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Front Page News

Sunday, August 25th, 2024

Promoting the power of preschool (Community Builder)

By Steve Boyarsky for the Daily Courier

Today's conversation is with Michelle Gallas, an advocate for preschool education who runs two child care centers in Grants Pass.

Q: You own and operate Imagine That ... Creative Children's Centers, and you've taught teachers and college programs on preschool education?

Michelle Gallas: I started my business in 2008. It was a crazy time to start a business. Lots of businesses were closing and folks were losing their jobs and homes, but it was the best time for me to create something I wanted to start for years. I made my dream come true. I started my childcare slowly with hopes it would grow and expand. I currently own and operate two child care centers in Grants Pass, serving 75 children and employing 25 staff in the early childhood field, but it is still not enough for the current needs of child care in our community. At that time, I also started teaching childhood classes as an adjunct at Rogue Community College. I have also taught early childhood education workshops for Southern Oregon University and Umpqua Community College.



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier
Michelle Gallas, founder of Imagine That... Creative Children's Center, sits in one of the preschool's classrooms at Bethany Presbyterian Church. "Children don't need worksheets, they need to play and become social," Gallas says.

Q: Why is preschool education important? Why have you invested yourself in this profession?

Gallas: Preschools are important. We're born to be social and attached to our family and community from the very beginning. We wouldn't be able to survive if we weren't attached, whether to your mama, father, grandmother, a wet nurse, or an auntie. How we get along is really, really important. Preschool has changed and evolved over the years. When I first started teaching, the focus was on counting, letter recognition, and writing their name. Now it's really about social emotional development. It's about being connected, and that starts at a young age.

We need to be social and learn how to compromise, cooperate, be kind and love. We got a little isolated during COVID, especially the youngsters. They were isolated. Many were exposed to good environments, but many were not. COVID sent a big message about how social interaction is so important for kids. Kids getting along and learning how to interact with each other is more important than counting 1, 2, 3 or knowing your ABCs. Learning to play in the sandbox together is much more important at this stage of development.

Advertisement for Chris Barnett, Commissioner of Josephine County. Includes text: 'Chris BARNETT FOR COMMISSIONER', 'Serving YOU In Josephine County', and 'For The People, By The People...'.

Q: Does preschool carry over into success in kindergarten and elementary school?

Gallas: Data shows YES! It's proven. Research shows that high-quality preschools can help shrink achievement gaps between students from low- and high-income families. And there is long-term improvement with income and health outcomes for all families. Absolutely, it's really a good thing. And it's especially good if preschools are quality programs and not focused on just 1, 2, 3 and ABCs. Children don't need worksheets, they need to play and become social. I don't even think kids need six hours of structured preschool. A couple hours every couple of days for preschoolers is great. It doesn't have to be a daylong program. Preschool is important for social emotional development and provides a foundation for their future.

Q: You recently returned from visiting South Korea preschools. What did you learn?

Gallas: South Korea was a "wide-eyed experience" for me because they really value education. The government funds a national preschool for all kids. They pay their teachers exceptionally well. They recognize the future is with their children. South



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Koreans value education, and educators are respected. We were blown away as teachers, how much they value educators. That was great.

Several early childhood education professionals who worked with Dr. Younghee Kim at SOU have spoken at several holistic education conferences and working with educators in South Korea, England and Fiji. We are currently writing a book and have started online holistic education training and consulting called "Playful Concepts."

Q: Your preschools are based on the philosophy of Reggio Emilia. It's not a person, it's a location?

Gallas: Everybody thinks Reggio is a guy, but it's a town in northern Italy. Reggio Emilia started after the second World War. Italy was totally destroyed from the war. Community folks, mothers, fathers, everybody came together to declare, "Hey, we want a different way of raising our children." There were government funds and controls, but they broke off. They started their own school based on their philosophy of what they believe was good for children. It's a beautiful style of teaching, kind of in between Montessori and Waldorf. It has more of an art flair. It's inspirational for children to be surrounded by a beautiful environment. Their schools let kids wonder, ask questions and develop their own interests. Reggio doesn't say, "This month we're going to do ocean study, and next month we're studying dinosaurs," It's more guided by the kid's interests. If children are curious about bugs and butterflies, that's what the teacher directs learning toward.

