

## Montessori Grad Awarded Fulbright Scholarship



### MONTESSORI GRADUATES

*Where are they now?*

#### Seth Swingle

Mountaintop Montessori  
Charlottesville, VA

Seth Swingle is a musician and a scholar with a knack for conveying his unique blend of skills and interests to those who can provide experiences that further those passions. His accumulated mentors and scholarships include a Virginia Foundation for the Humanities Folklife Apprenticeship, which he secured as a 15-year-old banjo player, and need- and merit-based funding through the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Young Scholars Program for both high school and college.

Seth has studied in France and Morocco to increase his fluency in music, French, and Arabic, and he graduated from the University of Chicago in 2011 with a degree in history and a Fulbright Fellowship

to pursue research in Mali, West Africa. For a young man who has fared so well in such competitive realms, his metric of success is singular: "I've always won by not competing. I measure myself against myself."

Mountaintop Montessori was fortunate to have the Swingle family as part of their school community through much of the 1990s. At just over a decade old, the school had begun to transition from a nomadic start-up, renting a series of church basements, to a mature program ready to settle into a permanent home. Craig Swingle still recalls vividly how his wife, Ruth Jolly, insisted after her first look at the school that he would have to go and see for himself how different and how wonderful it was. Thankfully, he did go and he did see.

They enrolled Seth in the Primary classroom guided by Kelly Norris. Craig, a building contractor, soon became an invaluable part of the dedicated team of staff members and parent volunteers, who brought about the expansion of facilities the school needed as it grew from a small Elementary program to a school providing the continuum of Montessori education to students of all ages.

Seth has fond memories of other educators along with those of his first Montessori guide, Kelly. He recalls that Estra Roell and Alma Scheible encouraged him to follow the interests that flowed from the countless hours he spent reading and to be the driving force in his own education. Seth began studying at the Music Education Center in Charlottesville at the age of three, and its director, Chrissy Sanford, has had a lasting impact on him as a musician. When he reached the age of ten, she encouraged him to branch out from the piano and learn a second instrument. He began learning to play the banjo, and it quickly became apparent that he has a special ability to capture the melody and spirit of a tune from his observations of other musicians playing.

Seth's parents provided him with exposure to a wide variety of things, and when something stuck, they took note. Seth expresses gratitude for the extraordinary lengths to which they went to provide opportunities for him to find his interests and develop skills in the areas that mattered to him. Ruth and Craig are not musicians, but they saw early on that Seth was

transfixed by music. The family traveled to many music festivals, where Seth absorbed shows by master performers, won youth banjo competitions, and even shared the stage with some of his mentors. He was so frequently in the audience at Charlottesville's venerable folk venue, the late, great Prism Coffeehouse, that the management eventually arranged a special pass for him so that the young musician could soak up as many shows as possible. Seth estimates that he attended over 200 shows in that unparalleled, intimate setting in a few years time, leading to his apprenticeships with both Mike Seeger and his first Malian *n'goni* teacher, Cheick Hamala Diabaté. Ruth and Craig had served in Mali as Peace Corps Volunteers, and Seth first traveled there with Craig before returning on his own in more recent years.

Seth completed Mountaintop's Elementary program in 2000 and was home schooled through high school. With no grades and no transcript, he set about applying to several of the most selective colleges in the US. As with the earlier grants he had won, his success in getting ad-

mitted to five colleges was based on the strength of his test scores, recommendations, and skills as a writer. Seth chose to attend Chicago after close scrutiny led him to conclude that it would be the most challenging. He made this decision, despite the even-bigger names and financial-aid offers of some other schools, demonstrating a level of focus and determination that surfaced again four years later. When discussing his Fulbright project, he makes it clear that he would ultimately be doing this research anyway, with or without the funding. "If you are interested in something, you can't wait for someone to pay you to do it," he says.

The Mountaintop faculty was thrilled to receive a visit from Seth just before his departure for Mali, where he is studying two regional styles of playing the *n'goni*, a lute that traditionally had four strings and is thought to be a predecessor of the banjo. Not surprisingly, faculty members remember him as a highly self-directed student. It was a delight to learn more about the years of his education since his

Montessori days, to share in his excitement about his Fulbright research, and just to spend time in the company of a young man, who is quite warm and winning in addition to being so intelligent and accomplished. (It was also a real treat to have his dad on campus again. No one was surprised to find that, while Seth had been reconnecting with staff and seeing the current students at work in the classrooms, Craig had found his way to the roof as part of an impromptu building inspection.) During his Fulbright, Seth will compare the music of Malian *griots* (traditional musicians who serve as oral historians, negotiators, counselors, praise-singers, orators, and wedding planners/officiators, etc.) from two regions, Kita and Ségu. He will also study the *kora*, a harp with a daunting total of 21 strings in two rows. Seth is sharing photos, anecdotes, and field recordings from his research at [3roundsoftea.blogspot.com](http://3roundsoftea.blogspot.com). ■

— by Leigh Ann Carver,  
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#### MONTESSORI MOMENT

## I Just Want Him to Be Smart...

BY RB FAST

Associate Director of The Montessori Academy of Colorado

As parents, we all have the same primary long-term concern for our children: we want them to be successful people who lead fulfilling lives. As a society, we have collectively defined those qualities that we most admire in others, and we have used them to define what makes a person 'successful.' Some of those qualities include being smart, attractive, friendly, strong, and creative. Although these are all positive qualities that we regularly see in people, we have turned them into something more concerning ... labels.

The 1970s marked a turning point in the culture of parenting in America. This is when the concept of parenting for self-esteem became the norm. Parents be-