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# COASTAL FREEPORT LIVING

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**family matters**

Written By Deb Daggett

# Marnee Harke,

*A Beautiful Dreamer*





### **Ardent and active citizens are the hallmark of**

**Freeport**, a culturally-diverse community whose strong roots began and remain the result of the strength, vision, commitment, and wisdom of its residents. Resident Marnee Harke seemed pre-ordained for life as an educator and she found the perfect home for her work and her family, right here in coastal Maine ...

**Born in Burlington, VT, Marnee is the youngest** of the three daughters of Jan and David. Her sister, Robyn, was 13, and sister, Tami, was 10 when Marnee was born. Partly due to the gap in their ages, Marnee often felt as if she had three moms growing up. While she couldn't know it then, her sister, Robyn, would play a significant role in Marnee's lifelong dream of becoming a teacher while sister, Tami, had a sixth sense when it came to all things Marnee.

**At the age of 2, Marnee and her family moved from Vermont to Wilton, CT**, an hour from New York City. As the years passed, she attended public school and grew to love music and theater programs within the school systems. Exposure to live music of premiere entertainers such as jazz musician (and neighbor) Dave Brubeck, that nearby NYC had to offer inspired her back even then.

**This “artsy” influence fostered Marnee’s longtime love** for singing and dancing; she took singing classes in school and later sang in church. Her musical gifts were enjoyed as part of the “Swingin’ Dore,” an a cappella group at Vanderbilt University, in the Saxtons River Vermont community chorus. She even has her own CD with the Swingin’ Dore! Marnee has since sung with the Freeport Community Chorus, as well.

“Singing is most important to me,” she said with a huge smile!

**Being an outdoorsy girl at heart, Marnee did miss growing** up in the nature-saturated atmosphere of Vermont where her beloved grandparents had retained their country home. Her greatest memories were made there, spending school vacations in the beautiful gardens of her grandparents’ home. She savored the waking hours outside playing, climbing trees, and taking advantage of every moment in her favorite natural setting. During winter breaks, she loved to ski, surrounded by the seasonal beauty.

“I can still feel my grandparents there,” Marnee said earnestly. “They were my strongest emotional connection, and I will miss them always.”

**Professionally, Marnee always felt a calling to enter the teaching profession.** While attending college, Marnee’s sister, Robyn, offered her glimpses of her own college experiences and career goal of teaching. Robyn ultimately honored that profession for 35 years before retiring. The sisters have often had compelling conversations regarding differences in their teaching philosophies, still protecting the respect for the other’s points of view. Determined to give their best selves to their eager students was their common theme, a forever bond. • • •



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**Choosing her own path carefully, Marnee decided to pursue a degree in early childhood education** from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, the top-rated school for education at the time. Vanderbilt offered the two majors she wanted – child development/psychology and Early Childhood Education – and it was the one school that required students to do a double major.

“Vanderbilt was also ahead of its time with the amount of time that students spent directly in a classroom.”

**She wanted to be a teacher but thought that maybe she would go into counseling, with that as a major.** Marnee began her freshman year, working on the first of eight internships she would take during those four years at Vanderbilt. She considered becoming a Head Start teacher in Manhattan but tried Head Start in Nashville and loved it. While student teaching in her final semester, she had two assignments – one was in a first-grade classroom in an inner-city school and one was in a Montessori classroom.

**She wrote about her personal philosophy as a teacher,** called “the flexible learner,” determined to individualize the classroom for each and every student. Six weeks spent in the classroom at the “The Children’s House” in Nashville transformed her, and she fell in love with the Montessori education model. There, she discovered where her heart and passion would live!

**Marnee graduated from Vanderbilt in May 1998** and started her Montessori teacher training that summer. Before she graduated, she was offered her first American Montessori Society (AMS) Montessori teaching position, which she excitedly accepted, holding it for a year. In fact, that offer was from the first Montessori school established in the U.S.

**Wanting to involve nature in her teaching,** Marnee was still drawn to Vermont where she found a position at a one-room schoolhouse in Saxtons River. From there, she learned of a Head Start position in Westminster, VT, the next town over. Making her dream come true, they allowed her to come in and transfer that Head Start program into a Montessori classroom.

**At that time, Marnee and her always-supportive husband, Bill,** an architect at a timber frame construction firm, started their family with the birth of their first son, Liam. Following his birth, Marnee worked as a field consultant for Head Start schools in lower Vermont, with one being a Montessori school. After, she stayed at home for a year and a half, happy to be a full-time mom.



Life changes seemed to be the norm for this close-knit family, handling each new job at each new town by loving and supporting one other along their way.

**After four years in Vermont/New Hampshire,** another exciting adventure brought the family back to Fairfield, CT, not far from where Marnee spent her childhood. There, Marnee again found work at the site of her first teaching position, where she could bring her son; Liam started Montessori school with his mom at 18 months old.

**Mother and son stayed together there until the purchase of a home dictated** the need to decrease their commute. Marnee then taught at another school, closer to home, for six years until Liam “graduated” from the Montessori school and began public school as a first-grader. It was then that Burke, the couple’s second son, was born, named after Burke Mountain in Vermont.

