

Your Economic Development Connection



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## KALEIDOSCOPE KIDS:

### A "Special Place" for learning

*EVC loan guarantee program helps save Atascadero preschool*

By Robin S. Dudley

From the large, grassy front yard hemmed by a picket fence where children can safely run free, and ample playground equipment including a nostalgic tire-swing and a slide originating in the branches of an old oak tree, to the stately old colonial-style house with brightly colored rooms of learning, Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center is a special place. In a serene yet centrally located older neighborhood in Atascadero, Kaleidoscope Kids was created to be a nurturing "home away from home" where children can learn, grow and explore every aspect of their senses under the watchful, twinkling eye of the Center's Owner Nancy Kirby, and the encouragement from the staff of seven caring teachers.

Approximately twenty Pre-School children from 2-1/2 years of age to kindergarten, and twenty-three After-School students ranging from first to sixth grade (affectionately nick-named "Little Kids" and "Big Kids" respectively), come together at the Center each weekday for what Nancy describes as "lessons teaching individuality, creativity and the importance of having tolerance for all people without discrimination for economic or ethnic backgrounds."

The school's colorful name reflects Nancy's warm, energetic personality, and her teaching philosophy of providing a "full spectrum of learning." It's also how she views children. "Kids are like kaleidoscopes," she explains. "They are like a bunch of bright, diversified colors that constantly change. The more colors they develop and the more they change, the better they get."

To see this busy school today, it's hard to believe that less than a year ago this small business was in jeopardy of closing its doors.



Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center in Atascadero.



The Center's lovely grounds and colonial-style house provide a "home away from home" for children attending Kaleidoscope Kids' Pre-school and After-School programs.

Nancy first started Kaleidoscope Kids as a preschool with six children in her own home in 1986 in order to fulfill a personal need. She wanted to create an environment where her own preschool-age daughter could grow and develop. With a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from Cal Poly, an Associate of Arts degree in business from El Camino College and "real world" experience as a teacher for the Paso Robles School District, Nancy instinctively felt there needed to be a step - or "bridge" - for children between their homes and the "institutional" feel of public schools. She set out to create a stimulating yet home-like environment with an integrated learning program that addressed the emotional, physical and intellectual needs of children. She wanted it to be a "special place" where lifelong childhood memories could be made, children would be prepared for higher learning, and parents could go to work guilt-free, knowing their child was in a supportive, nurturing and loving environment. Her hunch was right. Local parents and others agreed with her vision, and her business thrived.

As Nancy's dream blossomed, so did the number of children attending the school. Six students soon became sixty, and in late 1986 she moved the Kaleidoscope Kids preschool from her home to a larger, more suitable building on Marchant Street in Atascadero. In 1991, she opened her second location on Atascadero Avenue offering an

After-School program for older children.

When economic situations forced her to downsize the school's facilities and enrollment in 1996, Nancy went in search of a new building where she could bring both the Pre-School and After-School programs under one roof and realize her dream of a unique, "non-institutionalized" Learning Center - a "Kids' House."

She found the historic 3,000 square-foot Colony home at 5763 Rosario Street in Atascadero (where the Center is now located) available for sale. Built in 1916 by EC Seares, the grand old house sat back from the street with a stunning backyard view from a hill overlooking the town's civic center. Because a large number of the Center's children came from low-income families, and lived in small apartments



Children on the tire swing.

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without the benefit of yards or adequate play space, she felt the lovely one-acre grounds with old oaks and mature shade trees, and the spacious house would be the perfect setting for the kids in her care to flourish. Nancy and a partner bought the property, obtained permits allowing conditional use to operate a school at the residence, and Kaleidoscope Kids moved in.

For seven years, Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center on Rosario Street offered a safe, nurturing, healthy and diverse environment for the children and families they served. Then adversity struck again. In early 2003,

Nancy's business partnership dissolved, with the other partner wanting to sell the property. With limited financial resources with which to either buy her former partner out or move again, Nancy was faced with the harsh reality of possibly closing her school.

That's when she turned to Anita Robinson, President/CEO of Mission Community Bank, a long-time friend and a parent of a child who had attended the Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center. Anita referred her to Dave Mooklar, Loan Administrator at the Economic Vitality Corporation to see if her business would qualify for the EVC's Loan Guarantee Program.

These cash guarantees come from "Community Block Grant" funds provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The funds belong to each participating city, to be used to create new jobs or save existing jobs. For example, the City of Atascadero's funds are made available for the EVC's Revolving Loan Fund by the Atascadero City Council in order to benefit local eligible businesses, like Kaleidoscope Kids.

After evaluating Nancy's needs and formulating a plan, Dave Mooklar worked closely with Mike Price, Vice President of SBA Lending for Mission Community Bank, and was able to guarantee a portion of an SBA Loan. That made it possible for Nancy to get a loan to completely buy the Rosario property, keep her business open at the existing site for the kids and retain all seven staff employed there.

Today, life at Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center is bustling. Families arrive at different times of the day according to a variety of work schedules, quickly exchanging daily information and leaving children in the trusted hands of Center teachers.

Lesson plans are carefully created with all the senses kept in mind, alternating between teacher directed activities, and playtime filled with independent choice. Colorfully painted rooms and ever-changing activities keep young minds interested.

In the lilac-colored Dramatic Play Room, hats, shoes and costumes poised on racks and stands anticipate the next spontaneous tea party. In the Block Room, toys, trucks and games invite exploring and imagination.

Some children practice writing in the Letter Room, while others sit neatly in a circle in the Listening and Music Room, singing out the letters of the alphabet while their teacher shows them sign language. In the kitchen, future chefs wait for an experimental batch of Play Dough to finish cooking. The activity level and sense of community among the children is amazing.

Kaleidoscope Kids has established life-long relationships with the children and families of Atascadero. According to Nancy, "All of the kids here are connected in some way." With only word-of-mouth as her primary form of advertising, she still has cared for the children of "almost everyone in town."

Several alumni have come back to help out as teachers and aides in the same pre-school program they once attended. These include Nancy's own three children – Erica, Kylee and Neil – who worked at the Center during summers and after school throughout their high school years. Some of the teachers are "moms" of attending students, and several others are employed here while attending college to become fulltime teachers themselves.

In addition, five new early childhood education facilities in north San Luis Obispo County are direct "spin-offs" of Kaleidoscope Kids, opened by Center staff. There's no denying that



**Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center student Tristen gets a piece of watermelon from Center Owner Nancy Kirby during Snack Time.**



**Teacher Rose Stead reads to a group of captivated pre-school children in the Music and Listening Room.**

the philosophy and nurturing, encouraging spirit in this "special place" has played an important role in the lives of many children and families in the community, and even in the future professional success of many former students over the years.

According to Nancy Kirby, "Anita Robinson, Dave Mooklar and Mike Price should receive a lot of credit for what they did. They believed my small business was worth keeping open. With the Loan Guarantee from the EVC and the SBA loan I was able to save the school." Combined with Nancy's energy, drive and caring devotion to her students and their families, Kaleidoscope Kids Learning Center will surely continue to grow and prosper, while creating and retaining jobs in the community and making happy memories for children for years to come. For more information, call the Center at (805) 466-8888.