

60 SECONDS

Preschoolers hold the heart of director

Hinsdale Community Preschool director Ann Marie Berlino delights in being around little ones. Once in a while they return decades later as, well, big ones, like a young couple that stopped in recently with a stunning request.

"They said, 'We are planning our wedding, and we met here,'" Berlino recounted. "They came back and they wanted their class picture so they could put it up at their wedding."

Perhaps a love connection was inevitable after 75 years in operation, a legacy HCP is celebrating this year. Berlino said the fruit the toddlers will eventually produce is unknown, but it sure is a joy to plant the seeds.

"I love it. It's my passion," she said. "Give me the 4-year-olds and the 3-year-olds and the 2-year-olds and I am very happy because they grow in leaps and bounds."

As director, Berlino wears a lot of hats: scheduler, tour guide, facility manager. Most satisfying for her, though, is being amidst the play and laughter of the classroom, such

as when she leads the kindergarten enrichment program.

"I've been a teacher in various capacities all my life, and what better job to do what you love every day," she said. "I love the versatility of it, because it's always something new, another problem to solve. And I do love solving problems."

Berlino is preparing to mark a milestone of her own as she reaches 10 years as HCP's top administrator next June. Her desire for a career in education dates back as long as she can remember.

"I got a scholarship to go to the College of New Jersey all because I wrote a piece on why I wanted to be teacher," Berlino related. "As I got older I could see how I could influence children and their learning."

The preschool was established as a parent co-op during World War II by women with husbands serving overseas who wanted a good education for their children. Originally spread among several locations in the village, HCP found its permanent home in the lower level of

The Community House in 1956.

The parent co-op model means parents serve as the preschool's board members and also volunteer in the classroom.

"These parents are very involved in the running of the school. Myself, the parents, the staff — we're all here for the same reason, which is the education of these little ones, that they get off to a solid start," Berlino said.

Going home doesn't necessarily mean leaving work behind.

"I was reading about pyramids last night because my class on Thursday is pyramids and Egyptians," she said, smiling.

But Berlino doesn't consider it sacrifice.

"I just want them to learn and grow in a wonderful environment," she said. "It's such a fulfilling feeling to be able to know that you were a part of this child's life and you've touched this child's life. It's wonderful to see what they become."

— profile by Ken Knutson,
photo by Jim Slonoff



ANN MARIE BERLINO

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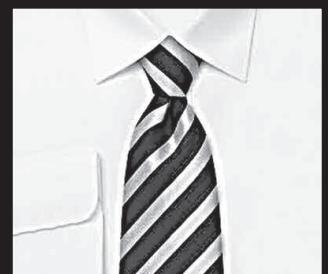
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