

Cannon Beach preschool to close

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 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 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



Charis Kids

A preschool student at Charis Kids colors in a calendar.

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 leav-

ing 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?"



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