



Metamorphosis at Mariposa

Trauma-Informed Montessori in Practice



Wildflower Schools



How do we bring Montessori’s holistic, child-centered approach to the communities that need it most in Puerto Rico? How do we provide students who have experienced significant trauma a nurturing, safe educational environment where they can blossom and transform? These are the questions that catalyzed Mariposa Montessori. This innovative Montessori microschoo operates in partnership with a shelter and care center for women and children who have survived domestic violence.

Mariposa opened its doors in 2021, blossoming in response to a community’s specific needs and assets. Two nonprofit partners came together to support Mariposa’s launch: 1) the Hogar Ruth—a nonprofit organization that provides care, shelter, and supportive services to women who have experienced domestic violence, and 2) Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico, a nonprofit that collaborates with educators to create community-embedded Montessori microschooos that support the needs and priorities of children, parents, and teachers alike. Together they created a school that is small in scale but whose conditions can be replicated to create healing spaces for families recovering from trauma.

Children at Mariposa each go through their own gradual, unique, and miraculous metamorphosis. The skilled and dedicated educators at Mariposa work with love and understanding to intervene in the trauma its students have experienced before that trauma becomes a pathology. Mariposa provides:

- An orderly and safe space
- Consistent routines that give a sense of security to the children
- A proven curriculum that supports their overall development
- Prepared adults that offer unconditional support and respect each child’s needs and process

Critically, Mariposa’s support for the child is amplified by the shelter’s support for their mothers, providing a two-generation approach to family healing.

The following case study outlines the history and conditions that sparked this innovative response to a critical need in Puerto Rico, the environmental conditions that support Mariposa’s success, as well as the partnership conditions that enable Mariposa and the Hogar Ruth to provide an effective, community-responsive, healing environment for students and families, no matter how long they stay in their care.

Gender-based violence in Puerto Rico

The prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault in Puerto Rico is staggering. In 2021, the Negociado de la Policía de Puerto Rico reported 7,876 incidents. Most of these incidents occur in the presence of a minor. This violence can be life-threatening: since 2000, close to 400 victims—roughly two Puerto Rican women losing their lives every month. These rates demonstrate a critical need for deeper investment in supportive services for victims and survivors.

Puerto Rico’s domestic violence shelters work tirelessly to support victims and survivors. These centers seek alternatives to care for their residents and children in a healing environment that respects each child’s needs and learning process. From this community’s need, Mariposa Montessori grew. The Hogar Ruth and Mariposa Montessori work together to create an environment where women and children can benefit from supportive services to escape the cycle of violence.



Wildflower Schools

Wildflower Schools is a decentralized network of Montessori microschoools across Puerto Rico and the continental United States. The schools are small and nimble (typically with two lead educators, called Teacher Leaders, serving 20–30 students, following the Montessori three-year age bands of children). The first Wildflower School opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2014. That school and the others that sprouted around it sparked worldwide interest in creating teacher-led local school sites using the unique teacher-driven, community-responsive approach that has become the Wildflower model.

Wildflower’s commitment to Puerto Rico and its educational revitalization has deep roots. Their presence on the island began in 2015 and has grown to include six schools and many seeds of future growth. These schools explicitly focus on serving students facing the greatest barriers to health, well-being, and high-quality education. During the 2021-22 school year, 46% of enrolled students were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch, and 88% were children of color.

Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico is increasingly meeting the needs of these populations through partnerships. In addition to Mariposa and their collaboration with Hogar Ruth, two Wildflower schools in Puerto Rico serve foster children. Another is set in a community-based special education services provider. These partnerships enable Wildflower schools to enroll students at a lower cost than local private Montessori schools, and two of these programs currently offer child care vouchers, providing free or subsidized access to families who earn lower incomes. Wildflower is currently working with the Department of Family to grow this offering. Students at Mariposa attend for free due to their program partnership with Hogar Ruth.



Hogar Ruth and the Seed of Mariposa



The **Hogar Ruth** is a community organization dedicated to promoting human rights and offering safe and supportive spaces that save the lives of women and children. It opened in 1984 to address the need for shelter services, counseling, and support services for survivors of domestic violence in Puerto Rico. Hogar Ruth currently specializes in interdisciplinary programs that serve survivors of domestic violence, stalking, sexual abuse, and dating violence. The exact location remains private to protect the safety of its residents. For the same reason, we have blurred photographs of students in this case study to obscure their identities.

