



PHOTOS COURTESY DR. JULIET KING

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AMS 2022 LIVING LEGACY, JULIET KING

By Koren Clark, MEd

Juliet King, EdD, is the AMS 2022 Living Legacy. She began her career in South Florida some five decades ago, teaching in Miami-Dade County when public schools were beginning to desegregate. She transferred to an inner-city school with a Title I Montessori program; this was her first introduction to the Montessori Method. To preserve Montessori access to underserved children, Dr. King and her colleague Dr. Lucy Canzoneri-Golden cofounded Coral Reef Montessori Academy (CRMA), the first public Montessori charter school in the state of Florida, in 1998.

Dr. King has dedicated her life to advancing Montessori, especially for underrepresented populations. CRMA, which began with 3 classrooms serving 86 students, now has 28 classrooms and over 600 students, and is an AMS-accredited Montessori public school.

Under Dr. King's leadership, CRMA has sought to promote social justice, diversity, and inclusiveness. Its board and student body are 80% people of the global majority; 25% of lead teachers are Black and 54% are Latinx. Through participation in local, national, and global projects, CRMA students have access to real-life civic, humanitarian equity and inclusion work.

Dr. King's dissertation, *An Examination of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Antibias-Antiracist Curriculum in a Montessori Setting*, co-authored with Dr. Canzoneri-Golden, was published in 2020. (Find Dr. King's dissertation at tinyurl.com/yxx3y287.)

Dr. King works with students at Coral Reef Montessori Academy.



KOREN CLARK: What do you remember from your early school days?

JULIET KING: I grew up in South Carolina and went to an all-Black school. I enjoyed it; I enjoyed my teachers. My early school days were an idyllic type of existence. There is one memory that stands out: the day that John F. Kennedy was killed. I distinctly remember staying after school that day with my brother and my sister, because my brother had football practice on the school field. When we heard that someone had shot President Kennedy, it was surreal. Kennedy, regardless of his politics, was like a breath of fresh air, and he seemed to have some empathy for Black people. . . . It seemed like he actually saw us. That day, it dawned on me that the life of anyone who had empathy for Black people was in danger.

Another thing I remember from my school days was our books. They were always beat up, marked up and written on, and ragged. They had been used several times by children from white schools before they were passed to us. Every year, we'd have to try and erase all the markings so we could use them. We never had new books.

KOREN: Can you tell me about some of the teachers that made an impression on you growing up?

JULIET: I had a lot of good teachers. My fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Witherspoon, stands out. She taught history, both South Carolina history and American history, and that was when I really began to love history. In sixth grade, I remember cursive handwriting with Mr. Smith. I loved my high school English teacher, Mrs. Parker. I had a lot of great teachers—I loved them because they were interested in us. There was a mutual type of respect, between teachers and students.

It was a good school community. Everyone knew each other, and everyone helped out. I was at a school reunion a few years ago, talking to one of my friends from when I was little, and she told me a story about my father. When I was young, I went to a two-room schoolhouse—the little kids were in one room and the big kids in another—and what my friend remembered was my father coming in every morning on cold days to start the fire so we wouldn't be cold while we were at school. Everyone helped out in similar ways, and that's what my friend remembered about our school days.

KOREN: That's beautiful—that sense of ownership and unity and feeling of “we’re doing this together.” I think people oftentimes underestimate the value of community. That’s what schools should be all about. That leads to my next question—what lessons did you learn about your identity at school?

JULIET: The teachers didn’t speak a lot about race politics when I was in school; that was considered too dangerous. When I was in school, we were taught to love our country. We knew it wasn’t perfect, but we thought it was the best country that we could be in. We were taught the Pledge of Allegiance and patriotic songs. We were taught that we were lucky to live in this country. It was a very positive type of education, although looking back I realize it probably would’ve been dangerous for them to do anything else.

KOREN: So nobody was refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance?

JULIET: No. Everybody said the Pledge of Allegiance. Everybody sang the national anthem. We also sang the Negro National Anthem.

To answer your question about identity, it was really my parents who tried to instill in me who I was as an individual. My father did a lot of reading, so when things would happen in the country that weren’t right, he would talk about them to me. But some things I had to learn on my own. Here’s an example: One weekend we went into town to go shopping, and we passed by a drugstore that had a soda fountain. I said to my mom, “Let’s go in there and get a hamburger.” My mother replied with disdain, “No, you don’t want to go in there.” I didn’t understand at the time. It wasn’t until later that I realized the drugstore didn’t serve Black people. I think it was my parents trying to protect me. You can’t always butt heads. I know sometimes people say, “Hey, if I was back in slavery, I would’ve done this and I would’ve done that.” But you have to stop and think these people survived. They survived to live another day for us to be here.

The search for self and knowledge continues. I am currently reading the book *They Came Before Columbus*.

KOREN: By Ivan van Sertima! I love that book. He documents the presence of Africans in ancient America.

