

Preschool on the beach

Daily Breeze Article By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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For generations, Portuguese Bend Nursery School has been creating the most idyllic of California childhood memories by holding classes at the beach.

The small, cooperative preschool has operated since 1953 on a stunningly beautiful stretch of sand at Abalone Cove in Rancho Palos Verdes.

On a recent clear morning, Catalina Island was the backdrop as a pod of dolphins cruised lazily by, just a few dozen feet from children cavorting about the school's sandy, fenced yard.

Mellow waves occasionally picked up strength, the sounds of their crashing in turn booming off the cliffs above.

Children screamed with joy, rocking a small rowboat set in the sand. Plastic shovels were toted around the yard, and some kids dug for shells. One 4-year-old fell in the sand, picked herself up and kept running.

It's not just the unusual outdoor setting that makes Portuguese Bend Nursery School - known as "Beach School" - different. In open-air classrooms, the instructors emphasize nonstructured playtime and socialization over academics.

"They're in regular school for 12 years, so this gives them a great experience," said Faith Dever, who teaches the 4-year-olds and has sent three of her own children to the school.

Longtime school director Sandy Holderman also sent her kids to Beach School.

"The main thing is learning through play," Holderman said. "This philosophy is more like the backyard that kids used to have but don't have anymore. These kids are free to do what they want. They're learning a lot, especially how to get along with others."

Spots on the school's 30-student roster have been hard to come by, and the waiting list has sometimes been more than four dozen names long. But now there are 12 openings for next fall, and parents can call and reserve them Monday.



Director/teacher Sandy Holderman, right, leads a sing-a-long at Portuguese Bend Nursery School. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)



Luca Meyer, center, on the playground at Portuguese Bend Nursery School. (Brad Graverson / Staff)

Holderman believes local interest may have waned because parents thought it was too tough to get in.

The school originally opened informally in 1953 by the Palos Verdes Peninsula's founding Vanderlip family, which offered their beach cottage for classes. In 1959, the school incorporated as a nonprofit, a year after getting its state license.

As the beach area passed from private hands to public care and eventually became city-owned property, the school was grandfathered in. It sits next to a county lifeguard stand.

Most mothers and fathers - who are actively involved in running the "parent-participation" school - hear about the school through word of mouth, if they didn't attend themselves.

The school does not advertise and its nearly hidden location - behind a gate off Palos Verdes Drive South and down a curving, landslide-cracked road - keeps its profile low. Classes are held Tuesday through Thursday from 9 to 11:45 a.m.

"A lot of people don't know about it, but it's an icon. It's been here basically since the beginning of people living in Palos Verdes," said Palos Verdes Estates mom Amy Forte, whose has had three children attend the school.

Sitting next to her on a bench, Forte's 4-year-old son, Ben, quietly consumed a snack of fruit salad. What does he like about the school? Blueberries, he says. He likes his friends, too.

He points to a curling rubber tube from a vacuum cleaner.

"It's a worm," Ben said.

Toys at the school are in some cases decades old, including a fleet of heavy-metal tricycles. The campus operates on a shoestring budget, with \$125 monthly tuition covering just the two teachers' salaries, said Forte, who serves as treasurer on the nursery school board.

Fundraising is a regular activity for parents, who are required to work at the school about 18 days per year. They also attend monthly parent meetings, and many go to monthly board meetings.

"You are not paying that much monetarily, but you are working for it. You are paying with your time," explained mom Chris Gorman as she hauled hobby horses onto the sand for free play time.

Gorman said she heard about the school from other parents whose children had attended. She was determined to get her 4-year-old son, Chase, in. She phoned first thing on the school's "call-in day."

"People can't believe it. They're like, school at the beach?" Gorman said.

Because only a handful of cars are allowed to use the gated access road to the beach, parents have to carpool. That creates a family-like bond, Gorman said.

Though most of the children come from homes in San Pedro or on The Hill, some parents bring their kids from much farther away. Last year, there were children from Gardena and Downey.

"They're willing to make the drive because of the uniqueness of the school," Gorman said.

Dever said the school is just as important to the students, who make lifetime friends. Her own children come visit years after they've graduated, she said.

"Still, even now, my teenager talks about 'Beach School.'"

Apparently it's not hard to comply with an exhortation that Holderman imparted to parents and alumni in a newsletter last spring: "NEVER forget about the sand in your shoes."

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Director/teacher Sandy Holderman, left, shares a quiet moment with girls at Portuguese Bend Nursery School. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)