Q: What percentage of preschool age kids in Oregon attends preschools?

Gallas: About 10% of 3-year-olds and 13% of 4-year-olds in Oregon are in preschool. Nationwide about one-third of 4-year-olds are in preschool.

Q: Would you classify the lack of preschools and child care as a crisis for Southern Oregon working parents?

Gallas: It's a crisis. And it's a crisis for us to provide it, because we don't have the staffing.

It's a bad cycle. I don't know how to get out of it except that we need more amazing teachers, which leads to high-quality preschool programs. Working parents and their children deserve and need quality preschools and child care so they can participate in their careers and fill critical jobs in our community.

Q: Is this a funding issue?

Gallas: Funding is a big issue in helping families afford quality programs and for quality programs to run successfully. The state of Oregon realizes this and there seems to be more funding coming from the state. Currently, we have a lack of educated preschool teachers. It's hard to run quality programs without quality staff.

Q: Where did you grow up? How did you choose to live in Southern Oregon?

Gallas: Maybe Southern Oregon chose me. I was born and raised in Eugene, but our family moved around a lot. I graduated from Roseburg High and went to Umpqua Community College. UCC had just started their early childhood education program, but they didn't have an associate degree at that time, so I moved to Lane Community College, then Oregon State, and Portland State, and went back to Oregon State. I finally graduated from Southern Oregon University and got my master's at SOU in early childhood education. I ended up living in beautiful Grants Pass because my mother lived in Roseburg. She had cancer, and I wanted to be closer to her. I raised my kids here. I have been very involved and a supporter of my community. I've lived here for 34 years. I can't believe it! Time flies when you are having fun!

Q: So why preschools? Why was that a pull for you?

Gallas: In high school I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. I love the ages from 3 to 6 years old. They are so curious and have a wonderment of life. It's a beautiful thing to watch preschoolers: they love life and love their teachers. All ages are wonderful, but I wanted to start early with infants, wobblers and toddlers.

Q: If you could wave your magic wand and grant a wish for preschool education, what would you wish?

Gallas: Every child should have the opportunity to play with other children and have connection with other children their age. We need quality programs: developmentally sound, quality programs for all our children.

Q: How did COVID impact preschools?

Gallas: Literally people ran and hid in different rabbit holes. We lost many brilliant educators. Many mothers who were in the field, great teachers for me, had to start teaching their kids at home. Many staff left for other jobs. They had more options and choices. They're committed to their own family and maybe needed to make more money. We need to reinvest in serving the youngest members of our communities and get more people interested in teaching again, at all levels.

Q: What's clearer to you now?

Gallas: We need to come together as a society and realize the benefits of investing in our children. We really need to invest in our families from the get-go: prenatal care and parenting classes from the beginning. Starting my school was a dream of mine for years, but it took me awhile. I worked at Kairos many years ago with adolescents in a residential setting. It was a hard, hard job. I remember thinking, "We need to help these kids younger." It's not too late for them, but it's a long turnaround at this point in their lives. At the preschool level we could touch a lot more kids and make a difference in their lives.

If we start younger it will change their trajectory. We have to invest time and money in our younger population. One of my guiding thoughts is: "If I have made a difference in one child's life, then I've been successful." If I have improved a life for one kid...

Q: ...And have you?

Gallas: I believe so. ... I hope that I have made a difference in many children's lives, and I hope I've inspired many educators along the way. That's my dream ... Imagine That ...

Steve Boyarsky has lived in Southern Oregon for almost 50 years. He is a retired teacher and school administrator. He remains involved in organizations that provide opportunities to young people.



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