Women often arrive at Hogar Ruth in the middle of the night, escaping, running, exhausted, with nothing in their hands, and usually with one or more children by their side. These children arrive with the trauma of adverse childhood experiences and a life abruptly changing before them.

Once a family arrives at the Hogar Ruth, the shelter works to support their immediate needs as well as longer-term sustainability. In addition to emergency shelter and care, the organization provides comprehensive psychological services and housing for up to two years for women and children starting a new life away from their aggressor.

With the hundreds of children that walk through its doors each year, Hogar Ruth saw the need to establish an educational program to support the children under the facility's protection. Staff members longed to support children in processing their trauma, recognizing the importance of the holistic development of the child and disrupting the cycle of violence. In 2019, Hogar Ruth connected with Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico to create this first-of-its-kind program that ensures not only the safety and protection of these children but also nurtures their healing and development.



“Children have many kinds of sensitivities, but they are all alike in their sensitivity to trauma”

- Dr. Maria Montessori
The Absorbent Mind



Mariposa's Beginnings



Mariposa Montessori bloomed out of the initiative of Hogar Ruth in partnership with Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico. The Wildflower team already drew inspiration and experience from the teachers of Morivivi Montessori and Pasiflora Montessori—Wildflower programs that operate hand in hand with the Hogar Cuna San Cristóbal home for children. Hearing of the need at Hogar Ruth, experienced Montessori teachers (also known as “guides”) Inesmari “Ines” Carrasquillo Santini and Karla Vázquez-Torres dreamed of the opportunity to offer a Montessori alternative to the children housed with their mothers there.

Karla and Ines began working with Hogar Ruth to develop a Montessori program, and Mariposa opened its doors in 2021 with Karla and Ines leading it. The school includes a toddler (18 months to 2.5 years) and primary (2.5-6 years) classroom, as well as a parent-child space for infants where mothers can learn how to support the development of their babies. Starting in 2022, they also expanded to serve children at the neighboring Hogar Mis Primeros Pasos, a home for children who have been removed from their families due to neglect or abuse.

“The biggest challenge since we started with the housing projects was for the mothers of sons and daughters between the months of birth until they entered kindergarten...The modality through Mariposa has filled it, not only for women to finally achieve their physical, emotional, and economic independence but now, under each of the environments, we ensure the safety, protection, and full development of our boys and girls.”

— Lisdell Flores
Executive Director, Hogar Ruth

What's in a name?

Each Wildflower school is named after a flower—a reflection of the organic growth and spread of beauty and potential in the world that Montessori and the Wildflower program strive to nurture. Mariposa is named for the native mariposa lily, but *mariposa* is also the Spanish word for butterfly, an apt recognition of the beautiful transformation that children experience in the loving care of this special school community.





Inesmari Carrasquillo Santini

Founding Teacher Leader, Mariposa Montessori

Ines leads the infant and toddler environment at Mariposa and has been in Montessori since she went to school at one of the first Montessori schools on the island from the age of two until upper elementary. Ines earned her bachelor's degree in biomedics and was preparing for medical school when she took a break and worked in an elementary school. She has never looked back. She realized her love for education, but she struggled with teaching in traditional schools because of her background as a Montessori student. She made the switch to train in the Montessori Method. She got her certification as an infant and toddler Montessori guide and achieved her master's degree in infant development and early childhood education. In partnership with Wildflower, Ines was one of the founding Teacher Leaders of Alheli, a Wildflower infant/toddler environment in Río Piedras in 2016.

"In Puerto Rico, there are already private and public Montessori schools, but you don't have Montessori schools that are sheltered and protected for this kind of community. So that is one of the things that attracted us to give this community—the opportunity for a Montessori education."



Karla Vázquez-Torres

Founding Teacher Leader, Mariposa Montessori

Karla leads the primary classroom at Mariposa and brings nearly ten years of teaching experience, including seven as a Montessori guide. After studying languages and acting in college, she decided to study education at the University of Puerto Rico and describes it as the best decision she ever made. After a brief period in the United States, Karla returned to Puerto Rico and was offered a position with the Department of Education. As a result, she attained her Montessori primary credential and became one of the founding Teacher Leaders at Flamboyán, a public Montessori school that received sponsorship from Wildflower. This past year she also earned her master's degree in rehabilitation counseling.

