

Natural Bridges home to new preschool



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Jonnie Cardinale opens Natural Bridges Children's Center preschool later this month with co-directors Karyn Schmidt and Allie Maffei.

Natural Bridges Children Center looks to draw in local parents

By Calvin Men

newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com
@CalvinMenAtWork on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ >> Much of what used to be Natural Bridges Elementary School has languished in the two years since it was occupied. Weeds are tall and trash is scattered around parts of the 13-acre campus.

But at the southern tip of the campus, education is blossoming. Natural Bridges Children's Center, a private preschool, is set to open its doors on Aug. 30 and leaders are eager to let parents know about it.

The visionary behind the school is Jonnie Cardinale, a 54-year-old teacher who dreamed of opening her own

preschool. Together with Karyn Schmidt and Allie Maffei, Cardinale hopes to fill up the 30 seats before the school's official start.

"We always had a dream to work together in our own preschool," Cardinale said. "When we saw what was happening with [the former] Natural Bridges [campus], that it was sitting empty, we came up with the idea that maybe we should propose an idea to the city school board."

The journey to start their preschool started when the three were colleagues and friends in the same education circles. Between the three of them, they have more than 45 years of experience teaching preschool, kindergarten and first grade.

HOW TO CONTACT OFFICIALS

For information, visit www.naturalbridgescc.org/

The preschool is entering its inaugural year and is about half-way full. With space for 30 students, Cardinale and her colleagues are shooting to full enrollment by the Aug. 30 official start date.

"We're excited to support Jonnie's program and the Head Start program that prepares preschoolers and their parents for their child educational experience," said Kris Munro, superintendent for Santa Cruz City School District, which is leasing the land to Natural Bridges Children's Center.

While Cardinale is leasing the property from the Santa Cruz City Schools District, the preschool is a private organization not beholden to the district. It receives financial support from the affiliated nonprofit Friends of Natural Bridges Center.

Built in 1967, the Natural Bridges campus sprawls across 13 acres. While the campus temporarily housed Pacific Collegiate School from 2005 to 2015, it's stood vacant until recently. In addition to Cardinale's program, district officials are also expanding a Head Start preschool program by using part of the Natural Bridges campus.

Munro also said the district is in negotiations with a third

PRESCHOOL » PAGE 6



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Natural Bridges Children's Center co-director Karyn Schmidt, parent/teacher Kara Nickel and co-director Allie Maffei are holding an open house this week for parents who may want to enroll their children in the preschool.

Preschool

FROM PAGE 2

educational organization about occupying the rest of the campus, though she declined to go into detail.

As for the origin of Natural Bridges Children's Center, the founders approached the district in the beginning of 2016 with the proposal. After receiving permission from the district, they were handed the keys in May 2017. Since then, it has been a whirlwind of renovation and applications for the right licenses from the state.

Natural Bridges Children's Center, nestled toward the end of the Natural Bridges campus, is a flower on the typically quiet campus. At the entrance, an oversized stuffed bear greets visitors from a wooden shack. Next to the wooden outpost is a boat for kids to climb onto and a dirt pile for them to scale. In the back is a swing set with a view of the ocean and a life lab garden.

The design and terrain reflects the preschool's constructivist philosophy, which focuses on teaching children through experiences.

"Our school wants to provide the learning experiences that are going to scaffold onto their learning," Cardinale said.

The preschool sits in a two-room portable classroom enclosed by metal fencing. Cardinale is quick to show photos from before the trio renovated it. Snapshots on her phone show a sad set of swings surrounded by tall weeds and fluorescent-lit classrooms with abandoned chairs.

But the trio — armed with their tools and an army of friends and family — remodeled and transformed their lot of land into utopia for early childhood development.

Peter Cook, a Westside resident and co-owner of Lighthouse Realty, said there is significant demand for preschools in the area.

"Parents would like to have local schools that're easy for kids to walk to or bike to. They don't have to drive far," Cook said.