



## Holiday + Gratitude 2019

By: *Claire Bainer*

Each year I give thanks to the many, many people who have worked to support and sustain the quality of life here at BlueSkies for Children: for the staff, the families and the children we all so dearly love. Like all things in the world, we exist in the symbiotic relationship of all that is. We are in so many ways able to be who we are and do what we do because we are loved and cared for and supported. As my transition to retirement draws closer (September 2021), the true meaning of sustainability looms large in my mind and in the minds of the leadership of the school community. We all love this hidden gem in the heart of Oakland and want to see it going strong, giving and loving children and their young families for many years to come.

The school is what it is for many reasons. It was founded and created on love -- the love for young children, the most vulnerable of our citizens and those whose voice is totally dependent on the altruism of the adults in our society.

This school was also founded on and dedicated to the delight of a job well done. We are and always have been dedicated to doing the best we could possibly do, using our best thinking for the children in our care. In doing this we have had to be intellectually curious about many fields so we could incorporate the best, most current ideas and research while standing firm in tried and true practice that blends structure with play, allowing for the best practices in early learning.

BlueSkies for Children is steeped in a philosophy and belief that clear and strong internal systems, both administratively and programmatically, create a strong, sustainable agency. These same systems make it easy for new leadership to pick right up where I leave off. In recent years and with the help of consultant Carolyn Godfry, we have been cross training administration and classroom leaders so they, too, can train and maintain incoming and existing staff and hold the basic tenets of the program while sustaining the philosophy.

BlueSkies is dedicated to creating a trusting, loving community of adults who stand up and are counted among those who value, protect and guide the organic, wholesome qualities of childhood; those who understand that through our relationships and support of one another we all do better. It is our busy, hard working parents, our loving, dedicated teachers, and our generous, devoted board that surround the children and the school, allowing us to be all that we can be to and for one another.

I am so grateful to the wonderful BlueSkies Board of Directors: Brooke Abola, Board President and Deputy City Attorney for the City & County of San Francisco; Murali Naidu, Vice President and Physician Executive; Lisa Freitas, Secretary and Family Law Attorney/Mediator; Bryan Quevedo, Treasurer and Policy & Program Analyst, Economic and Workforce Development for the City & County of San Francisco; Christa Edwards, Assistant Program Director for BlueSkies for Children; Rory Darrah, Early Childhood Education Leader;

### Upcoming Events

#### Tuesday, Dec 3

Parents for BlueSkies Community Meeting  
6:15 - 7:45 p.m.

#### Monday, Dec 23

BlueSkies closed for Staff In-Service Day

#### Tuesday, Dec 24 - Wednesday, Jan 1

BlueSkies Closed for the Winter Holidays, reopening Thursday, January 2nd

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## Holiday 2019, Cont...

Maggie Greenblatt, Regular Education Teacher & School Program Coordinator for UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital; Riana Hensel, Alumni of BlueSkies and Teacher at St Paul's Episcopal School; Barrie McClune, Graduate Student and Former Director of Stakeholder Engagement of Beloved California; Michael Shih, VP, Business Banking Sales Manager at U.S. Bank; Ceinwyn Valo Director, Strategic Partnerships for Kaiser Permanente; and Yvette White, Organizational Effectiveness Lead for Blend. This wonderful group of people helps me grapple with the challenges that come up and divine the future for BlueSkies. We would not be where we are without them.

I thank the extraordinary staff members of BlueSkies who are here 255 days a year, through thick and thin, sharing their lives and talents with all of us. We all bow down to our wonderful Program Director, Ameena, Assistant Program Director, Christa, and Operations Director, Julia; it is these three who measure the pulse of the school. I count on them to hold true to their integrity while always being thoughtful and caring as they make difficult decisions for the good of the school, and the children and families. A great shout of appreciation goes out to our wonderful office staff: Sue, TeLing, Kenji, and Romy; they graciously keep the tracks greased and everything flowing nicely. We thank the BlueSkies Head Teachers who make it all happen and work tirelessly for the beautiful children: Tiffany, Michelle, Danielle (filling in for Sandy in the Todds), Sally, Kiki and Rosalia. We couldn't live without our full time permanent subs: Claire, Jessie, Mu and Hilda. We thank the Kitchen and Housekeeping staff for keeping everyone well fed and the spaces clean. LaTasha and Michael keep us well-nourished while Maria, Ekwan, and Shwe keep our world here at BlueSkies clean and tidy. We thank the Hedco teachers for their thoughtful, caring work in their protected orbit of babies and toddlers: Maria V, Kea, Sandra, Paulina, Tianna, LaTeka, Samantha and Ki'erra. We thank the Nursery School teachers for staying one step ahead of those ever-changing children, creatively adjusting the environment to meet the children's needs as life ebbs and flows through and around their spaces: Andrea, Albina, Ben, Mimi, Dyana, Amy, Rebecca and our newest addition, Meseret.