"Montessori transformed my life—not just the way I see the children, but the way I am right now is different from the Karla I was before Montessori came into my life. For me, it was a full transformation."



Natalia de Jesús Centeno

Founding Teacher Leader, Mariposa Montessori

Natalia co-leads the infant and toddler environment and has worked in Montessori settings for the last six years. She completed her Bachelor of Arts in Communication (Audiovisual Communication/Information and Journalism) at the University of Puerto Rico - Río Piedras Campus. Before learning about Montessori, she worked as a Special Education Students Assistant in the Department of Education. In 2018 Natalia obtained Montessori Assistant Certification at the Instituto Nueva Escuela and has had the opportunity to work as an assistant in different levels of Montessori classrooms. After years of experience as a Montessori assistant, Natalia decided to become trained as a guide. Natalia attended **Montessori Stoppani Institute** in Tijuana, México, where she received her AML 0-3 Guide certification in 2022 and became a Teacher Leader at Mariposa Montessori.

"Working at Hogar Ruth and with this type of population has been a process of learning and unlearning, and a lot of personal preparation to be able to offer the children the best of ourselves. In the day-to-day work, I have noticed the importance of having the flexibility to observe and adapt according to the genuine needs of each girl and boy who comes into our environment. I consider Montessori the ideal philosophy for this to happen naturally and fluently, always following the child."

The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences—commonly called “ACEs”—are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years) such as:

- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home or community
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide

The effect of childhood traumatic stress can last well beyond childhood. Research has shown that childhood trauma survivors may experience:

- Learning problems, including difficulty concentrating and difficulty regulating emotions
- Increased stresses in the somatic systems causing illnesses such as stomachaches, headaches, and even a weakened immune system
- Social withdrawal and/or disruptive behavior, such as violent outbursts or self-harm
- Increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems

Trauma is a risk factor for nearly all behavioral health and substance use disorders, as well as many chronic health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease. With this understanding of the impact of ACEs, there is a growing field of research and programs around trauma prevention, especially for young children during the phase of the fastest brain development.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Traumatic Stress Initiative both emphasize the importance of supportive caregiving systems and high-quality child care that provides opportunities for social-emotional learning as tools of healing for children that have experienced trauma, such as the children that Mariposa serves. Schools and educators can play a critical role by providing trauma-informed care, promoting caring relationships, and creating a healthy social and emotional classroom climate that supports healthy brain development.



Hope and Healing through the Montessori Microschool Environment



Wildflower microschools offer educators the freedom and flexibility to create genuinely community-responsive schools. Like all Wildflower schools, Mariposa is nimble, allowing for swift adaptability in times of crisis and direct communication with families, as Karla, Ines, and Natalia make changes without bureaucratic constraints. They also choose the professional development they need to serve their community.

Critically, Mariposa relies on the strong pedagogical foundation of the Montessori Method. Dr. Maria Montessori developed her method over 100 years ago based on observations and research in schools serving high-poverty communities and children with special needs. Driven by curiosity, social justice, and an equity mindset, Dr. Montessori was a scientist who applied her medical training to teaching and, in doing so, uncovered universal truths about child development. Montessori philosophy goes beyond the pedagogical field; it is a non-violent revolution that provides children with tools to resolve conflicts peacefully, follows the child through an individualized curriculum, and puts the child first.

“The science of Peace, were it to become a special discipline, would be the most noble of all, for the very life of humanity depends on it. So also, perhaps, does the question of whether our entire civilization evolves or disappears.”

— Maria Montessori
Education and Peace

Mariposa uses the Montessori Method to incorporate philosophy and curricula to support young children’s need for security and self-esteem. In practice, this means providing an orderly and safe space, consistent routines that foster a sense of security, a Montessori curriculum that supports children’s overall development, and prepared educators that offer unconditional support respecting each child’s needs and process. The Montessori environment is a space for healing where respect for the children, their needs, and their pace is the most important priority. Even with such a well-prepared environment, children at Mariposa may initially feel restricted and restrained due to past experiences. It takes time, love, and patience to see children in Mariposa engage in their path toward transformation. As Karla explains:

“Because the majority of the students at Mariposa have experienced violence in their home, they come to school with little agency and are often scared to jump in and participate in lessons. These kids come in without a voice...but here, they find a place where they can talk, and someone will listen to and respect them. They learn that violence is not the solution. When you start seeing those kids being owners of their space, it’s just beautiful. They find a place where they can be themselves and be free.”

