Navy Browning recently became the School Director for the O’Brien School for the Maasai, a community-based, English-medium, American-funded school located in a Maasai-Tribe Village in the Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania, East Africa. She manages projects and the daily operations of the school, and leads teachers, volunteers, support staff and students at the school towards the common goal of ensuring quality, holistic education for 386 Maasai children and adolescents. Navy began at Austin Montessori’s Great Northern Campus primary (pre-K) program and continued through graduation from the Adolescent Community (9th grade). She earned an IB Certificate from Anderson High School in Northwest Austin, and went on to major in Global Service (International Development) with minors in Spanish and Digital Media at Valparaiso University, graduating in 2017. At Valparaiso she studied abroad and interned on a coffee, cacao farm with an indigenous, Bribri family, on a Bribri reserve, in Costa Rica.

Navy says that Montessori was integral to what she does now. The school is for Maasai children located in a very rural and largely-impoverished area. Navy and the staff run a sponsorship program for students moving on to secondary school, and work with NGOs and others to implement child protection policies and programs. She said AMS cultivated her interest, and gave her the skills – and the confidence – to take on such a meaningful and challenging role. Actually, Navy had a lot of interesting things to say about how AMS put her on the path to where she is now. You can read her full response to that question below. And if you’d like to learn more about the O’Brien School, follow it Twitter at @obrienschool or email Navy at director@obrienschool.org.

AMS: Navy, can you share any memories of your time at Austin Montessori that connect you to what you are doing now?

Navy: What a question!

My time and learning experiences at AMS are integral to what I’m choosing to do in my life now—in both overarching and specific ways. From my experience now, working as director of a school, and from attending Austin Montessori, I find that there are a few things that are invaluable to give
a child. I am so grateful that when I was a child, in the classrooms I was in every day, I was given the freedom to follow and pursue my own curiosities. I was trusted to make my own choices and to take responsibility. I was also given the very valuable skill of "how to learn". I learned how to critically think, pursue knowledge and solve problems for myself.

At my job now, I like to think of myself as a “Professional Problem-Solver”. On a daily basis, there are array of problems that can arise at the school. With anything from the bigger problems of finding a lawyer that has an understanding of Maasai culture, to calculating how many people one cow can feed, to smaller problems such as “How can we share and all play with the soccer ball?” When I was in the Adolescence Community, I never thought that my role as the “Bunny Manager” or being in the “Chicken” Humanities group would come up in my adult life. “How will this help me?” I remember asking. Fast forward to now, I see that these aspects of the AMS curriculum weren’t about feeding us knowledge about the care and keeping of animals, but more about providing us an avenue where we can have hands-on experiences making educated decisions for ourselves. Ironically, one of the projects in development with the students at the school in which I work, is setting up a business selling eggs from the school chickens—Is this what you call a “full-circle moment”? These projects taught me about running a business, balancing and making a budget, taking responsibility when something goes wrong. They were hands-on outlets to practice problem-solving.

When I was trusted and given the opportunity to work on projects at AMS, such as helping cook an “Auction Dinner,” or planning school camping trip menus, I gained confidence in myself and found out what I was capable of. I am incredibly grateful that I was given the option to make choices for myself at a young age. In the rural Tanzanian community in which I live, where FGM, child marriages and young pregnancies are common realities, trusting a child’s intuition or validating a child’s emotions or thoughts is not always common practice. Part of my job is working with adolescent girls and women that live in a community in which their worth is literally measured in cows. Their confidence is low, and they are in positions where they cannot come to know their full potential. But when they are trusted with opportunities, such as getting their education or responsibilities, such as employment from the school, their confidence grows exponentially. I think a lot of curricula operate on the notion that children and young people cannot be trusted to direct and complete their own work and learning. I appreciate that I learned from AMS that children are capable of a lot more than we may think. In the spaces created at AMS, I helped to feel empowered at a young age.

One of my favorite parts about my time at AMS, was being given the freedom, within reason, to pursue knowledge, topics, or projects that particularly interested me. I remember in the Adolescent community, some of my fellow community members taking an interest in writing code, and during the appropriate time, were helped by the guides to start that. Even from the younger classrooms, being able to choose topics to write and present reports on in Birdsong, helped spur a deep curiosity for the world. One of the questions that the guides at the adolescent community posed during my time there was “What does it mean to be human?” As some students may have taken a biological or philosophical approach I was interested taking an anthropological and ethnological approach to answering this question, and I like to think that through my work living
in and studying cultures different from my own, I am still, eight years later, creating my own answer to this question. Posing this question spurred an interest in me to study the world’s cultures, which kept going through high school and university I can still ask myself, "What does it mean to be human?" The freedom to have creative outlets, to read about things that interest you, and to be able to have some direction in my own education that the AMS curriculums and guides positively shaped who I am today.

It is very clear to me that my learning experiences at AMS, guided me to, and helped prepare me for my work in international development. Practically, it set me up for further academic education, but it helped teach me what it means to be a part of a community, how to be a problem solver, how to learn for myself and skills that aren’t found in a textbook.

Thank you!