

Center City Montessori School Celebrates Its First Lower Elementary Graduating Class

By Olivia Powers, Advancement & Marketing Associate

Greene Towne Montessori School (GTMS), which launched a Lower Elementary program in September 2023, celebrated a milestone this spring: the graduation of its first-ever Lower Elementary class. The Class of 2026 — who spent the past three years helping build the school's Lower Elementary program from its earliest days — was honored at a ceremony June 1, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

"Their fingerprints are on everything our Lower Elementary community has become," said Sarah Sweeney-Denham, Head of School. "Their impact on Greene Towne's story will be everlasting."

A Year of Art, Inspired by the Masters

Throughout the school year, Lower Elementary students studied the lives and techniques of three artists, using each as a springboard for their own creative projects.

Inspired by Yayoi Kusama's mushroom paintings, students built sculptural mushrooms from paper cups, water bottles, and packaging paper, finishing them with papier mache and Kusama's signature repeating patterns. A study of illustrator Eric Carle led one class to explore analogous colors before designing original insects, which were combined with the Kindergarten classes' flowers into a whole-school garden mural. And following ceramicist Kimmy Cantrell's abstract style, students built face collages from cardboard and oil pastels.

Exploring the City

Weekly field trips took students across Philadelphia throughout the year, including visits to The Franklin Institute, Waterworks, the Wagner Museum, the Museum of Illusions, and a behind-the-scenes tour of the Penn Museum archives, where students prepared questions in advance for the archivist. Students also attended live theater — including *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Stinky Cheese Man* at the Arden Theatre, and *Newsies Jr.* at the Walnut Street Theatre — and closed out the year with a celebration at Camp Onas.

Performance was also central to the students' own experience: in partnership with MacGuffin Theater, students brought *Where the Wild Things Are* to life, designing their own costumes, and also staged a full production of *Rock & Troll* through weekly theater classes. Each production required eight weeks of preparation, as students mastered lines, songs, and choreography ahead of opening night.

A Civic Action Project on City Sanitation

The most significant thread of the year was a classwide civic action project focused on sanitation in Philadelphia.

The project grew out of the Need in Deed framework, a model developed by parents to guide students through sustained, real-world service learning rather than one-off volunteer activities. Lower Elementary Co-Lead Teacher Shelby Feldman,

Montessori Director Emily Bittner, and DEIB [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging] Coordinator Allison Wiedman attended Need in Deed training last summer; Wiedman went on to lead the project directly with students throughout the year.

"Need in Deed pushes students past a single volunteer day and into a real process — observing their community, identifying an issue themselves, and following through with people who work on it professionally," Wiedman said. "Watching our students take ownership of that process this year was remarkable."

Students began by walking the blocks around their school and photographing whatever caught their attention. Many of the images, unprompted, centered on litter and waste — a subject already on the neighborhood's mind, as the city was still recovering from a summer sanitation workers' strike.

Through subsequent reading, field trips, and classroom discussion, the question of civic responsibility for the city's waste emerged as the issue that resonated most with the class.

Wiedman noted that the project connected naturally to core Montessori values, including the belief that children thrive in clean, uncluttered environments rich with natural materials — combined with the program's broader emphasis on community engagement.

"Beautifying the environment is a core Montessori principle, and our students felt that in a very direct way once they started paying attention to their own neighborhood," said Feldman. "This project let them connect something they already value in the classroom to a much bigger community outside our doors."

Students also learned directly from local practitioners: David Evans, co-founder of Block by Block Philly, a volunteer



The Lower Elementary Class of 2026.

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nonprofit working to make Philadelphia the cleanest city in America, encouraged them to consider organizing a community block cleanup; David Bloovman of Bennett Compost, and a former Greene Towne parent, presented on composting in Philadelphia and helped inform the students' final project.

The class's work culminated in a series of awareness posters educating neighbors about sanitation, recycling, and composting practices — a campaign the school describes as a lasting contribution to the surrounding community.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

As the graduating class moves on, Greene Towne Montessori celebrates not just their achievements, but also the role they played in shaping the school itself.

"This class didn't just move through a Montessori curriculum," Sweeney-Denham said. "They helped build the very program that will carry forward for years of Greene Towne students to come."

Each of the inaugural Lower Elementary third graders was admitted to multiple schools — including their first-choice schools — among them Baldwin, Friends Select, Germantown Friends, Springside Chestnut Hill Academy, Moorestown Friends, Perelman Jewish Day School, and William Penn Charter.

Greene Towne Montessori School, 55 N. 22nd Street in Center City, serves children ages infant through nine years old through Montessori playgroups and enrollment for Toddlers through Third Grade. The only accredited Montessori school in Center City Philadelphia, this fall Greene Towne celebrates the 60th year since its founding by parents in 1966.



The entire Lower Elementary program at Camp Onas.

CCCulture

Museums of Art, Science, and Ethnography Celebrate the Semiquincentennial with Special Exhibitions

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Museum exhibitions celebrating America's Semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of American independence, will run through this year and beyond. These exhibitions are not all about American history; some are about art, science, and ethnography. Check websites for hours and other exhibitions on view at the same time.

A Nation of Artists, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway

Many artists and types of art are represented including Black, Native American, Philadelphians and Pennsylvanians, women, and unknowns; paintings include abstract, landscape, portraits, and a whole room of Thomas Eakins; crafts include quilts, jewelry, ceramics, furniture, and a huge wood fireplace by Wharton Esherick. Through July 5, 2027. <https://www.philamuseum.org/>

A Nation of Artists, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Historic Landmark Building, 118 N. Broad Street

A selection of works by American artists from different time periods are grouped together by theme, not by artist or by date as one might expect. Although some of the groupings seem like a stretch, there is a wide representation of artists, so every viewer is sure to find something to love. This exhibition is paired with the one at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for a total of over 1,000 works of American art. Through September 5, 2027, <https://www.pafa.org/>

Botany of Nations, Academy of Natural Sciences, 1900 Benjamin Franklin Parkway

In the early 19th century, Capt. Meriwether Lewis and Lieut.

William Clark documented hundreds of botanical specimens and, through native tribes, learned cultivation practices, medicinal uses, and food preparation for many plants. Some of the oldest plant specimens they collected are housed in the Academy's Lewis and Clark Herbarium. The exhibition also includes 18th and early 19th century scientific instruments, journals, maps, peace pipes, and peace medals. The Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804 to 1806, was a U.S. military expedition for the purpose of exploring the Louisiana Purchase and the Pacific Northwest. Through February 14, 2027.

<https://ansp.org/experience/exhibits/botany-of-nations>

Native American Voices, Penn Museum, 3260 South Street

This new permanent exhibition, curated by leading Indigenous specialists, includes beautiful crafts such as weaving and pottery, as well the history and living culture of Native American and Canadian tribes in four geographic areas. The Lenape tribe — formerly residing in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and New York — was forcibly displaced by European settlers and the U.S. government between the 17th and 19th centuries; now most live in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario. Other tribes represented are from the Southeast, Southwest, and Alaska. Some facts you might not know: In 1680, there was a successful Pueblo revolt against the Spanish colonizers in New Mexico; in 1959, when Alaska became a state, members of tribes could become U.S. citizens, provided they gave up their native culture. <https://www.penn.museum/on-view/galleries-exhibitions/native-north-america-gallery>