Karla and Ines observe and learn from their community to develop the ideal environment for their students. The result of careful observations by a prepared adult is a space that is physically and psychologically prepared to allow children to express their true nature. They consider all of the child’s needs: physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual. It is a truly child-centered environment.

Creating a space for healing. For the harmony of mind and body to flourish in young children who have experienced trauma, the environment needs to respond to their individual needs. When children arrive at Mariposa, they discover a prepared environment designed to bring them a sense of peace, belonging, freedom of movement, and independence.

The physical Montessori environment at Mariposa has various characteristics that give a sense of security and confidence to the children.

Child-size materials: cabinets, chairs, and tables are designed according to the age of the children, and different sizes of chairs and tables are available so the child can choose the one that fits them. This provides a feeling of belonging and the opportunity to move independently. When children are empowered to manage their environment, they gain confidence.

Materials are highly-visible on open shelves and displayed interestingly. There is no clutter. **Order** is directly related to the amount of individuality the child gets in their environment, providing a sense of security that decreases anxiety and fear and enables a child to achieve independence. In Mariposa's classroom, everything has its place, and the procedures and schedules of the day are consistent. The environment and its contents are **beautiful**. Providing a clean, well-kept space shows a sign of respect to the students.

Additionally, though it is not an original aspect of the Montessori Method, many Montessori schools have adopted a **peace corner** which provides a space for a child to calm and regulate their bodies, when needed. Mariposa has expanded upon this idea, creating a larger section of their classroom devoted to this concept, and they find it particularly helpful for children who need extra support as they recover from traumatic situations. Mariposa's peace corner includes opportunities for children to engage with sensory materials that are calming, such as a sand timer, visual reminders of calming strategies, yoga mats, zen garden, and exercises to engage in mindful movement and breathing.

- Mindworks specialists agree that the same malleability that alters our brains in response to trauma also makes recovery possible. Meditation helps us heal from trauma by offering us a new perspective on past and current events, and ultimately, by changing the structure of our brain.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that the core elements of yoga practice, such as breathwork, postures, and meditation, help to equip youth with skills to handle stress and trauma-responses. A trauma-informed yoga practice can strengthen the mind and body connection, helping to reduce overstimulation and reactivity, and encourage relaxation. Yoga can help give youth the power to reclaim control of their bodies and experiences.

“Children’s character changes by means of calm, constructive activity that develops their intelligence.”

— Maria Montessori,
Education and Peace

Activities with purpose. In Montessori environments, children work with activities designed to respond to their biological development or sensitive periods of learning, which optimizes their self-construction process. Through the manipulation of the Montessori materials, infants and toddlers at Mariposa develop many skills such as language, visual discrimination, concentration, and coordination of movements. In Mariposa's primary classroom, the curriculum includes areas such as practical life, sensorial development, language, and mathematics.

All materials are designed with appropriate tools for the child to manage and allow the development of exploration, discovery, and repetition. At Mariposa, children can follow their drive and needs for repetition, which supports the internalization of the purpose and the refinement of movement. The absence of rewards and punishments in the Montessori classroom is another element of inclusion. By limiting methods of control and extrinsic motivation, children develop **intrinsic motivation** to facilitate an engaged learning process.



Children at Mariposa have the opportunity to manipulate the learning materials purposefully. Students work to meet their cognitive, physical, sensory, and social needs, allowing their personalities to develop to a high level. Everything in the classroom provides sensorial engagement, so the child takes in the characteristics of the material and perfects movement in working with them. Aside from the physical aspects of the environment, guides also consider the child's great need for independence, which is critically important for students at Mariposa. Karla describes the changes she sees in her students in this environment as almost instantaneous:

“It is amazing. The kids come with a lot of trauma, and they find in Mariposa a peaceful space with love and respect. That’s their space that we create. At first, they don’t know how to deal with freedom—they ask for permission, ‘Can I go to the bathroom? Can I do this?’ In a couple of days, they are born again.”