JULIET: Yes. I think James Baldwin and Richard Wright had a lot to do with me shaping my identity as well. . . . They were some of my favorite authors, especially Wright. I love his book *Native Son* because it is a beautiful narrative of our country’s history.

KOREN: What did your educational experience teach you about the meaning of education?

JULIET: Education is not how much you know. Education is being able to find out the answers to things that you don’t know. A lot of people spout words they may not understand and think they’re educated. But there are so many things out there to know. What I know, you might not know, and what you know, I might not know—there’s an infinite amount of knowledge out in the world, so to be educated is more about being able to find the answers to things that you don’t know.

KOREN: It sounds like a communal way of sharing knowledge—being able to learn different things from different people.

JULIET: Yes. When I was growing up and in school, and had a test, my teachers had not given us the answers or told us what was going to be on the test. They gave us questions that made us come up with our own answers, and made us think and rationalize. Some schools give you the answers and then want you to give the answers back to them just like they gave them to you.

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KOREN: That’s real learning, getting children to really critically analyze and . . .

JULIET: And think.

KOREN: Yes, to think about the answers rather than just memorizing them. That’s the higher-level critical consciousness. You said you loved history in school. Can you talk more about that?

JULIET: History . . . it's a story. It's a narrative. You learn about timelines and dates, but really it's about stories. Even when I was taught about the "discovery" of America, it's just a story. There's the history you learn about in the classroom and what you learn in life. What stands out to me most is the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. I was a child then, and I would watch sit-ins and demonstrations on TV. I remember seeing police with dogs and guns, and people screaming [racial slurs], and [Alabama governor] George Wallace blocking the door to Black students at the University of Alabama. And the way Black people were negatively portrayed in the media—both then and now—is not accurate. Sometimes, what people say happened is not what really went on.

KOREN: Right. It's not a true perspective.

JULIET: Of course, slavery is horrible and all kinds of things go through your mind when you talk about history, but just let's go back to Reconstruction when Blacks had a chance to be a part of the Congress and impact our current educational structure. This is why you need different perspectives in history.

So much of what Black people have accomplished is built upon a strong family structure. However, that is not the narrative we are fed about Black people in America. You hear that Black people don't have a family structure. We would not have been able to survive if we did not have strong families. Not only do we have our immediate family, but we also have our extended family; a lot of people don't realize this.

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KOREN: You attended an HBCU (historically Black college/university).

JULIET: Yes, I went to Benedict College, in Columbia, South Carolina. To me, it's home. I go back every year

to homecoming; I attend my class reunions. When I was about to graduate high school, my principal took me and two of my cousins to visit Benedict—it was where he'd gone to college. He ended up getting each of us a scholarship. I had a ball at Benedict—it was a good time for me. My sister and I started an endowment there.

KOREN: How did you decide to be a teacher?

JULIET: I didn't, really. When I was a child coming up, I always said I wanted to be a teacher—probably because, at that time, teaching was just about the only profession open to a Black woman. And then, in the early 1960s, when things appeared to be opening up for Black people in terms of desegregation, I said, "Hey, I want to do something else. I'm going to go into business." So I majored in business administration in college. And then when I graduated, I started working for National Airlines. My job was to check the receipts of the ticket agents after they finished their transactions. We had a 15-minute break each morning. I wanted to just work through the break, to try and get better at what I was doing, but it was a union rule that we had to stop. On top of that, my commute to the job was horrible, and the job itself was boring, so I decided I would look for another job. I started substitute teaching, and I really liked it. The principal at the school where I subbed most offered me a job, and I took it.

KOREN: How and when did you discover Montessori?

JULIET: I'm sorry I didn't find Montessori earlier in my teaching career. I'd heard of it, but I didn't know anything about it. When I went to teach at Pine Villa, a magnet school, the principal called me and asked me about taking Montessori training. I didn't do it at first, because it was only Early Childhood training and my certification was in elementary education. But later the school offered Title I Montessori for elementary, and I took the training then. It was interesting, because before Montessori, the school was telling us, "You have to do cooperative learning; you have to individualize instruction." But they didn't tell us *how* to do any of it. But when I took the Montessori training, it was like a light bulb going off. I just loved it. I had always liked going to work; I liked teaching. But when I started doing Montessori, it was so amazing! I saw the magic of Montessori.

I had a lot of Black students from a really poor area who were struggling. One day, we were working with

the three-part cards, and one of the children out of nowhere started reading fluently. I looked at my assistant. I was amazed. I said, “Did you teach her? Are you teaching that?” And she said, “No. Did you?” We couldn’t believe what we were seeing.

I had another student, a boy. He was a good little worker, but he wasn’t reading. I would give him phonics books to take home, and I’d say, “Read two or three pages.” And the next day, his mother came to me and said, “You told him to read three pages. He wanted to read the whole thing.” And I said, “Well, then let him read the whole book!”

