

nancy brophy



Mavericks And Movers Who Dared To Make A Personal Mark

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July 20, 1998 Westchester County
Business Journal – Special Feature

BOLDSTOKES

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Phys Kids

Nancy Brophy has seen the future and the alarming image is a nation of grown up versions of the little couch spuds who loathe activity and love to watch television. ‘Children today are less fit than ever;’ said Brophy, who owns the unique campus for children in Mohegan Lake that includes Tom Thumb Preschool and Dynamic Gymnastics. ‘A child

who is unwilling to move becomes a sedentary adult who is less able to cope with the everyday stresses that life tosses out.’ These stresses, by the way, can greatly affect both physical and mental health, she added.

Brophy makes it dear that her definition of activity includes both physical and mental components ‘We’ve all seen the one-sided adults, some who are brilliant but totally out of shape as well the body beautiful where there’s nobody home.’

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At Tom Thumb Preschool, for children aged 3 through 5, children have their first sustained contact with others their own age and with adults outside their immediate family. Play activities form a major part of the creative experience because, ‘Play is the work of children,’ Brophy said. But plenty of non-structured free time is provided, as well. Such periods allow children to choose what they want to do or whether they want to do anything at all. ‘Children can learn at this early age about their power to take charge of their own lives,’ said Brophy, who is a SUNY graduate, a New York state certified teacher of History and English and has taught in schools in Peru, France, Massachusetts and in nearby Brewster. And they should, she added: ‘When I had children of my own, I realized that by the age of 8, it is very difficult to

change the course of a child's life." The program offers many occasions for a child to develop independence and creativity. For instance, a child who sees another classmate stepping into a line ahead of others can speak out and say, 'Move to the end of the line' and in that moment realize a sense of personal power," she said.

Dynamic Gymnastics provides a facility and a professional staff that accommodates high-level competitors but mostly encourages recreational athletes to achieve fulfillment through the joy of participation. Brophy's partners at the gymnastic school are Sorin Cepoi and his wife, Teodora Ungureanu-Cepoi, Rumanian-born Olympic competitors who hold Master of Sports Certificates from the National Council of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest, based on their Olympic performances. "In 1976, Teodora was awarded a silver medal and Nadia Comaneci was awarded the gold," said Brophy. "They are both superb coaches but most important, they are committed to helping build healthy bodies and strong minds in their young students."

A recent addition to the creative environment on the campus is Mara Ethel's Rising Star Production Co. which Brophy described as a "total theatrical experience." Offered to all age groups, children to adults, beginner and professional, the programs in the performing arts include acting, improvisation, singing, voice, speech, dancing, pantomime, movement, writing, performing, directing, scenic art, costuming, makeup and production.

Brophy credits her enthusiastic and energetic staff with the success of her campus. "We share the same dream for children," she said. "And we believe that we contribute to this community. It can be something more than a strip mall and this is a beginning."

It was the teamwork of the staff, in fact, that resulted in Dynamic Gymnastics' playing host, in April, to an Olympian gold medalist, Leon Stukelj. The gymnast, who lives in Slovenia, has long been an idol of Emil Gaspari, the husband of Ann Gaspt, Assistant Director of the Tom Thumb Preschool. When Gaspari telephoned SftkeIj and extended an invitation to visit the school to meet and talk with the children, plans got under way. Stukelj is, at the age of 99, the world's oldest-surviving Olympic gold medal winner, according to the International Olympic Committee. "He's not just surviving," said Brophy, who accompanied the athlete on a whirlwind two-day visit that included Mohegan Lake and Manhattan. "He absolutely relishes every minute of life and thrives on it." Brophy noted that during their visit to Manhattan, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani invited Stukelj to officiate at the 2012 Olympic competitions which the mayor wants to be held in New York. "At the rate he's going, he could very well make it."

The visit from the Olympian great made a profound impression on the children at Dynamic Gymnastics. "His message, that sports can make you better as a person, was one that the children grasped right away," said Brophy.

This is a message that Brophy never tires of herself. Like many educators, she is convinced that it is essential for children to receive adequate physical activity on a daily basis for intellectual and social development, as well as physical health. In short, she believes that fitter children are primed to learn, to excel. "I want these children to understand that all the work they put into learning and into physical activity will make their dreams come true. I want them to believe in themselves. Once children have self-esteem that they get from a healthy mind in a healthy body, they won't be tempted to retort to artificial means like drugs, alcohol and cigarettes," she said. "If we are able to help a child understand that he or she is important then I have done my job."