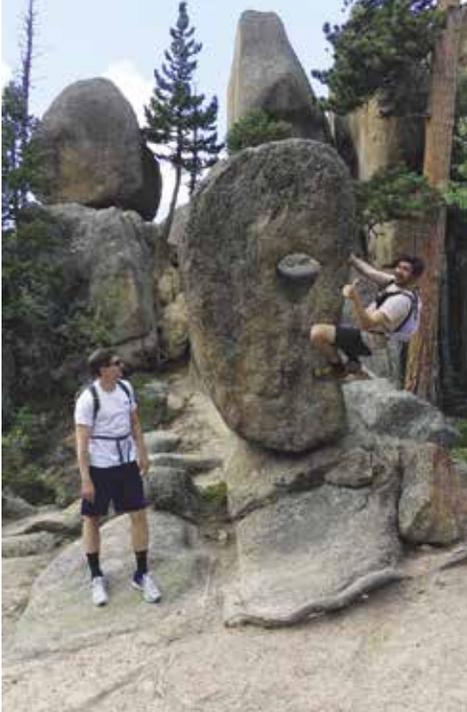


Alumni Spotlight:

Sam Alkaitis



Sam, with his brother (also a Montessori Alum) Matt Alkaitis, rock climbing in Boulder, Colorado.

It all started with a swamp water project from his days in Upper Elementary. Students Sam Alkaitis and Kyle Miller heard that there were a bunch of single-cell organisms in swamp water, and this ignited the natural curiosity that continues to motivate Sam to this day. “We went into our backyards, grabbed some swamp water, looked under a microscope and drew what we saw.” The boys ran to Teachers Kathy Allen and Gerry Leonard for an explanation of what they saw. “They got us the right books, they guided us...I still remember the volvox in the swamp water...a living pseudo multicellular organism...they form these communal groups into a cluster...and then we learned about it in Intro to Cell Biology in college. It tied into theory and history and who discovered what. But at

the time, it was like we discovered it ourselves.”

Sam started at The Montessori School in Primary in 1992 and continued through Lower and Upper Elementary, graduating in 2001. Beginning in seventh grade, Sam studied at Greens Farms Academy in Westport, CT, completed his senior year at St. Mary’s High School in Annapolis, MD in 2008 and went on to the University of Virginia.

The summer of his junior year, Sam landed a coveted “dream job in environmental science,” an internship working for the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation in Washington, D.C. His assignment within the Eastern Brook Trout program was to restore the fish to cold water streams. The role focused on looking at success metrics of the various initiatives within the program. Most interesting to Sam was speaking with scientists directly to learn what was working. Sam completed his degree in biology and earned a bachelor of science in biology, launching him on an optional pre-med path—with a minor in English and a “strong interest in art” in 2012.

Following graduation, Sam harkened back on a question his aunt posed while at UVA, “What would you be doing if you weren’t doing pre-med?” The answer for Sam was clear: animation. His answer prompted him to consider a broader path and with his interest piqued, he enrolled in a one-year program at Vancouver Film School. In a program that afforded him the opportunity to directly enter the animation industry, he travelled to the west coast of Canada, and earned a diploma in animation in 2013. Sam was immedi-

ately recruited for contract work on an animation project and gained experience as he moved from one project to another, challenged by the constantly evolving technology available. He has worked on programs including Rick & Morty (the top-rated animated comedy) as well as Jake and the Neverland Pirates and the new Donald Duck Three Caballeros on Disney’s streaming service.

In order to keep Sam engaged between projects, one company tasked him with learning a new animation program—Toon Boom Harmony—“You draw things once, and the computer fills in the motions between the images. We inherited season three of Jake and the Neverland Pirates and [the prior animation company] was using complicated rigs of the characters. (Rigs are the programs that enable movement in 2D animation, and make it so that the animator does not have to draw every micro movement from pose to pose.) We had to replicate the rigs without knowing how. It was an impossible situation, and I was tasked to figure it out. In a month and a half, I had to learn how to do the whole process.” Drawing from his primary research strategies from the National Fish and Wildlife internship, Sam called everyone he knew and was able to reverse-engineer the rigs. “A lot of it was biology! The code they used to make the rig is node-based with if-then logic.” Drawing on his science training and logical thinking, Sam learned the programming necessary to build the code. His training as an animator helped him understand how to apply the code to the design. Drawing from his Montessori schooling, embracing learn-

ing through natural curiosity, Sam was able to accomplish the monumental task.

Because of Sam's contribution, applying advanced coding skills in Vancouver, he was promoted to manager. A bit of a fish out of water, Sam knew how to do the work, but had to tackle how to motivate and teach others. Admittedly, he found management challenging and made a lot of mistakes. "A lot of times we [manage] through carrots and sticks, but alternative modes are useful. Not having a crime and punishment mentality has been important and left the door open to implementing positive reinforcement and positively motivate without telling what to do. Having alternative things to try and ways to understand when things fail is critical for management, and in life."

The Montessori model became Sam's most successful application for managing other. "It is a trusting system because you have to believe that learning is fun in order for Montessori to work. At Montessori, you trust that learning itself is powerful and it's empowering for kids. It made learning way more fun...it is a co-piloted educational experience."

Sam applied his take on the Montessori methodology to leading a ten-person project team on a colossal task—understaffed, under-budgeted. The strategy his own previous managers adopted of "hire someone to do a job, pressure them to do it and shame them if they don't" was one option. However, his team was behind and Sam recognized that was not the path. "I could see what they were producing and it wouldn't work. If I'd broken them, they would all quit. I knew the



Sam surrounded by "friends" in a humorous and creative Instagram post.

only way they'd hit the mark was if they learned more." Sam determined the best strategy was to drill, teach and support, applying his Montessori learning experience, and referred to his approach as "co-piloting." He engaged in open conversations with staff about "greatest fears at work" and together, they learned the best way for the group to work. As a manager, he recognized the need to help his staff learn and motivate and moved away from product/output oriented management to learning and process oriented. And it worked. Within eight months, his team was out-producing others by 200%, and nothing was intimidating. Sam's team became the volvox that Sam and Kyle found in the swamp water, working together to do amazing, important work.

Sam enthusiastically talks about the animation industry and has expanded his skills beyond building (code-writing) to storyboarding. He has a deep appreci-

ation for the art of animation and warmly embraces the opportunity to learn: "One of the guys came up to teach us how to draw Donald Duck, one of the original animators." Sam continues to honor his natural curiosity through interests in cooking—mostly inspired by unique combinations such as beet and basil ice cream (successful) topped with caramelized tomato sauce (not so successful). Sam toyed with resin and wood jewelry (a win) and found raw malachite and smelted it into copper (a failure)! He's writing a young adult novel just for fun and he keeps a book of ideas to try in the future. "We were encouraged to be broad, and for me that was really fun. I enjoy variety, it's exciting to try new things."