

Extraordinary class catches on

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It takes an extraordinary kid to take part in the Junior Iditarod sled race in Alaska.

While the adult version of the race travels over 1,000 miles throughout Alaska, the junior version covers only 158 miles in just two days.

This week some extraordinary kindergartners will take part in their own version of the celebrated event as part of an innovative new kindergarten enrichment program based in Deerfield.

Extraordinary Kids is the name of the program started last year by two Deerfield women with extensive backgrounds in education and child psychology.

Co-founder Carol Modes, who worked 14 years in the Deerfield public school system as a kindergarten teacher and a gifted instructor, said she created the program to give the local community something that would enhance the regular half-day kindergarten Deerfield students now attend.

"We felt the community needed an educational program to complement their educational experiences," Modes said. "Many children are ready for a longer academic experience. We feel we can offer activities they can't duplicate in the public schools. But we didn't want it to be every day. Many children have other activities, like ballet or hockey, to attend to and those things are important too."

"We take kindergarten one step further," Blau said. "At this age they're real excited about learning. They are kind of like sponges and they're so eager to learn that if you find a way to nurture that they're just like sponges."

The program is offered two days a week at the Congregational Church of Deerfield, 225 Wilnot Road, and one day a week at the Northbrook Park District. Someday Modes and Blau hopes to expand the program, possibly into the Lincolnshire Village Hall, which has offered the program space.

Students who participate in the program, Modes said, should leave with a life-long love of learning gained from spending time in the different cultures and disciplines the two Deerfield residents offer through hands-on experiences.

Themes

Each semester is nine weeks long. Classes are limited to 16 kids and every semester is built around three themes.

For example, in the fall semester the students studied Africa, the human body and monsters and in the winter semester the themes include polar regions, space and the rain forest.

"This isn't a gifted program but we do cater to the gifted child," Modes said.

"We really try to bring culture to the kids and immerse the kids in the different cultures," Blau said. "Everyone gets something out of what we do here."

The kids played amateur paleontologists after making their own fossils. They recreated the Aurora Borealis with foil-covered flashlights. They're imitating the Iditarod through paper cutouts of dogs and sleds. They accented their



Brian O'Mahoney/Pioneer Press

Five-year-old Victor Rudo works on a light switch during the science section of the Extraordinary Kids kindergarten program last week.

work on polar regions by collecting snow and observing and measuring its elusive nature. They studied Africa by imitating African ceremonies and dances and by tasting African foods.

Learning can be fun

The students also take part in math and science activities every class.

"We think it's important that all our programs are hands-on and the kids learn by participating," Blau said.

"Our philosophy is to make learning fun," Modes said.

Modes was the originator of the Extraordinary Kids program and enlisted Blau while they both trained for a 100-mile bike race.

"My kids were in her class," Blau said.

Blau has a masters degree in behavioral psychology and worked as a behavior therapist at a school for the developmentally disabled in Oak Lawn.

"I just have a way with kids," she said. "Because of my background I believe I can figure kids out before they know what hit them."

Curriculum

Both women were looking for a business they could operate which would leave them time to see their own kids off in the morning and greet them when they returned home in the afternoon.

"We created the curriculum, we did

the research, we spend hours going through books," Modes said.

And her idea has been a good one. Modes said the program went from 24 students to 65 over one semester and then to the current 80. Classes are offered from 9:15 a.m. to 11:15 Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and from 12:45 to 2:45 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays.

"The thing that's really so satisfying for us is that 80 percent of the kids who attended in the fall signed up for the winter session," Modes said.

An important part of the process was enlisting the Congregational Church of Christ to host the non-sectarian program.

"If it wasn't for the minister of the church, the Rev. Blair Hull, we wouldn't even have a program," Modes said. "We were very fortunate to meet her."

For the Iditarod lesson, Blau and Modes began by reading to the students about the race and showing them pictures so they could visualize the setting. The students then completed an art project depicting a sled and a dog, and a team of four kids attached their dogs to a sled for the race along a giant game board illustrated with facts about the race and polar regions.

"That's what we do here, real stuff, we try to find things that interest them," Blau said.

And from the reactions of the students, it seems that the two teachers almost always succeed.

"Kids learn a lot better when they're having fun," Modes said.