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Communing with nature in the outdoor classroom

By John T. Miller



Students at Wild Oak play an improvised collaborative running game during free time at their outdoor classroom in Lafayette. Photo provided

Using the 35-acre Twin Canyon Girl Scout Camp in Lafayette at the end of Springhill Road that borders Briones Regional Park for its classroom, Wild Oak Education, a nonprofit home school enrichment program, offers a unique approach to education.

Formerly Singing Stones School, a Waldorf Education setting in Walnut Creek, the group moved to the Lafayette location earlier this year and is currently completing its first 12-week session. Wild Oak rents the space from the Girl Scouts for their three days of classes, and occasionally hosts other community events, such as film screenings and campouts.

Classes are conducted using various campgrounds, picnic areas and other sites nestled in the hillsides. "We conduct education outdoors, rather than calling ourselves outdoor education," says Kate Newkirk, Business Manager at Wild Oak.

Lead Grades Teacher Meryn Gruhn Di Tullio reinforces the concept of using the outdoors, saying, "Something magical happens in nature that can't happen within four walls. Being backed against the wall and being trapped in a corner requires walls. There's a feeling of openness and a freedom to be yourself in nature's sanctuary."

The staff has had wilderness first aid training, especially concerning rattlesnakes. In addition, the school has access to the aptly named Cocoon building in case of inclement weather.

In addition to the Grades program (for ages 6-15 years), the school also runs a separate Forest Kindergarten program (ages 4-6), and a Parent and Child class for younger children. Both groups work to establish a rhythm to their days. According to their website, in kindergarten "the daily rhythm and weekly patterns of meaningful work such as washing, baking bread, and preparing soup provide a comforting sense of time and structure. The predictability of knowing 'what comes next' allows children to be fully present in the moment."

Lead Forest Kindergarten teacher Andrea Hector, who spent most of her childhood exploring the hills around Martinez, has a master's degree in early childhood education and environmental education, specializing in garden-based learning. Their website states she "combines her passion for Waldorf principles and her love of providing outdoor instruction for young children where they can explore the natural world in its entirety." Gruhn Di Tullio holds an associate degree in international relations and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and is a multitasking artist. Her passion is in creating engaging experiential curriculum, and the interconnection to nature.

While its emphasis for seven years previous as Singing Stones was as a Waldorf School, the Wild Oak

curriculum employs many different educational philosophies - including Montessori - in addition to the teachings of Rudolf Steiner.

Classes meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. for kindergarten, and until 1:30 p.m. for Grades. Extension is available until 3 p.m. each day, with handwork, art, and journaling offered. Students can choose to enroll in one, two, or three days.

Forest Kindergarten hikes to various sites in Briones on Tuesdays and Wednesdays where they engage in nature play, have snacks, and hike back for lunch outside. On Thursdays they chop veggies, make soup, and do other projects. Gruhn Di Tullio adds, "To promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging, eating together is an important part of our curriculum."

The Grades program covers math on Tuesdays, science on Wednesdays, and humanities on Thursdays. With a wide range of ages, the students often break into groups to meet their individual needs. The learning is experiential. For example, in science they used camping stakes and twine to make a grid of an area for a field study to examine the burrows and activities of the ground squirrel.

The focus of study for humanities for the current session has been the Renaissance, with emphasis on the explorers. Gruhn Di Tullio, a world traveler herself, brings more to the learning than the traditional Eurocentric teaching, saying, "The Renaissance was a worldwide experience involving other countries as well. We study explorers like Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan, and Zheng He, who was from what is now Mongolia." Gruhn Di Tullio says the teaching of a worldview matches the welcome diversity of the students in the program. Other topics include First Peoples, Human and Animal Tales, and Innovations.

About half the students come for all three days, an option known as a "micro school," according to their website. These schools feature less than 150 students, multiple ages learning together, where teachers act more as guides than lecturers, and a highly personalized education with an emphasis on project-based learning. Students come from all parts of the Bay Area.

Newkirk emphasized that Wild Oak is a home school enrichment program, and not a school, per se. "We are fulfilling a need in this area for nature-based education that also contains curriculum in core subject areas." For more information about tuition and session dates, visit wildoakeducation.org.

Reach the reporter at: john@lamorindaweekly.com

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