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Man vs. Bambi on the North Shore



Extra credit

Special class reveals the world to kindergarten kids

Four kindergartners sat in Barbara Lazarus' Deerfield kitchen eating sandwiches and counting to 10. Nothing unusual, except that they counted in Japanese.

As participants in Extraordinary Kids Ltd., a kindergarten enrichment program, the boys had spent the morning taking an imaginary trip to Japan. Now, safely home on the North Shore, they chattered on about the passports they had drawn and the foods they had tasted. Lazarus' son Jake could have done without the rice—way too sticky. And those chop sticks, they agreed, were impossible.

When a morning in the suburbs becomes a day in Japan, children are bound to learn, bound to think and bound to open their minds to the larger world. Chaperoning the children on their imaginary journey were two Deerfield women, Carol Modes and Susie Blau, who run Extraordinary Kids Ltd. The weekly two-hour programs, designed to enhance the basic kindergarten curriculum, are conducted at the Congregational Church of Deerfield, the Northbrook Park District and the Bernard Weinger Jewish Community Center in Northbrook.

"I taught a gifted educational program part-time for six years when my children were young," says Modes, who with her husband Gary has two sons, Matthew, 14, and Eric, 10. "The whole time I kept hearing from parents who wished there was more enrichment available. They felt that kindergarten was too much like a continuation of nursery school and they wanted more for their children."

Modes, 43, who taught in Deerfield public schools for 14 years, and Blau, 39, a behavioral therapist who worked with Montessori schools in Deerfield and Riverwoods for 15 years, originally met in a Jazzercise class. They became reacquainted in late 1995 while training for the annual 100-mile Century Bikathon to benefit scleroderma research.

As they pedaled along, Modes confided her grand plan to Blau.

"I realized it would be more fun to do this with a partner, and Susie's background made her perfect," Modes says. "In addition to her academic credentials and experience, she's a Boy Scout leader and serves on the board of the Wilmot Parent Teacher Organization. In fact, she's the one who came up with the name."

The pair approached local park districts and churches searching for a site that met state guidelines. "The first to respond was Rev. Blair Hull, the new pastor of Congregational Church, so we started our class there in spring of 1996," says Blau, who with her husband Joel has a son, Jason, 12, and a daughter, Jamie, 10. "When the Northbrook Park District approved our program soon afterward, we began holding two classes." Each class included 12 children and met once a week.

The following fall, Modes and Blau increased the number of classes and filled them again, with a maximum class size of 16 children. This year, their program serves 100 children at the church, 55 in the park district and 30 at the JCC.

The cost is \$20 per weekly session, with classes running 9 to 11 weeks, depending on the school holiday schedule.

Despite its growth, the biggest problem facing Extraordinary Kids Ltd. is finding a way to meet the growing demand. "All our classes close two hours after registration starts," Blau explains. "And when parents call by 10 a.m. to dis-

cover they can no longer register their children, we're all frustrated."

Toward that end, teachers Robin Levy of Deerfield and Jeannie Lederer of Highland Park have been trained to lead some classes this year. More teachers are in training, and the partners are considering opening classes in Buffalo Grove. Modes recently wrote a teaching manual detailing every phase of the program for use in possible franchising.



Partners Susie Blau (left) and Carol Modes

Among the subjects explored in the classes are the solar system, the polar regions, Africa, the human body, oceans and insects. The teachers try to integrate math, language, creative drama, art and science into each topic.

A few months ago, for example, the children explored Antarctica by playing "Penguin Partners," a graphing and counting game. Then they observed the way liquids melt and freeze.

When the kids arrived for class on the first day of the Antarctica unit, Blau greeted them wearing her parka and heavy gloves and led them outside into the cold. Her outfit was a clue to the answer to her first question: "What do you think people wear on an expedition to explore the Polar Region?" Next, she asked, "What do you think they put into their knapsacks?" Blau and her students filled a backpack with energizing granola, maps, a flashlight and a compass.

In other classes, children have created exploding volcanoes, made game boards from household materials, measured the temperature of snow before and after melting, and pretended to be astronauts. To understand how difficult it is for an astronaut to work wearing bulky spacesuits, the children pulled on rubber kitchen gloves and tried to open candy bars and write their names. To get a feel for walking in the reduced gravity of the moon, they strapped big sponges to the bottoms of their feet and bounced around.

So much of what she and Blau do with the children in class, Modes says, is simply what every parent wishes he or she had more time to do with the children at home. "I think, in fact, that's why we did this—I was looking for something for my own children," she says. "We had tons of science projects and other materials we had bought for our own children. As parents, you just can never get to it all."

Parents say they are sometimes surprised by how much their children retain. A few days after her son went on the imaginary polar expedition, Lazarus volunteered to help out in his regular kindergarten class. "I was reading a story to the class and when I came to the word 'camaraderie' I asked if anyone knew what it meant," she says. "The three hands that shot up belonged to the three children who also attend the Extraordinary Kids class once a week. They said they learned the word when they read 'Tacky the Penguin,' which talks about friendship and camaraderie."

Modes sums up: "We treat these kids like they're capable people with high expectations. Our motto is 'Kids can do.'" N