

School of Imagination Opens in Dublin

Preschool program serves those with and without special needs.

by Emily Atwood (Published 3/16/2007)

Imagine that your child was just diagnosed as mentally retarded. You were told his mind wouldn't develop beyond the age of 10.

Pleasanton resident Sabrina Sanchez was told this and knew the diagnosis couldn't be right. So she set out to find a preschool where her son, Luke, now 10, would be challenged and receive individualized attention. She found Happy Talkers, a preschool program founded by Charlene Sigman and run out of her home on Valley Trails Drive. There, Sigman promised "speech language therapy services in a fun and nurturing environment." Happy Talkers has since moved to Dublin at 7567 Amador Valley Blvd., Ste. 210. [edit Ste. 101]

After a short time in the program, Luke was diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder—not mental retardation. Through therapy and specialized teaching, Sanchez said he gained two years in speech after only six months. He now attends a Montessori school where he studies Chinese, Spanish and music, and also plays baseball.

Sanchez said the progression was a miracle. In fact, she was so moved by her experience there that she now does pro-bono public relations work for the school. Other parents enjoy the program so much that they began asking if Sigman had anything for preschool kids without special needs. With young children of her own, she had a difficult time finding a preschool she loved. And with the success of Happy Talkers, she founded the School of Imagination in Dublin. It is a one-of-a-kind inclusionary program that seeks to work around a child's needs and put him or her into an adaptive program where they belong.

Sigman's goal was to create an environment for typical kids as well as special needs kids "to learn and flourish with a small ratio and class size...as well as learn language and behavior skills."

The student to teacher ratio now stands at 4-to-1, with 12 students per classroom, where Sigman said other preschool programs in the area have an 8-to-1 or 12-to-1 ratio.

Sanchez's research into autism and developmental disorders has showed her that early prevention is everything. This is why she said Sigman's program and expertise is vital for children with special needs. Sanchez also said parents find the school to be more convenient when it comes to dealing with the challenge of helping their special needs child.

"If one mother has a special needs child and another who's not, she can bring both [to the pre-school]," she said.

It also is a one-stop solution to getting a child's therapy, instead of having to travel to different locations several times a week.

Another positive aspect of integration is that the students don't feel ostracized, Sanchez said.

"At public school kids think there's something wrong or that they're not okay," she said. "The School of Imagination is based on who you are and what you need. It's so satisfying to see the kids as a result [of this program]."

Pleasanton Planning Commission Chairwoman Anne Fox has also had a good experience with her child attending the program and has become an advocate over the years.

“[Sigman] does a phenomenal job,” she said. “She has the ability to develop ways to communicate with children that people think can’t be taught. The staff is talented and really dedicated. I would recommend it for any child.”

Until the group has its own property, the school is currently housed at Crosswinds Church on Sierra Court in Dublin. Although the church has no ties to the program, Sanchez said a wing of the building was donated because they wanted to bring something like that school to the community. In turn, the community showed its appreciation by donating materials to build a playground that was needed in order for the state to recognize the program.

After more than five years of working with Happy Talkers, the most rewarding part for Sigman is being able to help the families and make a difference in the lives of the children.

“I know I’m doing the right thing,” she said. “I’m just here to help.”

With the program running by the large efforts of the group, the nonprofit could use some help of its own. Sigman said that helpers and donations are always welcomed.

“Charlene’s work is so powerful,” Sanchez said. “I’m putting behind my time because it’s needed. To see how the community came together, I think her dream is too small.”

For parents worried about the cost of such programs, Sigman said they don’t turn families away. For more information about the school, visit www.schoolofimagination.org. For information about Happy Talkers, visit www.happytalkers.com.