

The Attic: giving children a sense of self

by Deborah Stone
Features Writer

Five years ago, a group of local parents got together to discuss forming their own learning community. They all had elementary aged children or younger at the time and decided to explore alternative education options.

What resulted from a series of weekly meetings over a period of months was the creation of The Attic Learning Community, a community of homeschooling families who share common beliefs about educating their children.

The program is built upon a developmental philosophy of learning that stresses an appreciation for the individuality and uniqueness inherent in each child.

"As parents, we wanted something different for our children," explains Pat Orrell, director and one of five founding members of The Attic. "Our goal was to create a place where children could be themselves and develop at their own pace. We decided that our learning community would focus on giving kids a sense of self and a passion for self, community and childhood. These are in fact our guiding principles."

The Attic opened with 16 students in its first year of operation. Parents and children initially met in the attic of one of the founder's homes in Woodinville; hence, the idea for the name of the school took root while in these surroundings.

"The attic is a place that has been lost to our kids," says Orrell. "In today's society, kids are pushed to grow up too fast and it's a challenge for parents to help their kids have a true childhood. We wanted to protect this childhood and so we conceived of the name for the school with these thoughts and beliefs in mind."

Currently, there are 40 children, ages five through 14 registered at The Attic for the coming school year.

They meet Monday-Wednesday for six and a half hours a day, beginning their school year in late September and finishing at the end of May.

Thursdays and Fridays are left open for children to pursue other interests and for parents and their kids to spend quality family time together.

"Our kids often take classes elsewhere in other settings to explore their interests in drama, foreign language, or sports, for example," comments Orrell. "Others may visit museums, take hikes or go camping. It is their time to do what they want and the choices are infinite."

During the three days of school per week, students focus on reading, writing, math, science and art and they are



Delilah Blacketer (8), Nicolette Clark (9), Morgan Maurer (8), Emma Hunter (8) and visiting sibling Nick Satrik (3) play at recess.

taught by a staff of four full-time teachers and two part-time specialists.

The curriculum is responsive to individual differences

and matches to each child's developing abilities, while also challenging the child's interests and understanding.

"Everything at The Attic is child-centered," adds Orrell. "The children are the center of action and the source of activity. They participate in activities that are meaningful to them. As teachers and parents, we try to nurture and bring out the artist, scientist, mathematician, reader and writer within each of the children."

Orrell explains that clear expectations and consistency are important ingredients in the learning environment and that a definite structure is provided, but within that structure, children have choice, autonomy and responsibility for their learning.

A former junior high science teacher who has previously taught in the public school system, Orrell remarks about the differences she sees in the students at The Attic, as compared to those she used to teach in the public schools.

"When I taught in the public schools, I saw kids becoming passive learners. Their curiosity deadened over time and they took no responsibility for their learning. It was very sad to witness this and it greatly disturbed me. The kids at The Attic, however, are real learners. It gives me chills to see how passionate they are about learning. They always ask questions and are so curious. It's exciting to watch how they take on increased responsibility for their learning."

The school serves children from kindergarten through middle school and operates as a multi-age community of

According to Orrell, this multiple age span gives children the opportunity to respect each other as individuals. They learn to look at the strengths each other possesses and celebrate individual differences.

"A multi-age classroom encourages kids to help and support one another," adds Orrell. "You'll see a five year old sitting and reading with a 14 year old, or there will be multi-age activities and projects where everyone makes a contribution. We want the kids to come together to make decisions and engage in problem solving. With different ages and levels, there are different perspectives and the children gain new ways of thinking and doing by listening to one another's views. They also learn the important skills of cooperation and negotiation."

Tuition at The Attic is approximately \$5,000 a year, per child. As parent participation is a key component of The Attic's success, each family is required to contribute four hours a week to the program for their first child enrolled and two and a half hours a week for any additional children enrolled at the school.

Parents can work in the classroom, help with fundraising, assist with office duties, landscaping and maintenance projects, or volunteer in a variety of other ways, depending on their abilities and the needs of The Attic.

Families also commit to actively engage in their own continuing education. Workshops and classes are often scheduled on various topics regarding the curriculum and philosophical approach of The Attic.

These are open to the public as a part of the program's ongoing desire to be a model learning community, where others can observe and engage in dialogue about the approaches used at the school.

"Our goal is to show what's possible in education," says Orrell. "We encourage people to come and observe and we have had a number of public school teachers visit our program. They have told us that they want to integrate our approach, our style, into their classrooms and into public education. We also have classes for teachers to take on different subjects, to enhance what they might be doing in their classrooms, or give them new ideas and methods to use with their students."

Students at The Attic are not formally assessed or tested. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning is not administered here. Informal assessment is done continuously and children get to participate in this process, as well. According to Orrell, student self-assessment is important. She comments, "The kids learn to assess their own progress, which gives them a better sense of self and also helps them take more responsibility for their learning. We see this as a powerful tool to develop in a child early on in his/her life."

This fall marks the first time The Attic will have a permanent home, after a series of temporary sites on the Eastside. The school is now located in Woodinville, across from Woodinville High School on Little Bear Creek. The building, which was a residence at one time, has 4,500 square feet and is set on five acres.

"It is perfect for us because it has rooms of different sizes, a big kitchen, five bathrooms,

a greenhouse on the property and plenty of space outside to conduct outdoor activities" describes Orrell. "We've been getting the place ready and we're excited for the coming school year to begin."

For more information about The Attic, there will be an open house scheduled on Sept. 21 from 3-5 p.m.; anyone who is interested in learning more about the program is welcome to attend. Call (425) 424-0800 for more details.