Mariposa students develop functional independence mainly through **practical life** materials. Through these tangible, hands-on practices (such as hand washing, food preparation, sweeping, and watering plants), they understand that they can take care of themselves and the environment, giving them self-confidence and psychological independence. Mariposa students grow to understand what it means to live peacefully with others in an environment that values collective peace as well as individual freedom. They become more self-aware and in control of their behaviors. They begin to consciously direct their own activity, taking charge of their learning instead of looking to adults for permission.

In Mariposa, teachers have noticed that the **self-care** area has a powerful impact on the transformation of the young child. “When toddlers have the tools and opportunities to learn self-care, it provides immediate satisfaction and agency,” Ines says. In *The Child in the Family*, Maria Montessori concludes, “Any child who is self-sufficient, who can tie his shoes, dress or undress himself, **reflects in his joy and sense of achievement the image of human dignity, which is derived from a sense of independence.**” Also, taking care of other living beings in the classroom, such as plants or animals, provides the opportunity to develop sensitivity toward their surrounding community. Taking **care of the environment** creates an appreciation for the shared space of the community.

Together, these characteristics create the conditions to promote the development of **concentration** through subtle auditory, physical, and visual stimulation. Children need to be able to self-regulate to focus and develop academic and social-emotional gains. The working atmosphere is quiet, and guides make sure that the environment helps the child to achieve concentration, avoiding unnecessary interruptions. Montessori Guides practice a great respect for children’s work, trusting in their intrinsic motivations to choose what helps them to construct themselves.



“Free activity makes children happy. We can see how happy they are, but it is not the fact that they are happy that is important; the important thing is that a child can construct a man through this free activity.”

— Maria Montessori
The 1946 London Lectures





Metamorphosis: Stories of Impact

At Mariposa, each story is unique—children arrive at different ages and under different circumstances. The community is itinerant, yet every child shows a positive change—a metamorphosis—no matter how long their tenure at Mariposa. The following stories illustrate how the Mariposa environment supports the child's transformation.

Jared and the Twins

Jared (15 months) arrived with his mother and his younger siblings, Albert and María, premature twins that were just under two months old. They were scared, tired, and exhausted but hopeful. The Hogar Ruth welcomed the family with love and warmth. Ines came to meet the family soon after they arrived, greeting the mother and offering support and an invitation to visit Mariposa for an orientation after she settled in the shelter facilities. When Jared first arrived at Mariposa, a social worker carried him and slowly handed him to Ines. In a low voice and looking Jared in the eyes, Ines invited him to the floor of the toddler environment. She observed him patiently. Jared rapidly assumed a crawling position, and it was evident that he felt more comfortable crawling over standing or walking.

Ines immediately worked to create opportunities for free movement to strengthen his body and find balance. Ines worked with Jared by offering her hand and walking with him through a variety of spaces and helping him to explore balance, coordination of his movements, concentration, and proprioception, among other skills. By the end of that first morning, after a lot of exposure, Jared let go of Ines' hand and made his first steps without assistance. That tailored support and safety from a prepared adult were important for Jared's first developmental accomplishment at Mariposa.

While Jared was working on refining his movement, his mother was struggling to support the development of Albert and María. The sleeping patterns of the twins concerned Ines: as the mother explained, they didn't sleep throughout the day and slept ten hours straight through the night. Infants at this age need 18–19 hours of sleep each day, including daytime naps and frequent feedings.

The most recent CDC update on developmental milestones established that children should be able to walk at least a few steps without assistance by 15 months. Movement is a critical factor in brain development and co-develops with cognition and language. Assessing and supporting movement development in early childhood will support the overall development of the child and may prevent deficiencies in school years.

With a lot of love and nonjudgmental guidance, Ines and her then assistant, Natalia, started creating a routine with the twins, knowing this would help them get healthier rest to nurture optimal brain development. They established a napping and care routine, and the twins began taking 45-minute naps within a few days. They began to look more alert, happy, rested, and interested in their surroundings. Ines observed the impact of the twins' improved rest in their development and their interest and engagement with their environment.

