

Marvelously Made

By: Crystal Henry

After close to 30 years in early childhood education, Jennifer McCarville has created a place for children. More than a machine churning out monotonous worksheets and other educational receipts, Marvelously Made is a place where children experience meaningful learning in a place that was designed for them. Children gleefully roam from indoor to outdoor classes, stopping to pet bunnies, observe goats, and dig for buried treasure in a sandpit the size of a swimming pool. It's a child's dream, and this revolutionary nonprofit happens to be right here in Helotes.

"I strongly believe when you are for profit, it's hard to be for children," Jennifer said.

Jennifer has worked in a variety of traditional education roles. She's been a preschool and kinder teacher, an administrator and led educational trainings and accreditations. But she was never in a

place that felt just right. There were always well-intended, but misguided, policies getting in the way of how she knew we should truly honor children.

"I would see children who were wilting over and over," she said.

Then 10 years ago she got the chance to do it her way. While she wasn't actively looking for a role as an administrator, she was serendipitously given the reigns at a small Mother's Day Out program a Helotes Hills Methodist Church. That role changed everything, and soon after she started, she was able to build a preschool around her knowledge of child development and brain research. She introduced playful learning by taking what she knew scientifically and experientially about what was best for children.

"We look at what children need to thrive, and then we do it," she said. "It's that simple and that complex."

The school was founded on biblical principles and the idea that children were created by a God who doesn't make mistakes. "God has made children well, and our job is to understand them," Jennifer said.

The grand idea of meaningful learning through play eventually outgrew the space at the church, and with the help of her partners Alison Poole, Kim Stallman, and some generous donors, McCarville secured a space on the corner in Old Town Helotes, and Marvelously Made - The School For Young Children was born.

The school is housed in three buildings — the Farmhouse, the Greenhouse, and the Cottage. The Farmhouse is a magical fairy cottage with warm earth tones, soft lighting, and plenty of art supplies, dolls, books, and a hedgehog.



The Greenhouse used to house the kinder class; however, they now use it as an office and multipurpose space. And the Cottage is the newest expansion to Marvelously Made. It currently houses the primary program with kinder through third-graders learning and exploring in both the indoor and outdoor classrooms.

Outdoor classrooms are the heart of the school. Each day the 3 and 4-year-olds spend their mornings choosing and exploring between the indoor and outdoor spaces.

It's not uncommon to see little ones running barefoot through the grass and sandpits, or racing tricycles around as their imaginations are unleashed. There are structures that look a bit like a pirate ship, a clubhouse, and a stage. But only the children get to decide the purpose of each one.

"We work to honor children's development in genuine ways. And we put their social and emotional development at the forefront," Jennifer said.

Art and science collide as toddlers mix baking soda and colored vinegar potions, and teachers are on-hand with notebooks and pens just in case a child has a story they want to tell. The staff knows that literacy starts with language, so rather than drilling letters or measuring arbitrary reading levels, children are encouraged to dictate stories, which are later shared at gathering time.

"One of the big questions parents always ask is 'Are they going to learn to read?'" Jennifer said. "And I always say 'I don't know. Are you reading to them every day?'"

There are cozy spots throughout the school and no shortage of teachers and parent volunteers who are ready to curl up with a good book, but one of the biggest educational benefits of Marvelously Made is parent education.

"Parenting is a developmental process and a journey," Jennifer said. "Even if you come with all the knowledge in the world when they're born, you don't know your child yet. You have to get to know them."

Jennifer works to empower parents, so that even after they leave, they feel knowledgeable and prepared to advocate for their children. She said parents want good things for their children and making sure they've got the right tools is all part of her job. "Schools have an amazing responsibility and opportunity to help parents understand the why behind the what," she said.

Jennifer said the most common thing she hears from parents when they first visit is that it looks so different from traditional schools. "It looks different because most places aren't made for children," she said. "We don't get the development out of order."

Jennifer said everything they do is a partnership between parents, teachers, and the community. She said the First Baptist Church of Helotes has been incredibly supportive by providing space when they needed it for special events. And the school wouldn't be successful without the dedication of parents and staff.

In addition to the work of maintaining outdoor classrooms and student gardens, the school is also



home to a menagerie of animals including guinea pigs, a hedgehog, a bearded dragon, Madagascar hissing cockroaches, snails, hermit crabs, goats, chickens, fire belly toads, a tarantula, and a tortoise. They also have a Rabbitat full of bunnies that the children can go inside to visit. "Science is a living endeavor," Jennifer said.

The animals are just another part of educating the whole child, since they help not only teach life science, but they help children learn about respecting boundaries. Jennifer said the school is all about feeding the soul by nurturing kindness, and giving maker opportunities like woodworking, handworking, knitting, and creating. It's all very important work, and it's all backed by research, but it's not what people are accustomed to seeing.

"Ninety percent of parents have no idea what we do here," she said. "But they know it feels right."

Registration is happening in February, and classes tend to fill up. But parents can sign up for a tour of the school on the website at marvelouslymadeschool.com. Or, attend the annual Art Show on Saturday, March 28, 2020, from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the First Baptist Church in Helotes.



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