

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

'Shocked, saddened and sick'*A Cannon Beach preschool is closing, but parents and former teachers question why*BY KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

CANNON BEACH — The same day Ashley Nelson decided to accept a full-time job, the preschool where her children attended an after-school program announced it would close in June.

Nelson, previously a stay-at-home mom, had been counting on Charis Kids in Cannon Beach as she dipped back into the workforce. Now, she and more than 20 other families are trying to figure out what to do next.

Charis Kids, owned by the Cannon Beach Conference Center, is the only local preschool option in the city and one of just a few such programs available across Clatsop County. The main preschool and after-school programs will end June 18. It isn't clear yet if a summer program will go ahead as planned.

Charis Kids is a long-standing community institution with an excellent reputation, Nelson said. When it closes, her children will not only miss out on a faith-based curriculum Nelson values and the care of well-trained and certified teachers, they will also lose the community that had formed around the preschool.

"It's an incredible hole," Nelson said.

Like other parents and former teachers who heard the news, Nelson said she is in shock. She doesn't understand why Charis Kids is closing. A letter sent to parents and a subsequent conversation with Marc Hagman, the conference center's executive director, left her with only more questions.

The letter to parents provides no concrete reason for the preschool's closure, but Hagman told The Astorian a combination of factors — including the coronavirus pandemic — led to the decision.

Stresses and strains

The conference center is not in a bad financial state, and the closure of Charis Kids is not an indicator of tough times ahead, he said. Still, the pandemic brought certain stresses and strains, especially when it came to operating a preschool. The center's leadership has been looking more closely at its overall mission. When conference center leadership began reexamining its programs and offerings last year, Charis did not seem to fit, Hagman said.

"If we hadn't gone through COVID," he said, "I don't think we'd be at this point."

The program is expensive to run and, given the center's primary responsibilities to conference and retreat guests, "it can't just be a break-even sort of thing," Hagman said.

But, he added, the decision to close the preschool was not easy.

"Charis Kids has had great impact in the work they do," Hagman said. "Not just in reaching kids, but their families and their extended families, too. For me, there's nothing that minimizes their compassion and their skill. What we're doing is not a comment or commentary on them. It's just this is what we need to do at this point."

Hagman said they will look to find



A preschool student colors in a calendar at Charis Kids, the only local preschool in Cannon Beach.

Charis Kids/The Astorian

"I understand that COVID has forced businesses to reevaluate, but I don't understand why you'd take away a ministry and outreach to our community that provides jobs and meets such a critical need. As Oregon goes back to work, our community needs child care options. Parents are scrambling, sacrificing their careers and asking 10-year-old siblings to watch their infants because there aren't enough child care options in our community."

— Dana Jones, a former employee at Charis Kids

other job options within center operations for the teachers and staff of Charis Kids who want to continue at the conference center.

Since the announcement, former teachers have reached out to Hagman and the conference center leadership, asking them to reconsider their decision.

Dana Jones, a former employee at the preschool whose children attended the program when they were young, said communities would be left without reliable and affordable child care if the preschool closes for good.

"I understand that COVID has forced businesses to reevaluate, but I don't understand why you'd take away a ministry and outreach to our community that provides jobs and meets such a critical need," she wrote in a Facebook post addressed to Hagman.

"As Oregon goes back to work, our community needs child care options. Parents are scrambling, sacrificing their careers and asking 10-year-old siblings to watch their infants because there aren't enough child care options in our community."

Clatsop County — along with every county in Oregon — is considered a child care desert. Many centers and preschools operate with lengthy

waitlists. Parents who might want a particular program for their children struggle to find something that fits their needs and their budgets.

Preschool programs often function as a form of day care for working families and are touted by education experts as a key way to prepare young children for kindergarten, as well as establish a foundation for the rest of their school careers. Administrators with the Knappa School District pointed to these benefits when they recently announced plans to open a public preschool later this year.

