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June 12, 2019

## Lasting lessons from the little ones

“I wike her,” said a 4-year-old boy sitting in a circle, as a young woman read the children’s book “Snow” to the group. “I wike her a lot.”

“Her” is Megan Fordon, a 19-year-old sophomore in psychology at Wayne State University who has been visiting the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute’s (MPSI) Early Childhood Center a few hours each week for the past six weeks. Fordon is part of Wayne State’s Developmental Psychology Service Learning Laboratory.

“It’s fun working around kids,” Fordon said. “This is a great age group to be around. I babysat a lot in high school, but never with kids this young.”

Taught by Professor Hilary Ratner, the class is a project-based



Megan Fordon, a 19-year-old sophomore in psychology, leads circle time at the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute’s Early Childhood Center.

complement to Developmental Psychology that provides students with hands-on experience throughout the lifespan. Students choose from service learning sites involving children, youth, adults or older adults.

Six students chose the Early Childhood Center, visiting at least two hours a week. Senior Gina Montalto, a psychology major, chose the class as a “foot in the door to learn more about how children develop inside the classroom and at home,” she said. “Plus, I’d heard nothing but good things about Dr. Ratner.”

The students write weekly reflections and observations of their experiences in the field, connect a journal article about developmental psychology with their service learning, and write a final summary paper. “Reading the students’ writing over the course of the semester is always so rewarding,” Ratner said. “They typically learn a lot about the field and themselves, and I have the opportunity to see and support their deepening understanding.”



Fordon and Montalto found the experience exhilarating, surprising and sometimes exhausting. Fordon wanted a preschool because she thought she would prefer to work someday in that environment.

Wayne State senior Gina Montalto, a psychology major, helps the preschoolers' make believe family negotiate household duties.

She expected preschoolers to be loud and a little crazy, but “I didn’t realize how much I don’t know about 3- to 5-year-olds. How little we remember about being that age.”

The on-site experience was enriching, but also altered her plans. “I’m thinking about working with adolescents and abnormal psychology next, to see if that’s a better fit,” Fordon said.

Montalto also enjoyed observing students in action.

“I learned so much from watching what they did, how they chose to say things, who they played with and how they played. Kids are so pure. No filters,” she said.

Though Montalto was nervous and intimidated at first by the students, the staff quickly offered support and helped her to relax. For her final project, she read “Chicka Chicka Boom-Boom” to the students. The lively circle of children helped her re-enact the alphabet falling out of the tree.

“All the letters fell down, down, down and went boom on the bottom,” one child said. He made a sad face. “Oops that was ouchy!”

While not always easy, Montalto enjoyed the challenge of expanding her knowledge of the developing brain in young children. “I’m going to miss them a lot,” she said of the children as the semester ended. “Coming here is the highlight of my week.” Several service-learning students have gone on to become student assistants at the Early Childhood Center. Montalto is one of them.

“Our center provides a wonderful place for students to get hands-on, real world experience working with children,” said Jamie Karagatsoulis, director of the MPSI Early Childhood Center. “Although at times it can be challenging for students with little to no

experience working with children, every student who completes their service learning hours at the center leaves enriched by the experience.”

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