

Step-by-Step program gets new name, new look



KATHERINE LACAZE PHOTO

Shelly Saunders, the head teacher for the Step-by-Step early childhood development program at Sunset Empire Park & Recreation District, shows her pre-school students a container with caterpillars, a new addition to the classroom, which the students will monitor as the insects travel through their lifecycle. Saunders has worked to make the program, which will be renamed Learning Ladder Preschool for the fall, a place that prepares children for entering into kindergarten.

Program will be called Learning Ladder Preschool this fall

By Katherine Lacaze
Seaside Signal

Just as circle time was coming to a close during class May 6, Sunset Empire Park & Recreation District Preschool Coordinator Shelly Saunders revealed her newest addition for the preschool classroom: a mesh cylinder container with baby caterpillars, called a "Live Butterfly Garden."

The small habitat, she said, would be kept in the science corner of the preschool classroom at the Seaside Youth Center, so her 3- to 5-year-old students could observe the creatures as they phase into butterflies.

The students are part of the district's Step-By-Step program, which has been renamed the Learning Ladder Preschool for fall, and the caterpillars are the latest addition in a series of efforts by Saunders to give her students a safe, fun environment to learn and prepare to join kindergarten in the coming years.

'Needed' a facelift

When Saunders took over the district's early childhood development program last November after the resignation of former Preschool Coordinator Madge Mossberg, the preschool space at the Youth Center, as well as the program's format, received makeovers.

"She did exactly what the program needed," said Dawn Jacobs, who started as the assistant teacher last September.

They reconfigured the room to make it more open and accessible to kids and covered the brown walls with yellow paint. They obtained more materials and supplies for the students. The curriculum, which Saunders has developed and evolved for 15 years, is focused on academically preparing students for kindergarten "in a very fun, learning-to-love way," said



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Maple, 4, a student in the Sunset Empire Park & Recreation District's preschool program, shows off a heart made from homemade playdough during the free play portion of class May 6.

Jacobs, who plans to resign from her position this June.

Saunders is a transplant from California, where she oversaw a similar program for a parks and recreation department there. When she moved to Seaside, she planned to be a real estate agent, but the preschool coordinator position was posted online the day she began looking for jobs, and she took that as a sign, she said.

Her philosophy is that "children develop and learn best through play. Our goal is to provide an environment rich in learning opportunities to help your child grow academically, socially as well as physically." She wants to "help them have a really positive, fun first school experience."

Some features of her classes include: attending a weekly story time at Seaside Public Library; a weekly yoga class; and morning snacks. The students are taught art, math, science and language arts, in addition to fine motor skills and socially acceptable behaviors such as sharing, paying attention and respecting the teachers and one another. Because several of the students are Hispanic, they practice numbers, colors and days of the week in Spanish and English.

"We really are touching on everything," Saunders said.

The program is coming to a close for this school year, but registration is open for

camp, which starts the week of June 22 and ends Aug. 27. The Summer Kindercamp is a 10-week program where preschoolers ages 3 to 5 can participate in arts and crafts, music, stories and other activities from 9 a.m. to noon Mondays through Thursdays.

Saunders also has several area field trips planned. The Kindercamp is structured slightly different from the preschool, she said, because she believes summer should incorporate more fun activities, like craft projects and field trips. This year's weekly themes are: Ocean, America the Beautiful, Let's Camp, Pee Wee Chefs, Pirates, How Things Grow, Robots and Legos, Mini Picassos, Science Fun and Bugs. Children can go to individual week-long camps or attend all 10 weeks.

The cost for Kindercamp is \$65 per each week-long session, and district residents get a \$15 discount.

"These programs are so critical for our little people," said interim Executive Director Mary Blake, who formerly served as general manager for 28 years. "Kids need to test and practice and play what's around them."

That kind of education, she believes, "will pay dividends."

The district is holding an open house for the Learning Ladder Preschool from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, May 16. It will take place at the Seaside Youth Center, 1140 Broadway. Parents and guardians can meet Saunders and check out the renovated classroom.

Scholarships and financial assistance are available for both district and out-of-district residents. For more information, visit www.sunsetempire.com or call (503) 738-3311.

fall classes.

The class for 3- to 4-year-olds will be from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays. Children must be 3 by Sept. 7 to enroll in the class. The cost is \$130 per month for in-district residents and \$145 for others.

The class for older preschoolers will be from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m., Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Students must be 4 by Sept. 7 to ensure they are the correct age to enter kindergarten in fall 2016. The regular cost is \$215 per month and \$195 for district residents.

Because of Oregon Department of Education licensing restrictions, space currently is limited to 15 participants per class. "At this age, I think it's so important to have that one-on-one connection with them," Saunders said.

She has 21 students between both classes this year. She sees the potential for growth, but it would require maintaining a second teacher — as the correct teacher-to-student ratio is 1-to-10 — and finding a larger classroom space.

Summer fun

The district also is preparing for this year's Kinder-

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CCC's Puerta de Oportunidades program fosters student success

A grant from the State of Oregon Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development enabled Clatsop Community College to launch the Puerta de Oportunidades program in 2015 to serve low-income, first-generation or disabled students. The one-year program designed to foster student success supported intensive academic advising, career guidance, scholarship and transfer planning assistance, technology support and tutoring.

This investment in student success is already demonstrating results.

Program participant José Miguel Sosa was recently named as one of CCC's Student Scholars and a member of the All-Oregon Academic Team. Sosa, who plans a career as a math educator, will transfer to Western Oregon University to pursue his bachelor's degree beginning this fall.

Sosa will finish his AAOT degree at CCC in

June, two years after graduating from Seaside High School. While continuing to work part-time at the Lumberyard Restaurant in Cannon Beach. Personalized advising helped him focus his interests and provided a clear path through coursework to facilitate his transfer. The Puertas Program also connected him with faculty at Western Oregon University. He received practice interviewing and assistance in refining scholarship essays. He was chosen to present at the Cesar Chavez Leadership Conference conducted at WOU last March where he also gained familiarity with the campus and its activities.

Puerta de Oportunidades benefited 11 CCC students this year. In addition to academic support, each student received a scholarship of at least \$1,000. An extension of funding that would allow the program to continue in 2015-16 is currently under consideration by the Oregon legislature.

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