But day cares and preschools are rarely profitable ventures. Programs often struggle to find and retain qualified staff and keep prices affordable for families. With the pandemic, centers faced restrictions on how many children they could accommodate and other costs and hurdles. Before the pandemic, Clatsop County had 12 state certified child care centers. After shutting down temporarily last spring because of the pandemic, only a handful had reopened by July.

Which makes Charis Kids even more special to the families who have come to rely on the program.

Shelby Gosser, a hospital nurse administrator, relies on Charis Kids for

child care but also appreciates the education her daughters received. She had been looking forward to sending her third child to the program soon.

"For me, it was the amazing light at the end of the tunnel," she said.

The closure will not just impact her, she said. "Moving forward, it will severely impact working families that would be the ones growing this community."

'Shocked, saddened and sick'

Gretchen Corbin taught at the preschool for 13 years before being laid off in March 2020 because of the pandemic. She had previously let administrators know she would be leaving the program to move to Seattle. The pandemic and the layoff hastened her timeline.

Now she feels "shocked, saddened and sick."

She respects Hagman and knows it was a difficult decision, but she hopes the conference center will reconsider.

"We got so much feedback that we were meeting a crucial need in the community for families of every social and economic level," she said. "We served them all and we worked with them all to make sure everybody could come."

During Corbin's time at Charis Kids, the preschool served students from Astoria to Nehalem. It had also adjusted operations to make it through difficult years.

Nelson wishes the community had a chance to work with the conference center to figure out a way to keep Charis Kids. "If it was a funding issue, why not give the community a chance to help?" she said. "If there was an issue we could have helped you solve, why couldn't we have been given an opportunity?"

TODAY

Today is Monday, April 12, the 102nd day of 2021. There are 263 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 12, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Georgia, at age 63; he was succeeded by Vice President Harry S. Truman.

In 1861, the Civil War began as Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

In 1877, the catcher's mask was first used in a baseball game by James Tyng of Harvard in a game against the Lynn Live Oaks.

In 1955, the Salk vaccine against polio was declared safe and effective.

In 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to fly in space, orbiting the earth once before making a safe landing.

In 1963, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, charged with contempt of court and parading without a permit. (During his time behind bars, King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail.")

In 1975, singer, dancer and civil rights activist Josephine Baker, 68, died in Paris.

In 1988, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office issued a patent to Harvard University for a genetically engineered mouse, the first time a patent was granted for an animal life form.

In 1990, in its first meeting, East Germany's first democratically elected parliament acknowledged responsibility for the Nazi Holocaust, and asked the forgiveness of Jews and others who had suffered.

In 2015, Hillary Clinton jumped back into presidential politics, announcing in a video her much-awaited second campaign for the White House. Jordan Spieth romped to his first major championship with a record-tying performance at the Masters, shooting an 18-under 270 to become the first wire-to-wire winner of the green jacket since 1976.

Ten years ago: Japan ranked its nuclear crisis at the highest possible severity on an international scale — the same level as the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

Five years ago: Actor Anne Jackson, who often appeared onstage with her husband, Eli Wallach, in comedies and classics, died in New York at age 90.

One year ago: Christians around the world celebrated Easter Sunday isolated in their homes by the coronavirus.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jane Withers is 95. Jazz musician Herbie Hancock is 81. Rock singer John Kay (Steppenwolf) is 77. Actor Ed O'Neill is 75. Talk show host David Letterman is 74. Author Scott Turow is 72. R&B singer JD Nicholas (The Commodores) is 69. Singer Pat Travers is 67. Actor Andy Garcia is 65. Country singer Vince Gill is 64. Rock musician Will Sergeant (Echo & the Bunnymen) is 63. Rock singer Art Alexakis (Everclear) is 59. Folk-pop singer Amy Ray (Indigo Girls) is 57. Actor Alicia Coppola is 53. Rock singer Nicholas Hexum (311) is 51. Actor Retta is 51. Actor Shannen Doherty is 50. Rock musician Guy Berryman (Coldplay) is 43. Actor Riley Smith is 43. Actor Claire Danes is 42. Rock singer-musician Brendon Urie (Panic! at the Disco) is 34. Actor Saoirse Ronan is 27.

— Associated Press



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