



Beloved community member Paul Smith.

This New World We're In

We are almost 6 weeks into the new school year, and in a way things are settling into a new normal. Students, parents and teachers alike are getting accustomed to virtual classes and things are going more smoothly as all are getting used to the technology and to being together, at a distance. Hugs and personal contact are sorely missed, but all are making this work.

At the same time, we're also experiencing extremes. We celebrate holidays, but also mourn the loss of a cherished community member to COVID-19. We interact with guest speakers from other countries in our classes in ways not possible when we met in person and we offer art as an emotional outlet for students in these troubled times.

Read on to learn about each of these new experiences.

With a Little Creativity, Virtual Celebrations



In Costa Rica, September is a month that children look forward to almost as much as Halloween or Christmas, for it has not one but two holidays to celebrate. But this year, the children worried that they wouldn't get to celebrate with their friends and teachers. But they needn't have worried!

In 1946, Costa Rica designated September 9th as the day to recognize the rights of children. Those rights include freedom, education, health care, nutrition and several other necessities for a good upbringing. That's the serious side of the day. For children, though it has become a time to celebrate, sometimes with gifts, and mostly just with children simply being children.

Our primary students met the challenge of carrying on those celebrations within the confines of their virtual classes, much to the delight of the children. Students were encouraged to come to school in everything from costumes to crazy hair to pajamas or mismatched clothing -- one even came dressed as a vampire!

Third and fourth graders started the day with a fun virtual session sharing jokes and showing off their pets at home, then playing games and holding scavenger hunts. They then settled into a few minutes of reflection on how they can

celebrate and have fun even when they can't get together and came up with some great examples and a discussion of how flexibility is important.

And not even a week later, it was Independence Day on September 15th, celebrating 199 years since Costa Rica became independent from Spain. In more normal years, the day before is marked with a torch run across the country and on the day itself there are huge parades boasting traditional dress, bands and dancing. Our school traditionally participates in both of these, running segments of the torch carry, and with an entry in the parade.

Undeterred by being limited to virtual classes, we celebrated nonetheless. Our kindergarten classes, for instance, were encouraged to dress up in the traditional clothing with blue, white and red from the Costa Rican flag. Families cooked traditional -- known as "typical" -- Costa Rican foods. And in classes, aside from showing their outfits, students and teachers danced together to traditional Costa Rican music.

Third and fourth graders were also encouraged to dress up for the day. A parent of one of the students joined the class to talk about the different styles of dress in communities across Costa Rica and they then danced together. The class -- with students and teachers from Monteverde and from other countries -- also shared what they most enjoy about living here.

Would we rather be meeting in person? The answer is probably a unanimous YES! but we won't be stopped in celebrating.



Want to help MFS both this school year and with scholarships for next year?



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or a bank transfer in Costa Rica.*

We Celebrate, But We Also Mourn

For most of the last 6 months, though the local economy has collapsed, we have felt as though we were in a nice safe bubble in terms of health, as the larger district of Monteverde had only registered 4 coronavirus cases. That bubble has burst, though, as in the past week 7 cases were identified in our immediate community. More people who had contact are quarantined based on contact tracing, and others are self-isolating for safety.

Then we got the sad news that Paul Smith, who had been in the hospital, died of COVID early Wednesday morning, September 23rd, just 5 weeks after his wife Sylvia had passed away. Both of them were icons in the community, active for decades in Monteverde, and especially close to our Meeting and MFS community.

Paul was easily recognized as, in his eighties, he was often seen riding his bicycle or cruising in his golf cart that he adapted with a solar panel to fit his ardent interest in preventing climate change. He has been widely recognized as an artist since the early 1970's, with both local art galleries and the family's Hotel Fonda Vela filled with his art and, in the last few years, mosaics. He also made music -- playing violin and cello as well as making the actual instruments.

Both Sylvia and Paul were frequent volunteers at our Friends School. Sylvia loved to help in our kindergarten, and even as her health failed, the kinder classroom was one place where she seemed most at peace. Paul tutored students in art and special projects, and taught many young people not only how to play violin or cello but how to make them. In addition, Paul donated a mosaic that hangs outside our director's office. Paul and Sylvia's house was always included on service days when teams of students went out into the community to volunteer -- but often learned more from Paul than they worked!



Paul's donated mosaic

MFS staff member Eugenio Vargas remembers fondly that when his daughter Felicia (while an MFS student) wanted to take violin lessons from Paul but couldn't afford a violin of her own, Paul immediately offered her one of his instruments.



2008 photo of violin class with Paul and MFS students Angelina and Felicia;

the student mosaic at the bus stop; and Paul with the blackboard tribute to him.

Paul also tutored or offered internships in art for our MFS students. In 2018 he worked with a high school student to complete a mosaic for the community. The mosaic is on the side of a bus stop in "downtown" Monteverde where its beauty continues today. The back of that bus stop has a blackboard for an ever changing array of community art, and in 2017 Paul was honored when area artists posted his portrait on the board.

And when Paul wasn't busy with art or music, he was untiring in his efforts to protect Monteverde's amazing animals and environment from climate change with solar installations, encouraging alternatives to cars (e-bikes, golf carts), and work with environmental activist groups.

We will miss Paul and Sylvia tremendously.

And We Discover New Opportunities

It is all too easy to focus on what we *can't* do in these pandemic times of virtual school. But we are discovering both new things we can do in the virtual world and new functions for things we already do.

For example, we have for decades started school on Wednesday morning with a period for all students to discuss MFS and Quaker values, then the student body, teachers and staff gather for Midweek Worship, a period of mostly silent reflection. On

Zoom, however, we just don't find the same sense of community in that silent time. Instead, each primary grade now shapes their own session on values and reflection while our colegio students (grades 7-12) meet on Zoom with a group from the Monteverde Friends Meeting for a presentation and breakout discussion groups to evaluate topics such as compassion, spiritual journeys, and peacemaking.



Javier Reyes of AFSC explains the functions of their school mediation teams.

On September 24th we did something special for the colegio group -- we connected live with staff from the American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC's) Guatemala office for a presentation on their work on peacemaking and conflict resolution in their community. AFSC staff member Javier Reyes offered important insights on the crucial components of effective conflict resolution and how they had implemented those in their community. He went further with really honest examples of where their mediation approach worked well -- in schools where they could build trust among students -- and not so well, in the broader community steeped for decades in violence and very real danger that prevents such trust.

Both the AFSC staff and MFS are eager to make sure this is the beginning of an ongoing partnership, not a one-time occurrence and we are planning further exchanges.

Another example of a new function of an existing class is becoming apparent in our art classes led by teacher Edda Pacheco. Edda has recognized that her students, from youngest to oldest, are well aware of both the pandemic and the cultural and political turmoil across countries that characterize these times. Like adults, our students react with anxiety, with anger, with uncertainty and with loneliness in not socializing with their peers. But they may not have as many outlets for all these feelings as adults have.

So in her classes, Edda increasingly sees the need for art as an outlet not just for creative skills but for the many emotions that we all feel in these times. Thus in her recent classes, while still teaching artistic techniques, Edda has given students the option of expressing their emotions -- anywhere from their feelings about the Black Lives Matter movement or the pandemic or beautiful examples of where they find comfort in these difficult times.

The pictures below are just a few examples of what our students are expressing. There are so many more beautiful examples that we will be posting those to our [Facebook](#) page in the near future.