At their arrival, the twins did not react to voices around them, not even their mother's, nor did they cry. Little by little, they showed a growing interest in communicating and interacting with other people, with their environment, and with objects. Mariposa's team stimulated the babies by getting close to their eyes and speaking in soft voices, singing in a low tone, conversing with them, offering a safe space to explore movement, and observing and meeting their needs at the appropriate times. Soon, with a great deal of love and attention, they began to interact and show a variety of emotions that they did not show when they first arrived. In just a few days babies started to smile socially. They smiled just by looking at the teachers, demonstrating that a bond was forming. Within a few weeks, Albert started to move his extremities, strengthening them. María started to move her neck and made a movement to turn around, grasp things, and take them to her middle line. At 3-4 months, she started to turn over.

Jared, Albert, and María stayed just over two months at Hogar Ruth, but Ines and Natalia are confident that their time together had a lasting impact on the children. As Maria Montessori said, "Touching the child is touching the most delicate and vital point, where everything can be decided and renewed, where everything is full of life, where the secrets of the soul are locked up, where the education of the man of tomorrow is elaborated."

Bryan

Bryan arrived at Mariposa when he was four months old. He was a very happy, alert, and observant child who always had a smile on his face. The connection between him and his mother was beautiful. Ines could see that Bryan's mother was equipped to care for her son in the ways he needed, even though she was going through a difficult time in her life.

Bryan's mother told Ines she wanted a space where she could be calm with her son and connect with and engage him. This comment gave Ines an idea: Ines invited Bryan's mother to Mariposa's recently created infant environment so that she, with support from the Guides, could take advantage of the prepared space to share with her son and continue supporting his development.

Ines and Natalia worked with Bryan's mother, giving her suggestions for activities and strategies to achieve certain developmental milestones. After a few weeks, Bryan spent a few afternoons alone with Ines or Natalia so that the mother could also take a few hours for herself alone and work more fully with her own healing process.

The experiment and its impact on Bryan and his mother formed the basis for a parent-child program for the women residing at Hogar Ruth. A parent-child program engages parents as a co-educator alongside a Montessori-trained teacher, supporting parents to promote child development through activities in the prepared learning environment, educating parents on important developmental milestones, and providing practical tips for applying the Montessori philosophy at home.

Bryan and his mother settled into a home in one of Hogar Ruth's transitional housing projects, and continue to attend Mariposa and benefit from the supportive community.

“[M]ovement helps psychic development, that development expresses itself in its turn by further movement and action.”

— Maria Montessori
The Absorbent Mind



Jimena and Alaya

Jimena (5) and Alaya (4) arrived with their mother at Hogar Ruth, looking for a safe place away from their violent home where they experienced physical and sexual abuse. Upon entering Mariposa, Karla observed sadness and fear in their eyes, and their communication skills were underdeveloped. Both girls had particular difficulty expressing their feelings.

In her first days at Mariposa, Jimena rarely spoke, and she constantly met the teacher's gaze, looking for approval. When Karla presented lessons to her, she had difficulty focusing on the task, and her attention span was short. With the support of the adults in the environment, understanding and responding to her needs, little by little, Jimena restored her basic levels of internal regulation and even excitement.

Montessori guides strive for their students to achieve a level of independence where they can present materials and then leave the child to their work; however, Karla understood that Jimena needed additional support to feel safe and relaxed first. She spent extra time with Jimena, encouraging her with the materials, and helping her develop the vocabulary to express her emotions. Within a week, Jimena sought approval from the adults in the environment less often, and her countenance became happier. Within a few months, Jimena was working independently, happily, and actively participating in daily school activities.

Unlike her sister, Alaya was a very active child. At first, she avoided interaction with adults and children. She generally used crying as her primary means of communication and couldn't control her body to regulate her emotions. She was also sensitive to unfamiliar noises and changes in the environment, resulting in disturbing outbursts that included running and throwing.

Every day Karla supported predictable routines for Alaya to provide her stability and increase her confidence, avoiding sudden changes or noises that would disturb her. Instead of worrying about Alaya not using some materials because of her sensitivity, Karla focused on Alaya benefiting from seeing others participate, perhaps many times, before she became involved, thereby learning through observation. Introducing the Montessori grace and courtesy activities gave Alaya the opportunity to practice polite social interactions, such as the art of taking turns in conversations, how close to stand to others, and how to maintain eye contact. Working with her in the peace corner area also provided Alaya the opportunity to practice self-regulation skills, and Karla paid special attention to helping her describe her feelings.