**More life changes soon found Marnee as Head of School at** Great Beginnings Montessori School in Fairfield. She worked there until 2013 when Bill and Marnee's dream to move to Southern Maine finally came true. They had always vacationed in Maine, camping every year at Winslow Park, and sought a community that would give them all they wanted – nature, outside adventures, coastal living, and a nearby small, manageable city.

**Ultimately, Marnee wanted to establish her own one-room schoolhouse** where she could foster young minds, help nurture local children, and contribute to their chosen community. As fate would have it, a cold call to the First Baptist Church in Freeport was answered by then-pastor, Reverend Sandy Williams.

"The church was so supportive of us being in this space and it really just speaks volumes to the great community Freeport is. The library was in the backyard, and we could walk to Freeport Community Services to volunteer – the location was just perfect!"

**Marnee, who is director, owner and lead teacher, opened the school with three students, now five years ago. Today, the Freeport Montessori School student roster is usually nearly full!**

"I am a purist when it comes to Montessori education," states Marnee. "We believe that Montessori is a multi-age classroom, with ages from 2 1/2 to age 6, balanced within the age groups. We have a maximum student number of 21, but we hold, as best we can, to the balance."

**She eagerly explained how the Montessori program differs from public school programs:**

The main difference is in our philosophy of the "prepared environment," with individualized, hands-on learning, meaning the classroom is readied with 7 learning areas, including math, language, culture, science, art, and the practice of real-life skills.

There is a sensorial area that works with the five senses: size, shape, color, smells, sounds, and tasting. And each of the 7 areas has 3 wooden shelves with three different shelves on each of the shelving systems – and they have 15 or more works available in each area of the classroom. These are all set up ahead of time, ready to go for the child who is ready to do the work.

Note that each child is allowed to choose his own work, while the teacher is there to guide in the process.

**Marnee employs three teachers to help guide the learning: Marcia Clark, McKayla Gray, and Tammy Nicholas.** Marcia and Tammy both

hold American Montessori Society certifications. Family involvement is also key to Montessori schooling. Parents are invited into the classroom to do special presentations. Parent nights are held once a month in order to get together as a group and learn more about Montessori education, fostering personal connections between teachers, parents, and students.

**"Our parents do a wonderful job!"** Their needed involvement in the classroom and community became even more apparent during this time of distance learning. I'm impressed by every single parent who's developed Montessori classrooms in their own homes. They are really taking the time, following their child's interests, and making the best of their time together in this very strange period of not actually being out together."

**Although nothing is set in stone at this time, students and teachers** are expecting (and eager) to be back in school together in September. Until then, Marnee continues the school year via Zoom with weekly circle times, individual chats with each student, and provides daily activities to do at home. She also shares updates on her seedlings, tadpoles, and chicken egg incubation, all of which normally would be done in the classroom.

**Marnee also stays in close contact with parents to offer support and** discussions on a weekly basis where talks range from idle conversation to discussions of problems and community needs. Teachers and families try to solve problems together. A number of parents had Montessori education themselves and seem to be getting into the routine and realize that this is a special time to engage with their children like they never had before.





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Connections between parents and the school are stronger than ever, as are the relations between parents and children.

**Marnee Harke is locally known as “a woman with a mission,”** a proven fact! She is also a woman with a huge heart, a wide array of talents and skills, a deeply-devoted educator, a loving wife and mother, a daughter, a sister, and a faithful friend. Her favorite sport is downhill skiing. Back in Connecticut, she was a downhill racer in high school. Snowshoeing, x-country skiing, and hiking are a few of her other outdoor, winter hobbies. In the summer, her family loves to go boating and fishing, and Marnee enjoys cooking and baking, which she’s been doing a lot of lately!

**When asked what she is most proud of in her life, Marnee said,** “Definitely, my family and my school! The school was something I’d always dreamed of and didn’t know if it would ever become a reality. This sounds corny, but the community of Freeport made it feel comfortable, enabling me to be able to strike out and establish my own school. I am forever grateful for the friendship and support!”

**Important Life Lessons and future plans, in Marnee’s own words:**

Patience, to constantly push yourself

gently, to strive beyond your comfort level. My husband has really been one to help me do that in my own life. To have somebody in your life that pushes you, just a little bit, to that next level of growth.

Never stop dreaming. I dreamed of moving to Maine to open my own school and here we are. I am content and happy and that doesn’t mean that the dream stops. My dreams now are for my family – to see my children grow and develop into the men I can see in them – and the potential of them, as well as that of my students.

And in terms of my school, I want us to continue to grow as a strong community. I want the best for the families that we serve. I always want to have something that is obtainable. I will push myself to always offer a quality true Montessori environment.

**Positively focused, faithfully inspired, intelligently managed, carefully educated, lovingly partnered, and graciously intentioned ... Marnee Harke has armed herself with everything she needs. She is happy in the well-founded dream she has nurtured, and the Freeport Montessori School is a focused passion that all of us can applaud today. And as for her own children, Burke is now 12 and Liam is 18 and a freshman at the University of Tampa. Congratulations to Marnee and to all!**



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