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San Jose mom's Science Smart Kids offers enrichment programs for young children

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Ildiko Stennis knew what she wanted for her children and when she didn't find it, she created it.

After teaching science at Buchser Middle School, Santa Clara High School and elsewhere, Stennis traded in teaching for motherhood a few years back.

"Like a lot of stay-at-home moms trying to make it on one income, I couldn't afford enrichment programs for my children," says the Rose Garden area resident.

Plus, the few science programs she did find were geared toward older children, not her three sons, now 7, 4 and 2 years old.

"I started a backyard play group with parent participation, and the kids did all these experiments and projects all summer long. I'm very passionate about giving kids hands-on opportunities," she says.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the participants and their parents, Stennis volunteered to teach an after-school science program at St. Clare School in Santa Clara, where her oldest son was in kindergarten during the 2009—2010 school year.

She also approached Ballard Montessori Preschool, which her eldest son had attended, and was hired to do the same.

From that she launched her business, Science Smart Kids, and found herself teaching weekly classes at River Glen Elementary and Booksin Elementary schools and workshops at the library branches in Rose Garden, Willow Glen, Cambrian and Evergreen.

As she added new clients Stennis started hearing from parents who wanted classes for their

children who were not enrolled at any of the schools where she was teaching.

"I wanted an offsite location where I could open up classes to the public," she says.

"A lot of parents want to supplement what's been cut out of schools, and there's such a need for hands-on enrichment classes taught by credentialed teachers."

In early 2011, Stennis started renting classroom 114 from Westminster Presbyterian Church, 1100 Shasta Ave., and she recently signed a year's lease.

Her spring series of six-week classes start April 20 for grades K-2 and on April 23 for preschool, K-2 and 2-4, with tuition ranging from \$90 to \$120.

In a typical class, she says, students rotate through three stations, doing an experiment or activity at each one.

When the children are studying astronomy, she will have them demonstrate the phases of the moon using a light and pingpong balls, and then do a painting, such as a spiral galaxy with glitter. Lastly, Stennis likes to end each session with a bit of literature, reading a children's story, such as *Aya* and *the Perfect Moon*.

Stennis' sister, Maria Poling, is following her lead with Art Smart Kids, which offers seven weeks of art



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classes for children ages 3 to 6, starting April 21 and 22; for ages 5 to 8 on April 22 and 23; and ages 7 to 10 and 9 to 14 on April 23, with tuition ranging from \$105 to \$140.

Poling also offers classes for home-schooled students.

In June, the sisters are launching Smart Kids Summer Camps, combining science, art and history on various topics in morning and afternoon sessions for children going into grades 1-6.

"I love thematic instruction," Stennis says, explaining that the "Egyptian Adventures" camp will include the history of ancient Egypt, the sciences they used to make medicines and cosmetics, and their art.

Other topics will be "Castles and Catapults," "The Amazing Human Body" and "Geology Rocks! & Art Landscapes."

The first camps start June 13 and range from \$150 to \$235 for the full week sessions and \$130 to \$190 for the final week, which is four days in length.

Both Stennis and Poling live in the Rose Garden area. They and their seven siblings grew up on Sierra Avenue, where their parents still live.

What sets their camps apart from most others, Stennis says, is the fact that they use only credentialed and experienced teachers rather than college and high school students.

Additionally, the camps are designed as learning experiences for children, rather than being primarily recreational.

In the fall, the two will launch a monthly "Parents Night Out," where children can spend an evening of hands-on activities and pizza, while their parents have a night to themselves.

For more information on the classes and camps, visit www.sciencesmartkids.com or call 408.386.5804 or visit www.artsmartkidscreate.com or call 408.687.5054. Partial scholarships are available on a limited basis to parents in exchange for serving as assistants.



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