

SOUTH LOOP CHILDREN HAVE THEIR "SPACE"



Owner Kimberlee Burt and her "community" of learners. (Photo by Jennifer Williams)

After passing through the 11th and Wabash entrance of "A Child's Space — Early Literacy and Learning Center," a little red, yellow and orange bench, about two feet from the floor, greets you before the front desk receptionist can.

In the small lobby area, you see tiny pink and blue wooden chairs that don't even look real at first glance. If you take a walk all the way to the back of the Center, you'll find bathrooms identical to those in downtown office buildings, except they have extremely low toilets and sink counters.

It's all just right, though, for the little toddlers who will attend the Center — a world for youngsters in which adults don't quite seem to belong. Located at 1020 South Wabash, this "10-year-old dream" of its owner, Kimberlee Burt, has finally come to pass. And it continues to be more than she ever expected it would be.

"Even in terms of the standpoint of the space. I was not looking in downtown Chicago for a space for my Center," says Burt, a Chicago native who previously worked for five years as an educational consultant and trainer for Scholastic's, Inc., a major publisher and distributor of children's books.

Burt's only criteria, she said, was that the Center would be in a location with a thriving community, and in a facility where children would be provided "beautiful, rich learning experiences."

She instantly fell in love with the idea of easily being able to take the children to the museums, the Art Institute, the lakefront, and the various surrounding neighborhood parks.

"I thought it was the right kind of environment. It had the right feel ... we just needed to add our personal touches on the space," Burt said. "I wanted (the Center) to be a space where children can learn and feel free, and (one that) creates joyful experiences for children."

The 5,200-square-foot Center fits six classroom spaces, where science and discovery activities will be held, computers, and traditional blocks and toys that will be accessible for the children.

The color schemes for the classrooms, Burt said, match the temperaments for the different ages of the children, according to a developmental study she did.

The most adorable section of each classroom is the "Dramatic Play" area, where there's a make-believe kitchen with artificial food and cooking utensils.

For extreme activity, the Center includes a large room in the rear that has couch-like bean bags,

a basketball net, a clubhouse with sliding boards, toy bikes, and more. That's the place "where the kids can really go wild," Burt says.

While a number of people commemorate last year's events of September 11 by flying American flags and visiting Ground Zero in New York, Burt and her children will also remember the day in their own little way.

For their first "Play-School" activity, this month, the children will interact with Chicago firemen and learn about being a community helper for what they call "The Firehouse."

The "Play-School" room will change its theme each month, allowing the children to explore real world places.

Burt says one of the most important elements to the philosophy of the Center is what she calls "a community of learners," which will encourage parents to participate in various activities.

Parents will be able to learn from child development experts through workshops, Burt said, to find more ways to connect them to their child's daily learning.

Another feature will be a program called "All About My Friends," an opportunity for families to share their histories and a cultural meal. The children will create a story page based on their backgrounds to help them appreciate one another's differences.

Throughout this past summer, Burt ran advertisements about her Center in various newspapers to reach prospective parents and children, but seemed to attract more teachers seeking employment. She has found the old-fashioned way of gaining business to work best: passing out flyers.

She walked almost every night through Grant Park and other surrounding parks, spreading the word on her new Center, and is now confident about a successful grand opening this week.

A born-again Christian, Burt believes God influences her desires to teach and meet the needs of a child, regardless of their racial or economic background.

Admitting she's more of a "teacher-at-heart," the owner plans to spend a lot of time with the children, instead of just watching them from her upstairs office. She doesn't even refer to her new business as a daycare center, boasting that "her community" will be actively involved and learning things that will make children better people down the road.

For more information on "A Child's Space — Early Literacy and Learning Center," call 312/431-1234.