

# Montclair's Open Air School

CONTRIBUTED BY HELEN FALLON, TRUSTEE, MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER



Montclair's Open Air School existed from 1910-1920 (left).

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**I**N THE EARLY 1900s, Montclair's population was booming, our school district was growing, and tuberculosis was an ever-present health risk. The disease had afflicted mankind for centuries, but in the late 1800s it was discovered that tuberculosis, also known as consumption, was caused by germs. Lack of fresh air was considered a significant indicator for the disease, as were the dense, urban living conditions that resulted from our country's increasing industrialization.

Knowing the source of the illness and common risk factors, anti-tuberculosis societies combatted it aggressively: they educated people about the science behind the disease and promoted the benefits of fresh air, sunshine, rest, and nourishing food.

The Open Air School movement began in Berlin, Germany in 1904. German authorities sent tubercular children to outdoor schools where the curriculum included rest, play, and a diet of three nutritious meals each day, in addition to studies. Within three months, most of the children were completely cured. News of this success spread quickly.

The first Open Air School opened in the U.S. in Providence, Rhode Island in 1908. By 1914, the United States had 60 Open Air Schools, also called Fresh Air Schools, in 32 states.

An Open Air School was established in Montclair in the 1910-1911 school year; the previous year, a report indicated that of 4,000 children attending the Montclair public schools, 47 would benefit from the outdoor school setting. A 20' x 30' platform was constructed at the rear of the Cedar Avenue school grounds (today's Nishuane School) and covered by a large tent with sides that rolled up to allow the maximum light and air. Due to space constraints, only the 20 students most urgently in need of treatment were enrolled. The children were served breakfast, lunch, and milk and crackers at closing. They were closely monitored by nurses at school and home. To keep the children warm in cold weather, they were given woolen clothing and "sitting bags," which were similar to sleeping bags. On cold days, heated soapstones were inserted in the bottom of the bags to keep the children's feet warm.

At the end of the 1910-1911 school year, the average weight gain per student at the Open Air School was more than 5 ½ pounds and - since weight gain was a primary indicator of the treatment's viability—Montclair's open air program was considered a success.

There was talk of expanding the Open Air School program to the Chestnut Street School and Mt. Hebron School, but those plans do not appear to have come to fruition. However, in 1912, an "open window method" was implemented with good effects at Hillside School. The nutrition aspects of the Open Air School program were also expanded to a lesser degree to other schools. The benefits of milk were especially noted and "milk stations" were established at Nishuane, Rand, and Baldwin Street Schools.

By the end of the 1920 school year, the Montclair Board of Education made a decision to discontinue the Open Air School, deciding to use the funds to enhance nutritional programs at multiple schools. That, along with the practice of maintaining well-ventilated classrooms, was intended to produce health benefits similar to the Open Air School program, for more students. In 1943, the discovery of streptomycin eliminated the need for specialized tuberculosis treatments for large number of children. The Open Air Movement faded away in the 1950s-60s as tuberculosis retreated.

Though Montclair's Open Air School was relatively short-lived, it helped some of our most vulnerable, early 20th century residents not only survive, but thrive. ■

■ Can you recall a particularly memorable post?

**DANIELLE:** Some posts are obviously controversial, like vaccine posts, or holding your child back from kindergarten. But if you had told me that J. Lo's Super Bowl performance was going to cause seismic repercussions in our group with the conversation lasting for days with upwards of 600 comments, I wouldn't have believed you. That post took on a life of its own, and I was so surprised that it was as contentious as it was. We really had to moderate that one and we don't have to moderate a lot of stuff.

■ Lori, you're a moderator of two other groups. What motivates you to be an admin?

**LORI:** I started the cooking group when I first moved here to meet people since I didn't know anyone. I ended up meeting some of the best people in that group. I also run Secret Montclair which now has over 12,000 members. We wanted to have a group where people could express their opinions a little more freely than some of the other groups. I didn't expect it to grow so large, which means it's a lot more work than I bargained for, but I am gratified to know that we are providing a great resource for neighbors and a vibrant forum for local discussions.

■ What have been some of the most rewarding aspects of moderating the group?

**DANIELLE:** You see people rally around each other all the time. People want to help each other and take care of each other. I'm always very touched by how vulnerable people are willing to be to support someone else who's having a hard time. If someone makes a post and somebody else shares, 'I was in that situation. It was really hard and this is how I got through,' they're often baring a part of themselves with the goal of helping someone in need. It's always a beautiful thing to see people come together to support each other within the group.

**SHEILA:** The virtual happy hours recently are fun because during the pandemic you don't necessarily have that natural break at the end of the day but also it allows us to say what we're happy about or what we found some joy in and not just a cocktail.

**BRIAN:** I think the humor too. That's something that stood out for me. There are some people in the group who you know are just going to bring the fun every time.

■ Did you foresee the group being as meaningful and useful to people when you first started?

**DANIELLE:** I definitely foresaw it being useful. But I didn't realize how meaningful it would be, and that's been beautiful to be a part of. Whether it's talking about how to raise a child to be anti-racist, or our BIPOC members bravely sharing their experiences of racism and discrimination with the group - these are powerful conversations with lasting impact. I don't think that I foresaw that it would be so personal - the sharing of emotional stories and constructive exploration of difficult topics. I think we thought it would be more of a crowdsourcing for local services type of thing, and it's really evolved into a true community. It feels good to provide a place where people feel safe to discuss so many things, and where they feel like they can make a connection. ■

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at [cweiner@bestversionmedia.com](mailto:cweiner@bestversionmedia.com).

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# Montclair Foundation Giving

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The Neighborhood Childcare Center in Montclair

**T**HANKS TO THEIR generous community, the Montclair Foundation has awarded \$81,000 in grant funds since the pandemic began to local nonprofit organizations that address key areas of food supplies, homelessness, emergency medical services and mental health support. People are still in great need and your donations still are needed.

The most recent recipient of a Montclair Foundation grant is the Neighborhood Childcare Center on Maple Avenue. They have continued to provide childcare support every single day throughout the pandemic. They care for almost 50 children of emergency and essential workers. The children range in ages 4 months to 12 years. The center has also been providing healthy food to these children but needs help to continue this support. ■

For more information visit the Montclair Foundation website at [montclairfoundation.org](http://montclairfoundation.org).

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