

Walnut Creek Journal

Serving Walnut Creek and Alamo



DAN HONDA / Staff photo

Walnut Creek residents Amy and Ofer Erez co-founded Diablo Valley School to offer an alternative to mainstream education in the county. Their 2-year-old son, Yo'el, can attend at the age of 4.

Alternative school will offer children freedom

By Allyson Daniel
Staff writer

Children given the freedom to learn what they want, when they want, excel both academically and socially, say founders of an alternative school that is to open in Walnut Creek.

This philosophy is the premise for Diablo Valley School, founded by six people who

wish to offer an alternative to mainstream education in Contra Costa.

Like its model, Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, Diablo Valley School will take a noncoercive approach to teaching. Students, ranging in ages from 4 to 19, will be free to do whatever they want, with no separation into classes or grade levels. They will never be expected, prompted or pushed to learn anything.

"Our credo is 'Wait for the student to take the first step,'" Sudbury Valley School founder Daniel Greenburg wrote in a 1991 article for *Mothering* magazine. "Children learn not because they are pushed to do so, but because they are inwardly driven to conquer the unknown, to understand."

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School

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Diablo Valley School will open with a summer program that mirrors Sudbury Valley's format, at Walnut Avenue United Methodist Church. Founders are still searching for a location for the regular school term.

Students will have the freedom to study mathematics, learn about martial arts, or read a book. They can create their own learning environment by doing whatever naturally piques their curiosity.

"Kids, by doing what is fun or enjoyable, educate themselves," said Amy Erez, one of Diablo Valley School's founders.

"This format allows the individual to create their own well-roundedness, to live in the world they to choose to live in as adults."

Erez likened the Diablo Valley experience to a year-round summer vacation.

"It reminds me of the way I used to feel in the summertime, where I'd get up in the morning

and the day was my own. I could do whatever excited me."

Walnut Creek residents Shirj Mendonca and Rob Walker have decided to send their 7-year-old son, Ryan, to Diablo Valley because they believe it will teach him to be resourceful.

"In an information society, it's not what you know, it's how you know where to get the information," said Walker. "Having to find the information, and not have it given to you on a silver platter, results in a longer lasting learning."

Ryan Walker, a first-grader at

'It's about empowering children so they can be the best of who they are.'

— School co-founder Amy Erez

Walnut Acres Elementary, said he is excited about attending Diablo Valley School because it will give him time to learn things like "how on Sega buttons, it moves through the wires and comes out on the TV."

"I get so excited about this concept," said Mendonca. "It just feels right. Ryan is a very creative child and I think it will give him space and freedom."

The school symbolizes freedom and democracy in action, said Erez.

"It's about empowering children so they can be the best of who they are."

Like in a true democracy, everyone in the Diablo Valley School community will have the right to participate in all aspects of the school's management. Students and staff will meet once a week at the "School Meeting," modeled after the New England Town Meeting.

During the School Meeting, the community will make decisions on expenditures, hiring teachers, and renewing or discontinuing yearly contracts of staff members. Each student has an equal vote and the right to choose whether or not to vote that vote, said Erez.

"It gives students the option of being responsible, but it doesn't force that responsibility on them," said Erez.

There will also be a judicial system formed to deal with written complaints from anyone about anyone in the school community. The judicial committee will be made up of one staff member and a few students representing each age group.

"Because of the judicial committee, I strongly believe there will be no gang problems on the campus," said Erez. "There is no such thing as a weakling or a bully. There's no one to rebel against. Each individual is an important part of that community and voices can be heard equally, regardless of age."

Staff members will be available to respond to student's requests to learn, but they will not be asked to do any of curriculum.

"The children are taught to be very resourceful," said Erez. "It's not up to the staff members to answer the child's question, it's up to the child to answer his or her own. The staff is there to help and support in any way."

If several students become interested in a particular subject, they can form a "corporation."

They organize a meeting place and time, and design a set of rules to regulate the use of equipment necessary for their project. Students must then be certified to use the equipment without supervision of a staff member.

A student can attempt to graduate when he or she feels ready. To receive a high school diploma, Diablo Valley students will defend a thesis before the "assembly," made up of staff, parents, fellow students, and members of the community.

The thesis states, "I am ready to be a responsible adult in society," said Erez.

Diablo Valley School is not an accredited institution, as there have been no graduates by which to measure its effectiveness. But Sudbury Valley, founded in 1968, has been accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges since 1972.

According to a 1983 survey of 69 Sudbury Valley graduates, about half had gone to college and six had earned Ph.D. or master's degrees. Those who did not attend college made a conscious choice not to go.

For more information on Diablo Valley School's summer program, contact Amy Erez at 932-7610.