

## Around the Community



### At JCC Chicago, Outdoor Learning is Essential to Early Childhood Curriculum

**B**ernard Horwich JCC is one of the cornerstones of early childhood education in W. Rogers Park and a jewel in the crown of JCC Chicago. Here they've developed a curriculum based on Reggio Emilia, a nature-based, child-centered approach to learning that relies heavily on the concept of outdoor classrooms. Experiencing fresh air, children are able to learn in a space that is both energizing and provides soothing sensory input which is especially welcome during this pandemic.

With 12 years as Director, Miriam Aberman believes that, "Nothing is more critical to stimulating children's imagination and curiosity than nature, which is why JCC Chicago has prioritized year-round outdoor learning as a central part of our curriculum for years now—even prior to Covid." Research shows outdoor learning improves self-regulation, advances gross motor skill development, increases concentration, and promotes self-confidence. "And it follows, that a love of science and math is developed through an understanding and appreciation of ecosystems and environmental processes," Aberman says.



With a massive outdoor campus for the children to explore, children ages 2 to 5 years quickly become competent, capable learners as educators encourage their curiosity to inform learning plans. Children are eager to learn when something they see sparks their curiosity. Teachers are trained to respond to questions with other questions. The goal is not just to feed information to children, but to be on a path of self-discovery.

"For example, in our outdoor class-



room, the teachers and children spent time drawing and writing the children's names with a stick in the snow and mud. While doing that, they explored how the snow melts which brought them into a deeper discussion about the properties of snow and changing temperatures," said Morah BrookeLynne Dukes.

New this year, "We took an empty field and added easels, wheelbarrows and building materials so that children can create more elaborate structures. We've

found that everything that can be taught indoors, we're able to do outside including circle time, davening, and lunch," said Shuli Medow, longtime Program Coordinator responsible for co-leadership of the school. The site also features an indoor art studio, gross motor skills room, and gym. Additionally, there is an indoor pool where children participated in a learn to swim program pre-Covid; they hope to be able to restore in-school lessons as soon as it is safe to do so.

Another way the program is unique is the focus on social emotional needs. Educators work with a full-time social worker to set individual goals so that every child grows at their own pace and the school is committed to learning standards set by the state to achieve age-appropriate milestones. Educators are ongoing learners too and are continually sourcing new ideas and funding avenues to improve the program. Two teachers were recently awarded a grant for muddy buddy suits, rain boots, umbrellas, sleds and snow shovels to help children be more comfortable outside year-round. "Even Chicago weather can't stop us!" said Medow.

### JCC Chicago Stands For Community Connection

**B**eyond the community built every day in our Early Childhood and day and overnight camps, the J makes it a priority to focus on adult connection and engagement too. *Community Tuesdays/My Go To Place* is just the start of what's happening virtually at JCC Chicago in partnership with CJE SeniorLife. And best of all, there's no cost to participate in these weekly programs!

*Move it Mondays* is a great way to start your week, with invigorating exercises and an opportunity to see friends safely via online sessions. We had over 50 participants this past week who got the benefit of some stretching and strengthening at home using a sturdy chair, weights (soup cans or water bottles work!), resistance bands (a hand

towel or necktie works!), and a water bottle to stay hydrated! Mark your calendar for Mondays at 11:30 am.

After a great Monday workout, we are back again every Tuesday at noon for *Community Tuesdays/My Go To Place* for some learning and socializing. We offer a wide range of topics, with our most popular programs being virtual tours! From the comfort of their couches, participants have been able to tour the 'Notorious RBG' exhibit at the Illinois Holocaust Museum, the Chicago Riverwalk, and Abraham Lincoln's home. One participant recently shared, "It breaks up what would be a lonely time for us. It is intellectually stimulating and a great chance for us to talk to others in the discussion time!" Our next



Community Tuesday event on January 19 discusses Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks: Grand Masters of American Comedy, with Professor emeritus at Fordham University, Brian Rose.

"The tours, the talks, the exercise sessions are all great programs that create community for our seniors, enabling them to learn with each other and know that every start to their week is fueled by stimu-

lating and engaging opportunities to connect," says Devorah Horovicz, Manager of Community Programming.

Community Tuesdays/My Go To Place is a free program brought to you by JCC Chicago and CJE SeniorLife, and is generously funded by a grant provided by the Albert and Lucille Delighter and Marcella Winston Foundation, a supporting foundation of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. For more information and to register, please visit [www.jccchicago.org/communitytuesdays](http://www.jccchicago.org/communitytuesdays).

JCC Chicago also offers a variety of virtual programming including book discussions, film Q&As, and more. Visit our J Talks page [www.jccchicago.org/jtalks](http://www.jccchicago.org/jtalks) for more information.