After more than a year, Karla describes how Jimena and Alaya seem like different girls: “Their looks are now happy, and they have healthy interactions with their classmates and teachers. Critically, they gradually developed emotional management skills to be able to focus on tasks for longer periods and facilitate their learning and healthy development. Their mother described her gratitude for their time at Mariposa. In her own words, ‘My experience with Mariposa has been extraordinary...It's been a great help for my kids in terms of attitude and development. For example, after being [at Mariposa], they have more security in themselves, more self-esteem, and more independence.’”

A Symbiotic Partnership: Wildflower and the Hogar Ruth

Mariposa is a beautiful, exceptional learning environment: a small school without bureaucracy; a curriculum that adapts to the child's needs; an environment that provides the opportunity for growth; prepared, trauma-informed adults; and wraparound family services. Together, these traits foster immediate developmental changes for the mothers and children participating in the program, creating a two-generation approach to serving families in crisis.

While Mariposa is certainly special, the characteristics that supported its growth are highly replicable. With the support of their nonprofit partners—the Hogar Ruth and Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico—and a time-tested curriculum, Mariposa's Teacher Leaders can focus their time and resources on the critical needs of their students.

In addition to the social services that the Hogar Ruth provides to the women in its care for healing and family stabilization, their partnership with Mariposa includes:

- Managing payroll and other administrative functions for Mariposa's Teacher Leaders
- Fundraising to support program costs (e.g. tuition, food)
- Facilities and maintenance in connection with their resident program for women

Wildflower Schools Puerto Rico provided the supportive structure for Mariposa to launch, as well as ongoing support. Their contributions include:

- Startup grants to pay for the initial buildout of the Hogar Ruth's space, Montessori materials and furnishings, as well as teacher salaries during the startup period
- The consultation of experienced operations guides who provided direct and personal support through the process of envisioning and opening their school (e.g. design, licensing requirements)
- A supportive network of Wildflower teachers in Puerto Rico and across the United States who can share advice and wisdom in many subjects including Montessori practice and trauma-informed care

The startup funding from Wildflower was especially critical. Since 2015, Hogar Ruth applied for funding from several local agencies to start an early childhood program and was repeatedly denied. Lisdell Flores, Executive Director of Hogar Ruth, expressed the importance of Wildflower's role in launching Mariposa and supporting its ongoing work:

"The support received from Wildflower has been monumental, the most important of all the startup of what today is one of the greatest achievements we have had as an organization. Without this support, accompaniment, and management we would not have achieved it. Their mentorship, patience, and organizational level were the driving force behind what is now our Mariposa Montessori School...To speak of benefits of our alliance with The Wildflower Foundation is to speak of a collateral benefit that positively impacts the lives of hundreds of children who pass through our services annually. It is to give an integrated and holistic look at the problem of domestic violence and its effects on those who survive it."

Mariposa's model offers additional flexibility not available in larger bureaucratic systems in Puerto Rico: Given the prevalence of natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, Mariposa's Teacher Leaders have the ability to make decisions about opening and closing in harmony with the needs of their families. Most recently after Hurricane Fiona, Mariposa was able to re-open more quickly than neighboring schools, operating off of generators and support from the broader Wildflower network, to provide critical support to their vulnerable families.

Following the success of the partnership, Wildflower is in conversation with the network of domestic violence shelters across Puerto Rico to replicate the Mariposa program and create additional partnership schools. By integrating Wildflower's Montessori microschool model into existing social services, more women will gain access to the support that will enable them to heal and rebuild while nurturing the development and well-being of their children.

Hogar Ruth found in Wildflower the fertility and adaptability to grow, a structured pedagogical foundation with shared values, and a teaching philosophy in harmony with the needs of its population. Through this partnership, they enhanced the learning of the mothers and children in its care, raised the performance of its programs, and amplified its work to promote their participants' recovery, self-esteem, and independence. Even if families are only at Mariposa for a short time, the Mariposa and Hogar Ruth staff trust that the spark of transformation has ignited and that their love, care, and education will have a lasting impression on many lives.



