



STORYTELLER

CARING FOR OUR COMMUNITY'S CHILDREN

From preschoolers to preteens, Terri Allison has the *write* words for kids

By Julia Rodgers

In 1988, Terri Allison helped write the grant to start Storyteller Children's Center. She has been serving on its board of directors ever since and last summer became executive director of the preschool, which provides quality, tuition-free early childhood education for homeless or at-risk children, as well as comprehensive support services for their families. The children receive nutritious meals, medical screenings, counseling and therapy for developmental delays, and the families receive referral services to help bring stability to their lives.

"I'm so proud of the evolution to what it has become," says Terri, who remembers the days of moving furniture into Storyteller's first temporary location. "There were times when we were hardly making ends meet, but the families needed us. To watch it grow all these years has been worth it."



Terri Allison at Storyteller Children's Center with young friend Stephanie.

Currently housed at 2115 State Street, the program serves almost 100 children a year. However, the waitlist is always full (with at least 40 children at any given time hoping to gain admission), so an additional location is being considered by the Storyteller board; they are faced with many challenging decisions but say having Terri as executive director has almost made their jobs easy.

"We feel so confident with what's going on there," says Jon Clark, board president. "Terri is so creative and extremely competent — it's a great combination."

In addition to her job at Storyteller, Terri has also co-authored the book, *Moon Mother, Moon Daughter: Myths and Rituals that Celebrate a Girl's Coming of*

Age, with her friend, Janet Lucy. Both women have daughters about the same age, so they decided to write about how mothers and daughters can connect, not battle, during the preteen years.

"How would it be different if we looked forward to our daughter's first steps into womanhood with the same anticipation and excitement with which we had anticipated their first walking steps?" they ask in the introduction.

Using the book as a guide, Terri leads mother-daughter groups, called "Moon Circles," here in Santa Barbara. "It's sort of like spiritual Girl Scouts," says Jo Saxon, who

participates in the group with her 10-year-old daughter, Hope. “My daughter loves it. All the girls look forward to the next meeting. They love Terri.”

Terri tried out the ideas contained in the book on her two daughters, Mikaila, now 19, and Emma, 17. Terri and her husband Rob also have a son, Will, who is 15. “At first, Mikaila and Emma were embarrassed about being in the book, but now I think they appreciate their contributions to it,” says Terri.

An experienced educator and administrator, Terri home schooled her children and served as the coordinator of the HomeBased Partnership at Santa Barbara Charter School, an independent study program that offers support and classes for parents who are teaching their children at home.

“There’re a lot of preconceived notions about home schooling,” says Terri, admitting the grandparents quiz the kids over Thanksgiving dinner to make sure they’re learning. But Terri sees home schooling as a gift she has been able to share with her children. “We didn’t home school because we were unhappy with their school. We were just lucky to be in the position to do it. It worked really well for our family.”

According to Terri, the best part about home schooling is that parents are very involved with their children. “A big part of any child succeeding is parent involvement,” she says.

Of course, Terri doles out that same advice to Storyteller parents, trying to make it easy for them to be involved at the preschool. “Parents are encouraged to come whenever they can (during lunch, at the end of the day, etc.). We try to make a good connection with them during drop off and pick up times. It’s really important to look at the whole family and take a holistic approach to education.”

Perhaps because of her holistic approach to education, Terri doesn’t get discouraged when she meets children and families in dire circumstances. “You see how hard the families are working to get back on track,” says Terri. “There’s so much good happening here, it doesn’t feel hopeless.”

What suggestions do you have for parents who want to create a sense of community for their children?

Stay involved. There are many opportunities; some are just not as obvious as others. Even when your child prefers that you are invisible, small openings present themselves if you are paying attention. And, don’t be afraid to ask for help. It’s cliché now, but it does take a village to raise a child.

What do you like best about working with children?

How much I learn from them about myself. Sometimes it’s very humbling to hear the perspective of such uncensored, wise beings.

How do you think coming of age is different for girls than boys?

It’s different for everyone, regardless of gender. What is important is to acknowledge it in a way that is meaningful.

Should we be trying to protect our children from today's society?

I don't think it's possible. We need to help our kids become critical thinkers so they can protect themselves.

Do you have any big plans for when your children all leave home?

Napping. And if there is any money left over, traveling. There are so many places yet to see.

What is your motto?

Try and live each day with gratitude.

Storyteller works in collaboration with the Community Action Commission's Head Start Program. For information about Storyteller Children's Center, or to volunteer, call 682-9585.

To learn about Moon Circles, call 683-3552.