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Sienna Ranch offers normalcy in stressful times

By Pippa Fisher



Outdoors and masked, these kids are learning and connecting with nature, while playing, exploring and just, well, being kids. Photo Annette Dale, Sienna Ranch

The challenges of 2020 have been intense for everyone - most businesses have had to creatively up their game to survive the closures and restrictions imposed on them as a result of COVID-19 and children have had to adapt to learning from behind a computer. More than ever it has been crucial to give kids a break from screen time and get them into nature. One of the first places to offer that safely is right here in Lafayette - Sienna Ranch.

But it has not been without challenges.

Sienna Ranch lies tucked into the northeast corner of Deer Hill Road, backing onto Briones. The ranch, whose mission is to connect youth to nature through its array of educational outdoor programs, was shut down in the spring for eight weeks. The small family-owned business established in 2008, offers programs to children from PreK up to ninth grade, including horse riding, archery, wood shop, pottery, gardening, art, and animal education.

"We just continually see firsthand how important outdoor education as a field is," says Sienna Ranch Business Director Julie Sanders. "It is a sense of normalcy in a time of high trauma."

"When they (students) come to Sienna Ranch they get to slide down hills, make woodshop-free build projects, build with clay, pet and interact with animals," says Sanders, noting that at a time when kids may be feeling isolated, they make new friends and are reminded how to socialize.

Sanders explains the challenges of the shutdown and the subsequent reopening. The ranch has had to evolve the business structure. "We have seen operation costs increase due to COVID and also have had to be really creative and fluid and adaptive with our offerings in order to create new revenue. We have had to struggle balancing making revenue while also maintaining the safety of our staff."

The ranch was forced to reduce hours during the spring to half time or less for all employees, managing to stay afloat with a PPP loan. At the end of the summer they had to do a series of layoffs and restructuring.

Initially in the spring the Ranch pivoted to online options for their classes, retaining about 70% of its enrollment, using Zoom for shorter sessions with instructors. Sanders says they created take-home kits for the classes to be able to do at-home challenges and activities with their teachers on Zoom, still using their hands and experiencing nature whether in their backyard, at a local park, or from inside looking out of their window.

"We had woodshop and pottery classes all building projects with their teachers over Zoom," says Sanders. The only classes they were unable to transfer to the online model were horse and archery classes.

And Sanders is proud of Sienna Ranch for being one of first camps to develop in-depth COVID policies and procedures - one that other organizations and camps looked to for example.

"We are open about sharing our policies because we want others to be able to see them and use them as a framework to create their own," she says. "We've continually adjusted our policies to adapt to the information we are learning about the virus and how our local health agencies are responding. Being agile and proactive has allowed us to adjust to the ever-changing landscape."

Sienna Ranch classes have always focused on small student-to-teacher ratios and now those classes are offered in stable cohorts for 4-week sessions. Since COVID-19 started they have altered their cleaning routines, implemented temperature checks, provided guidelines and safety protocols for parents and a health and safety pledge for them to sign before joining any program.

Sanders has noticed that at first some kids have challenges remembering how to socialize with their peers. She says the need for these sorts of programs is greater than ever.

"There is a lot of anxiety from kids who are worried about the virus and we saw a lot of separation anxiety after being home for so long with only their parents. In the first couple of days of our in-person classes there were a lot of students who struggled emotionally with reintegrating into a group setting with peers," says Sanders.

This has led to an adjustment of approach and ways in which the team connect with students. "We also have seen our mission and purpose shift," notes Sanders. First and foremost a place to connect young children to nature, they have seen their roles as educators evolve to help provide social and emotional well-being also.

Parents interested in the full list of classes available can go online (see link below). Camp enrollment is extremely popular and camps sell out quickly. Currently Holiday Camps are available, but filling up fast.

As one third-grade student put it, "This is way more fun than my Zoom school - I love Sienna Ranch!"

Sanders takes the thought one further. "This place and our activities are a lifeline for kids who are living in highly isolated times."

More information on Sienna Ranch can be found at <https://www.siennaranch.net/>

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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