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Lafayette Nursery School: More than a Pre-School, a School of Life

By Sophie Braccini



Gretchen Palau and young students work on a rain gutters/pipes project, filling up the gutters with sand. Photo courtesy Lafayette Nursery School

academic pressure their kids will face and how best to insure that they will be ready to enter kindergarten.

Wong feels confident that her older daughter, who will start kindergarten this fall, is ready for the challenge. "The play-based philosophy that has been the school's choice since the start is the best method to get the kids ready," believes the mother, "they learn about themselves, they gain confidence in their abilities and are more than ready after they attend the nursery school."

The participatory school is not an easy choice for parents when both work. For Wong, who has a part-time job, it took some organizing; her husband took on some of the volunteer work. "It's mostly the mothers who come into the classrooms, but we have some dads too, and they certainly come when we perform maintenance tasks for our facilities," says Parry. Some parents serve on the Board that manages the non-profit, and others continue at LNS by becoming full-time helpers or even directors in a classroom if they've completed their early childhood education requirements.

Parry believes the strong ties that are formed as families grow up together stay with them for the rest of their lives. "During our summer program, we see our previous students now in middle and high school coming back to help and it is so fun to see them again as young adults," says Parry. Furthermore, she's noticed that a lot of alumni families are involved in the local community, and she spots their names in the lists of volunteers in the library project, or the playground-building at the Reservoir, "that community involvement stays with them," she said.

For more information go to www.lafayettenurseryschool.com. Nancy Parry will continue to teach for the continuing education program of the Acalanes Union High School District and will consult with parents and parents' educators.

The Lafayette Nursery School threw a big party for retiring Director Nancy Parry, celebrating Parry's 27 years with the school. For many current and alumni parents and children, it was like saying goodbye to a member of the family. The Lafayette Nursery School (LNS) is not your typical pre-school; it is structured as a co-op, meaning that the parents participate in the day-to-day educational process, forming a community along the way with lasting friendships, and for many, a life long commitment to serving the communities around them.

The school was formed in 1953 by Louise Clark, who remains a very active Lafayette resident. It has operated at its current location at 979 1st Street since 1958. The idea is that parents actively participate in the educational process. According to the enthusiastic parents of LNS students, though the school may ask more from parents than other schools, it gives more, too. "We chose this school because the parents are engaged in the learning process, both for the kids and for themselves. There is a big parent education component to the school," says Susanne Wong, who brought her two children to LNS last year, "It also creates a bonding experience with both the parents and the other children."

Parry agrees that parent participation makes the LNS unique. "I train the parents and they help supervise, they share their strength, their professional and cultural background, and there is a real partnership between staff and parents, it is quite a place," she says.

Parents' education happens during their class participation, as they come two or three times a month, and during formal sessions organized by the directors. "Parents today have a lot of challenges, and ask questions about child development and various behavioral issues and we take the time to answer the questions," says Parry. She notes that parents' concerns have recently been focused on the

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