

Place-based learning key to new Southwest Charter School

By Polina Olsen
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When they walked around John's Landing looking for obtuse, acute and right angles, each child kept a clipboard and took two photos for the classroom wall. In fact, the place-based learning program at the Southwest Charter School takes kids into the neighborhood every day.

"The idea behind place-based learning is that if kids understand their immediate surroundings and community then ultimately they're going to care about it and turn into concerned citizens," said Anne Gurnee, education director.

A former director of "OMSI-like" museums in Albuquerque and California, Gurnee lives in the Ashcreek neighborhood and worked for a Portland science education consulting firm before coming to the school.

"It's great to learn about the Amazon Rainforest but it's abstract especially to younger children," said Gurnee. She thinks Portland children should first understand the temperate rainforest where they live and then gradually broaden their knowledge.

Southwest Charter School opened in Fall 2007 after winning approval from the Oregon State Board of Education. They found a building two weeks before classes began. Built in 1954, the 3,500 square foot warehouse once belonged to a clock repair company. Now, children, books and drawings fill the one story building one block west of Southwest Macadam Avenue.

Enrollment increased since opening and now stands at 40 students. "We've had a surprising number of mid-year transfers," said Gurnee. Kindergarten, combined grades first, second and third (123), and combined grades fourth, fifth and sixth (456) make up the three classes. Ultimately, they hope for grades K-8 and 200 students. Their charter limits class size to a maximum of 22.

Today, the staff wears green, and paper shamrocks hang on the walls. It's St. Patrick's Day. The kindergarten class chats loudly as they head out the door. They're on their way to Physical Education class at the nearby Easter Seal Society building, where the school rents extra space.

"I want to teach you one that was new for me," said the young instructor. A Kung Fu expert, he sticks to agility and balance with kindergarteners but teaches Kung Fu to first through sixth graders.

"It's called the Angry Gorilla," he continued as children get ready to jump across the room. "First I face this way, and then I turn all the way around. Your knuckles will touch the ground."

Back in the 123 classroom, the children shouted "We're making a leprechaun city full of traps." Haunting Irish bagpipe music plays softly in the background. According to legend, a trapped leprechaun must reveal the location of his treasure. One girl holds up her paper house complete with bed, pillows and blanket. "If the leprechaun falls asleep, you can grab him," she explained.

Meanwhile, the teacher, Mike Martin, works with one boy on an essay "My Weekend at the Zoo." A corner of



Lisa Colombo (who teaches fourth, fifth, and sixth grades) supervises while Matt Lewinsohn (left) and Lexie Pansky work together on a project. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

the room designated as The Wetlands displays a paper kingfisher and bald eagle.

"At the beginning of the year, the kids built a whole village," Gurnee said. "They were learning how a community works." Every child had a job and owned property. They even gave out tickets for speeding.

According to Gurnee, the innovative curriculum's backbone lies with basics -- reading, writing and mathematics. "It's a mathematical thinking curriculum. It's not a drill and kill where kids are just memorizing," she explained.

The math program, Bridges, is used by several local districts. Reading and writing are built into every day. "Children choose books beyond their read-

ing ability if they're interested in the subject. We encourage kids to follow their reading interest area."

Kindergarten begins the morning with journaling. "They draw a picture about something that's going on in their life or that they're interested in," Gurnee says. The 123 class uses *Writer's Workshop* also common in many local schools. "There's a group of boys writing a series of books on dragons, -- they're up to 12."

Molly Cooper, of John's Landing, sends her daughter, Juliet, to Southwest Charter School's kindergarten. "She learned to read within days of attending," Cooper said. She originally sent Juliet to Capital Hill Elementary but

(Continued on Page 5)

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