

Ruth Washburn Nursery School looks back on 50 years, last 38 on Westside

A preschool that's been on the Westside since 1973 is celebrating its 50th overall anniversary this month.

The Ruth Washburn Cooperative Nursery School, 914 N. 19th St., was started in 1961 by Miriam "Minnow" McPhee, based on the concepts of young children learning from play and involving their parents in the process. Retired Colorado College Professor Bill Hochman remembers those days quite well. His older son John was in that first class. Six other families brought their kids too, using two big rooms in the Mesa Road home of Jerry and Jean Jones, who were both CC graduates.

"Minnow was the endearing spirit of the whole thing," Hochman said. "She was a gentle, lovely person, who had the talent to be an invisible, guiding hand, in quiet control."

The founder named the school after Ruth Washburn, her aunt, who was a nationally known child psychologist, Hochman said. Minnow herself had studied child education at Tufts University in Massachusetts. Before bringing her philosophy to the Springs she worked at nursery schools in Denver, Hochman said. By all accounts, the spirit Minnow imbued in the school has carried on to the present day - despite her retiring in 1977, the location changing three times (between the Jones home and the present site were periods at the Broadmoor Community Church and a former Colorado College fraternity house), and the number of students increasing to more than 100.

A nonprofit organization, the school is open to ages 2 ½ to 5. Tuition is charged, although scholarships are available.

A celebration of the golden anniversary will be Saturday, Nov. 12 at the Fine Arts Center (\$30 a person), preceded by a fundraising silent auction that started Nov. 2 and will continue through the 11th. The goal is to raise \$50,000, in honor of the 50 years.

Hochman's interest in Washburn spans its entire history. His younger son Michael attended the school in the early '80s. In the years since, the professor has continued to pay visits. "I was there last week, and I saw beautiful kids, running around smiling," Hochman said.

Another person with a lengthy Washburn past is Brenda Hood, now in her 25th year as a Washburn teacher. In her tenure, the building has been expanded twice, a garden has been added, and the campus has seen a turnover in teachers and families, "but we never left the core values of who we are," she said. "This is an environment kids don't really get anymore."

Sukie Jackson is only in her first year as school director, but she'd previously put three children through Washburn and worked there six years as a teacher. She revels in some of the school's history, such as the tradition years ago of the May Fair with the "wheel of fortune" where participants could win handmade beanbag frogs (many of which are still on display in what's known as "Minnow's Room"). And teachers over the years have come up with instructional innovations that have been passed down, one example being an enactment of the "Caps for Sale" story, including hats for all the "monkeys" to wear.

Another long-time Washburn supporter is Charlie Paterson, whose older daughter went there in the late '70s. A construction contractor, he built two additions to the school (1990 and 2004) - donating time and materials

along the way - and served twice on the school's governing board. His overall take is similar to Hochman's, Hood's and Jackson's, that the school has managed to keep a high quality and kindly spirit over the years. "It isn't easy," Paterson pointed out. "Some years there has been a struggle with continuity, but I think the school has got some soul to it."

One of the keys is certainly the parents, as exemplified by the word in the full Washburn name: "cooperative." Parents don't just drop their kids off at Washburn; they're formally "members" of the school. As such, their responsibilities include scheduled times to help in the classroom and provide snacks. They're also expected to attend all-school meetings, assist with upkeep, serve on different committees and join in fundraising. Mark Modeer, the owner of Zeezo's and a student himself in the early '70s, has put two daughters through Washburn (his second is in her last year), and serves on the governing board. He has fond recollections of his days there as a child, feeling that they gave him a sense of self-worth that helped him to cope with a difficult family environment. He said he got a thrill out of finding, when he brought his daughters to the school, 2-by-4 playground blocks and milk crates that he'd played with in his Washburn days.

Kimi Tanabe, one of Sukie's children, was interviewed while helping out at the school's Oct. 15 Fall Harvest Festival. She said she too has good feelings about her preschool days there. Asked for her favorite memory, she spoke of the school's flexibility, that even when her teachers had a lesson plan in place, "they never stopped you when you wanted to do something else."

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