KOREN: You’re talking about a family that may not have had that much literature at home, right? And you’re using the Montessori phonetic curriculum, and these kids are blossoming.

JULIET: Yes. In addition, one of the great things about Montessori is teacher transformation. Montessori teachers know how to talk to students. They are calm, they are respectful, they honor the child.

KOREN: Yes. That true honoring . . . to truly see the light in children’s eyes, to see their full humanity, you’ve got to be able to clear the clouds from your own self. Can you talk a little bit about what prompted your doctoral dissertation, *An Examination of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Antibias-Antiracist Curriculum in a Montessori Setting*?

JULIET: When Lucy [Canzoneri-Golden] and I started our school, Coral Reef Montessori Academy, we went out of our way to try and find teachers who were nurturing, who were open to all students. We would ask prospective teachers, “Do you have experience working with Black children?” and tell them, “Hey, we expect all children to be treated equally.” But bias is a systemic thing; it’s a mindset. Without realizing it, we think differently about different groups of children. In our school, I noticed that the students who were being sent to the office for disciplinary reasons were mostly Black students, and usually boys. And our Black students made up only 18% or 19% of our population. We started to investigate and track data on this. We found that about 60% of the kids being written up for discipline problems were Black. It wasn’t so much that the Black kids were behaving worse than the other kids. It’s that they were being reported more.

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And this doesn’t only happen in schools. In this country, the mortality rate for Black infants is much higher than the mortality rate for white infants. Doctors have this misguided perception that we don’t hurt as much. They think we can take more pain. This is a dehumanization of Black people; we have to be mindful of this.

2020: Dr. King working with her sorority, AKA, to get out the vote



Dr. King (far right) with other members of the Dade County, FL, chapter of The Links, Inc., collecting supplies for Hurricane Harvey victims in the Bahamas



Dr. King and other Links, Inc., members participate in "Links Day at the Capitol."



Dr. King and members of the Miami Girl Friends help furnish rooms at a shelter for survivors of domestic violence.

KOREN: Yes, a lot of times people think that the violence that we're seeing on the streets is not related to the curricular violence that happens in the schools, to what happens in hospitals, to what happens on the job. They think they are all isolated incidents, but in fact, they're all interconnected.

JULIET: And Black people face lots of microaggressions each day. I'll give you an example. I was coming out of a grocery store one day and a male employee said to me, "How are you doing, sweetie?" And then to the white woman behind me, who was much younger than me, he said, "How do you do, ma'am?" She was "ma'am" and I was "sweetie." I'm old enough to be his mom. Things like that happen all the time.

KOREN: Social justice has been a thread throughout your life. Can you tell us how it shows up for you?

JULIET: It shows up in many different ways. I vote in all the elections. I'm a member of a graduate chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority (AKA)—we work to try to improve life in our community. I'm a lifetime member of NAACP. I'm a chairperson of the Individual Giving Committee for my college, Benedict College. I work with The Links, Inc., to provide scholarships for different groups and do mentoring. It's just a part of my life, how I live. And social justice is part of the mission statement at CRMA. When teachers come into our school, they know that equitable treatment of students is something we value and expect.

KOREN: I feel like social justice and activism is simply about activating your humanity.

JULIET: Yes. We just want to be seen as human beings, as part of the human race. We're just trying to live. That's it.

KOREN: What do you think we need to do to create equitable opportunity in education for all children?

JULIET: That's a hard one. As I said before, we have a systemic type of problem. For example, it's not that Black kids can't learn. But society tells them in different ways that they can't learn. And sometimes kids fulfill those prophecies. When they go to take a test, it might not be that they don't know an answer

but rather that the whole weight of the Black race is on their shoulders. Because if they mess up it's not just them. They're bringing everybody down. We need to change the mindset of people—not just white people, not just Black people—all people. I've heard it said that the North won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative.

The narrative is that Black people are subhuman. That we cannot learn. That we are less honest. That

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we are more likely to steal, that we are hard to handle. It's a lot of work to change mindsets, to make sure that people are seen as human beings. Sure, some Black people are bad. But it's the same for white people, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and so on. Until we can see people as individuals and humans, this is something that we're going to face. It's going to take a while. This is a part of who we are as a country. I think young people are our hope, though. In the 1950s and 1960s, during the civil rights era, the people I saw demonstrating were almost all Black. But in the past few years, with the protests around George Floyd's murder and others, there were people of all races and creeds out there in the streets. It's always good to see that other people are willing to stand up for what they see as being right and wrong.

KOREN CLARK, MEd (she/her), is CEO and co-founder of Know Thyself, Inc., a Montessori materials and professional development organization, and is a partner with Wildflower Schools. She serves as a board member for the Black Montessori Education Fund and is a member of the Montessori Life Editorial Advisory Board. Koren is AMS-credentialed (Elementary I). Contact her at knowthyselfinc.net.