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Two Small Women Making a Big Difference

By Sophie Braccini



Susan Allison (left) and Mary Ann McLeod on the playground at Mulberry Tree Photo Sophie Braccini

"The lesson plans are all based on a story line," explains Allison, "each of the four learning centers explores a different aspect of it through the art, cognitive learning, science, and movement. At each center, the teachers observe and challenge the children at their own level. Our mission is to develop the cognitive, social, emotional and physical sides of every child."

"Here the children learn to learn," adds McLeod, "When they leave, they have learned to listen, to take turns, to take charge of themselves for some tasks, their social skills have blossomed, they can write some words."

Every few years, a new program is started at the school to take advantage of new research. "Three years ago we started implementing 'conscious discipline'," says Allison, "it is a positive discipline approach that reinforces the positive behaviors with words. We as teachers do it, and now we are seeing the children doing it themselves." For example, if a teacher sees a child climbing on a table, instead of saying "Don't climb on furniture," she will say, "The play structure is for climbing," and she will show it to the child. "It works incredibly well," says McLeod, "we've given some informational material to the parents, and had a speaker about the method, so consistency is maintained between the home and the school."

Allison is already in charge of many things at the preschool; McLeod feels confident leaving the business that is so dear to her heart in Allison's hands. Allison feels comfortable as well, knowing that McLeod, who lives in Moraga and has grandchildren close by, will never be too far away.

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Mary Ann McLeod will retire this year. After more than 30 years at the head of Moraga's Mulberry Tree Preschool, she is passing the baton to Susan Allison who has been with her as a Director for 10 years.

The two women have much in common, though a generation apart in age. They are petite, vivacious and warm, they share the same passion for education, and both graduated with the same Master's in Early Childhood Education from Saint Mary's College.

The preschool, on Saint Mary's Road, is a remarkable construction. A circular wooden structure, it was first owned by Tory and Robert Felton; Tory Felton was one of McLeod's teachers at Saint Mary's. "The round structure is conducive to the type of learning that is occurring here," says McLeod, "the children move from one station to the next as their day unfolds."

"I started as an elementary school teacher," explains McLeod, "and I noticed that the first or second grade children had already acquired habits that were very hard to change. I believe that very early education is where you can build a foundation for life."