

CONSERVATORY NOTES

Creating an Environment for Expression

By Heidi Holbrook-Kalil

Although my family would never consider itself “musical” in any way, my childhood home was always filled with music. My parents entertained all the time, and the sounds of Jose Feliciano, John Denver, Barbara Streisand and Stevie Wonder resounded in the air. As a child I danced, sang (quite badly) and put on “shows” for my family, but never seemed to be able to conquer playing an instrument. I even tried my hand at guitar in college but couldn’t make my fingers cooperate with one another. So, never in a million years did I think I’d find myself at home teaching at a school with music at its core.

Imagine my fear as I applied for a job at South Shore Conservatory, thinking I would have to explain my complete failure at being “musical” at any level. But that didn’t happen, and I was delighted to discover that the music component of our curriculum comes from a combination of sources, and I was given complete artistic freedom to teach as creatively as I wished. Five years later, here I am teaching PreK students.

The joys of teaching in an arts- based school and all that it encompasses far exceed any fears I once may have had. I feel at home. Beautiful voices fill the air at any given moment, as does the sound of numerous musical instruments. Children are given the freedom to express

themselves in an environment that is safe and totally free of judgment.

The cohesive learning environment shared between the arts specialists and the classroom teachers is remarkable, and it’s what sets SSC’s Preschool, PreK and Kindergarten apart from traditional programs. For example, we can carry a lesson about the human body in the classroom through to a dance class with Ms. Adrienne (Zopatti) and her knowledge of bones and muscles in movement. Her students move their phalanges of the foot and hand (toe/finger bones) as the music plays.

Learning about the change of seasons is carried through in music with Ms. Su (D’Ambrosio) and Ms. Jennie (Mulqueen) with many of their wonderful songs about falling leaves and snowflakes. The children sing “Snowflakes falling from the sky, snowflakes falling way up high, how many snowflakes do you see falling from the sky?”

Our unit on manners takes a comedic turn in our specialist time with Ms. Elaine (Sorrentino) when we teachers act out “naughty” behavior during lunchtime vs. appropriate behavior. Our “naughtiness” is so over the top that it leaves our PreK students with their mouths open in disbelief. They know immediately what is considered good manners and what is



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considered bad manners, and they certainly remember what they learn.

The same holds true with Ms. Emily (Arsenault) in drama, Ms. Meg (Durkin) in yoga and Eddie (Sorrentino) Spaghetti in percussion. The learning is fun. Our hope is that our children feel as “at home” in school as we teachers do, and our goal to give them a nurturing, creative environment that allows total self expression.

During the winter months, when I find my classroom-bound students restless for activity, I often break out my Cha-Cha Slide CD. This particular dance song gets them up and moving, and allows me to teach them right from left, forward from backward, counting and following directions. They have so much fun they never even notice they’re learning. Ah... the beauty of an arts-based curriculum!

“Ms. Heidi” has been teaching at South Shore Conservatory since