another six months in Kenya where I pretty quickly became (a) very excited about the long-term potential for Africa and (b) resolved that for-profit business was the best way to drive improvements in developing markets.

I spent the next few years working various jobs and internships in the US, doing everything from house construction to private equity, traveling back to Kenya every six months or so in order to try to start a business there whenever I had saved enough money to afford it. This back-and-forth continued for about three years until our company, PowerGen, had gained enough traction so we could start paying ourselves a bit in 2013.

The initial thesis for PowerGen was terribly ill-defined. My co-founders (a roommate from college and a Kenyan friend) and I believed in the future of

East Africa and believed in the future of renewable energy globally, so we set out to build a company at the nexus of those two broad themes. We didn't know much of anything about the region, renewable energy, or how to run a business—so the learning curve was painfully steep and there were many twists and turns, and several big pivots.

More through stubbornness than skill, we eventually gained our footing and are now one of the leading renewable energy companies in the region. We employ 60 people full-time and have installed power systems throughout seven countries. But probably our most exciting work is in pioneering a new electric utility model for Africa to address the 500+ million people who lack energy access on the continent.

In this model, we build solar-powered “micro-grids” in communities which retail energy services to customers through distribution grids (which we build) and smart metering systems which allow people to pay and interface with their accounts through their mobile phones (which are ubiquitous). We finance the micro-grids to remove the up-front burden of energy access from our customers, and allow them to pay for it as a service (like we all do at home in Connecticut). This private micro-utility model is very interesting and potentially a very scalable approach for addressing the massive energy deficit in the region.

I credit and/or blame (depending on how things are going!) my Montessori experience for this path I have ended up on. My Montessori experience gave me the courage and love of exploration that

caused me to take it, and also armed me with the foundation to have a chance of succeeding on it. When I reflect on how I ended up where I am, the answers are almost all rooted in my Montessori experiences beginning at the age of two:

1 Community, togetherness, empathy

Intrinsic to the Montessori experience is a sense of community and togetherness. Class meetings, Gatherings, and the smallness of the community were some of the elements that created this environment—but ultimately it was about great teachers. Bobby, Susan Clark, Gerry Leonard, and Kathy Allen were second only to my parents as positive, shaping influences on my childhood, and they created classrooms where collaboration and cohesion were paramount. (I suspect Bobby has a last name, but in true Montessori fashion I was never aware of it in my Primary school days and now she lives in my memory as a single-name legend like Pele or probably more appropriately, Raffi).

Growing up in such an environment instilled in me a sense of community that I have applied—usually subconsciously—to many areas of my life. I feel that we, as a country, as a world, as family, or whatever group you choose, are in this together, and the highest purpose is to serve the good of that team. For my years in school this conviction typically manifested through my commitment to whatever sports teams I was on, and now it's expressed through my desire to try to fix this big problem of electricity in Africa.

2 Seeing the world as an array of infinite possible choices is scary, but rewarding

Walking into a Montessori classroom as a student can be terrifyingly open-ended. Where do I sit? Who do I work with? What do I do? These are fears of ambiguity that we all have - children and adults alike. Growing up in this unconstrained environment forced me and my classmates to develop confidence, conviction, and accountability for choices from a young age. For me I think it also nurtured a piece of me thrilled by exploration.

The comfort—and even excitement—with facing underdefined sets of opportunities that I built at Montessori was directly related to my 22-year-old self choosing the unknown in Africa over a clear path at a bank in New York.

3 The value of the journey

In Montessori symbology, the Labyrinth is our beacon which breathes life and meaning into the stale—yet important—cliche that life is about the journey and not the destination. The value of the Labyrinth is rooted not in its architecture or its bricks, but in the fact that it is a physical manifestation of a philosophy that is deeply ingrained in the Montessori experience. The Montessori ethos is one that emphasizes how you get there as more important than where you arrive. No matter what your skill level or experience with a given undertaking, you were expected to approach it with integrity, effort, and openness.



In a world fixated on metrics and results, the value of a childhood education which instilled the value of the journey cannot be overstated. It has provided me with an anchor when the objectives seemed murky. As my dad, a former Montessori teacher himself, taught me: when complexity obscures the destination, just focus on doing the next right thing.

I don't think I could have asked for a better childhood education experience than the one I had at Montessori. A lot of that is about the philosophy of the institution, but ultimately it came down to the people. In particular the teachers mentioned above and my classmates and remarkable friends. Friends like Matt Alkaitis and Scott Arcenas pushed me in ways that only competitive childhood friends can. The fact that Scott could read 1,000 page books and Matt could do cube roots in his head at age 10 was pretty motivating. *Montessori gave us a*

unique environment in which to challenge each other and learn how to make tough choices in a setting saturated with love and support. The more I see of the world, the more I realize what a special thing this was and is.

My journey in East Africa will probably continue for a couple more years as we look to scale the micro-grid model we have developed. We are transitioning from being a “business” (fixated on profitability) to a “venture” (obsessed with growth.. and then someday maybe profitability), which means we are raising capital to grow fast and aggressively, with a higher risk of catastrophic failure. It's a new chapter and a new opportunity, to learn for which I am excited.

At some point I will be returning home to pursue a new path, yet to be determined. Whatever it is, I know it will be a fascinating derivative of the formative experiences I had on Whipple Road two decades ago.