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

By Mary Gottschalk
mgottschalk@community-newspapers.com

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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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