

Application Related Information

Application: Application Incomplete Iteration Name: 202410_GR_G
Grad Program Applying To: MES Program Name: MES

Recommendation Information

Recommended By: Emily Wadland Recommenders Title: Chair, Bryant Montessori Garden Leadership Team
Recommenders Institution: Bryant Montessori PTO Contact Name: Rhonda Piri
Waive Access to Recommendation Ltrs: I choose to waive my right to review this recommendation. Recommendation Waiver Choice:
Recommendation Form Submitted: ✓ Recommendation Status: Received
Received Date: 12/30/2022 11:51 AM Recommender Assessment: I recommend this applicant without reservation.
Recommendation Type: General Recommender Form: Letter of Recommendation
Recommendation Entity ID: 1024000108416140 Recommendation Owner: Josephine Bernier

Recommender Form Questions

How long have you known applicant: Applicant ability as self-directed learner:
Time since last contact with applicant: Applicant as productive member of group:
Relationship with Applicant: Applicant most significant strengths:
Ability to complete rigorous grad program: Responsibility/reliability:
Communication Skills - Oral: Communication skills - written:
Service Orientation-sensitivity/empathy: Ability to work independently:
Ability to handle stress: Ability to think critically:
Ability to analyze/problem solve: Ability to think creatively:
Openness to feedback: Potential for leadership:
Ability to work in a team: Personal/professional reflection:

Description Information

Description: Form URL: <https://evergreenstatecollege.radiu>

Other Information

Created Time: 11/05/2022 03:15 PM Created By: Josephine Bernier
Modified Time: 12/30/2022 11:51 AM Modified By: Josephine Bernier

29th December 2022

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RE: Reference for Rhonda “Lilith” Piri

I write this reference as Chair of the Garden Leadership Team at Bryant Montessori School, a pre-K through 8th grade school in the Tacoma Public Schools district. The Garden Leadership Team is a committee of the Bryant Montessori PTO and oversees the school’s Outdoor Garden Classroom and garden programming. Our 6,400 square-foot Outdoor Classroom is a peaceful oasis situated in a dense, diverse urban neighborhood and functions as a learning laboratory. Its purpose-driven design includes wildlife habitat, beds and berms for growing food, sensorial experience spaces, and a range of seating configurations which provides opportunities for students and educators to work side-by-side, grow, and enjoy the natural world. The Outdoor Garden Classroom exists because of Lilith Piri, and I’d like to tell you the story of how that came to be.

Although a good school, Bryant Montessori was a crowded campus dominated by blacktop and many portable buildings to accommodate a student population that long-ago exceeded the capacity of its outdated building. There was a garden space at the corner of campus that mostly consisted of low garden beds, but the space was poorly designed, under-used, and not maintained. It was a real-world problem – others saw it too – but it was Lilith who envisioned and facilitated a solution.

Lilith’s solution was a novel kind of garden – not seen elsewhere in the district or at almost any urban public school anywhere – that could provide over 400 preK – 8th grade students daily access to the natural world. It would be built solely by the school community to meet the needs of the school community, accommodating whole classrooms, small groups and also individuals as a place in nature to work, learn, and find peace and retreat. Lilith’s vision was ambitious, required a broad range of activities to implement, and took years to bring to full fruition.

Early on, Lilith surveyed the community to assess the needs of teachers and students, and she worked to garner support from teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners. As the vision for the space took hold, she communicated with the community, cultivated volunteers, and led efforts to fundraise through plant sales, grant writing, soliciting

donations, and convincing the PTO to financially support the garden. She facilitated the design of the Outdoor Classroom, getting help from others but also heavily contributing her own design and planning skills, and she led a series of work parties to build-out the various gardens and learning spaces. Lilith always sought to connect the students to the garden, by taking the garden into classrooms and taking kids out into the gardens. It's now been several years since Lilith has been our Garden Coordinator, but many students fondly remember working with her. For not only did she teach lessons and build and maintain the gardens with the students, over-and-over she created opportunities for the kids to get their hands in the dirt.

In this way the Outdoor Garden Classroom was built, piece-by-piece over a number of years, not just by adults but by the students that these gardens belong to. Through it all, Lilith always saw the next thing needed, always centered the needs of the students and teachers, always created opportunities based in the Montessori philosophy of students learning by working with their hands, and always sought to build community.

Not everything came easily. In the early years, the school district's grounds crews would sometimes spray pesticides and herbicides in our student gardens and indiscriminately weedwack ornamental plants, and school district policy didn't allow students to eat the veggies they grew. Lilith doggedly advocated for our students and the gardens, working through the bureaucratic difficulties. Because of her persistence in bringing about needed changes in the school district, we no longer face these problems.

It's hard to overstate the truly unusual and beautiful gardens that Lilith designed and brought to life in the Outdoor Garden Classroom. When district officials, local community leaders, and garden aficionados have toured the space – most gasp and remark with surprise about our lovely and unique school garden. What most people didn't immediately recognize is its planned, purposeful, smart design, and its impact. Before the Outdoor Classroom, Bryant Montessori School had 0 trees inside our gates. When Lilith departed our community 2½ years ago, the gardens on our campus had over 25 trees, many more large shrubs and flowers, and was designated a Certified Wildlife Habitat. The Outdoor Garden Classroom has brought lushness to our campus. It's provided equitable access to the natural world and the opportunity for our students to build and maintain something beautiful. The sense of community and purpose rooted in our gardens has been powerful to many of our students.

Several months ago, Tacoma Public Schools began a complete rebuild of Bryant Montessori School. Although the Outdoor Garden Classroom that Lilith brought to life is in the process of being disassembled, a major feature of the new school will be a new, centrally-located Outdoor Garden Classroom that is more accessible for the children and visible to staff. Schools often want big gardens and school districts are reluctant to provide them because they often fall to neglect. Bryant Montessori's situation is different. We will be getting a large site for our new Outdoor Garden Classroom because Bryant Montessori has a track record of building and maintaining its gardens. We credit Lilith for creating not just our first Garden

Classroom but for also creating a school garden culture for supporting and caring for the gardens. If our Garden Leadership Team learned anything as the school emerged from the pandemic and prepared for the rebuild, it's that our students expect and delight in caring for the gardens. And so we continue Lilith's work to preserve and passionately advocate for this incredible space.

I advise you to seize the opportunity to work with Lilith, for when she sets herself on a worthy endeavor, she approaches it with ambition and perseverance, and most likely you will see her make a creative and impactful contribution to the world.

I welcome you to contact me if you have any questions about Lilith.

Sincerely,

Emily Wadland

Chair of the Garden Leadership Team at Bryant Montessori School