We thank all the parents and alumni families who step up and continue to help BlueSkies. We give a shout out to those volunteers who share their expertise and enrich BlueSkies in so many ways, and especially those who chair the Parents for BlueSkies Community committee: Lauren, mom to Sally and Maddie and Macy, mom to Leo and Alta; we thank the the room parents who welcome new families and, last but not least, we thank each one of you for being the wonderful person that you are and sharing that with the school community. We all make a difference and we all count, the parents, the teachers, the grandparents, the cooks and housekeepers, and the office staff and administrators: we all bring our love for children into the school. We value each and every one of you as you share your children, and families, and lives with us, and wish you a season that is rich in love and caring.

Claire



## BlueSkies-isms

*Parents often hear their children using phrases that they suspect they learned at BlueSkies. Each month's "BlueSkies-ism" will include a phrase the teachers use all the time at BlueSkies, and some context to help you use the phrase at home too.*

*"I'm using it now; you can use it later."*

We don't encourage children to give away things they are using or to "share". Sharing comes later; before a child can share with generosity he must experience ownership, so at BlueSkies the rule is that an item or activity is yours until you are done. When you are done and put the toy back or leave the area, then someone else gets a turn to own it. Each child knows that no one is going to ask them to be done with a toy until they finish playing with it. (You wouldn't like someone to come up to you and take a book you are enjoying away from you and say you had to share it.) We want the children to know that we value and respect what they are learning and doing, and do not feel it would be kind or respectful to insist that they give away something they are working with and enjoying. On the other hand, we also want the children to communicate with each other and to respect others' wishes too – they will be encouraged to let the other child know when they are finished and it is his or her turn now.

## Staff out in December

The following staff will be on vacation this month:

- Kwan 12/2 - 12/12
- Albina 12/9 - 1/1
- TeLing 12/16-1/8



## Snapshot in the Todds

Observing in the Todds classroom, I have the opportunity to see four children having a snack. Today, I'm also watching a new hire as she begins her staff orientation. New teachers are carefully trained and given time to observe before they are put in the position of interacting with the children. This teacher will become a teacher in the Todds, so she is watching the children and getting to know them by watching their actions. She is also watching the teachers so she can model her behavior and language after theirs. Two children at the snack table finish their snack and, seeing the new teacher, ask her what she is doing. She smiles and responds, "I'm learning about your school" and she goes back to her notebook. The two finish eating, drop their cups and napkins in the bins close to her and brush past her as they get their jackets.

Another child, Laurie, pushes her chair back, ready to clear her place, but then realizes that the new teacher is seated only a few feet from the bin. She freezes, looking from the new hire to the teacher serving snack at the table and then back again at the stranger. The teacher asks "Are you worried to see someone new here, Laurie? Don't worry, she's just watching us." The teacher moves close to Laurie and the new hire looks hard at her notes so Laurie will feel safe enough to follow her routine. The teacher stays by her side as she comes to the trash can and then puts her jacket on. After her jacket is on, Laurie puts her head around the corner to peek at the new hire, who makes eye contact and smiles. In a moment Laurie pokes her head around the corner again, the new teacher says a gentle "peek". After a moment Laurie peeks again and the new hire says "peek a boo". Now when Laurie peeks she says "peek a boo" with a big smile. Soon she is ready to show how she can make her zipper go up and down. The new teacher returns to her orientation reading and observing in the hallway. Now, Megan gets up from the table and says "I'm worried" to the teacher. The teacher says "I wonder why you're worried?" Megan looks at her and then, without hesitation, puts her things in the trash and walks by the new teacher in the hallway to get her jacket. Watching out of the corner of her eye, the new teacher continues to pretend to read quietly.

Laurie and Megan are just two years old and have both been at BlueSkies since they were babies. They have both seen new people periodically in their classrooms. Their different reactions to a less-familiar person reflect their different temperaments. Laurie is at the cautious end of the "Approach to New Things" temperament scale (see Temperament Tools in the Parent Library). Her teacher knows that Laurie likes things to be predictable; she needs extra support when there are changes and that is especially true when a new person enters the room. Unknown people are especially unpredictable – they might talk to you, or come too close! So her teacher stands close to Laurie, lending her security, and helps provide language to describe Laurie's "worried" feeling. The new hire wants to show herself to be trustworthy so is quiet and unobtrusive. It is because she was quiet that Laurie decided to make a friendly overture toward her. Peek a boo play is familiar and the new teacher remembered that, like reading the same book over and over, the game demonstrates predictability. It helped Laurie realize that this new person was probably a safe person and that she could relax and get to know. Megan, on the other hand, is always game for a new experience. She is at the other end of the "Approach to new things" scale, and when she watched her teacher's support for Laurie being "worried", she thought maybe that was another new thing she should try out. So she said "I'm worried" to see if the teacher would also give her extra support; the teacher recognized that Megan was not worried at all, but just seeing what that new word was about. The teacher supports each child by treating them differently. As the cautious child learns that she will not be asked to go too far out of her comfort zone, she will learn to become more comfortable trying new things. And on another occasion, the High Approach child will learn that the teacher will rein her in, giving her security by knowing that she will not be allowed to get too far out on a limb – something the cautious child will rarely need. Each child will get better and better at managing her interactions with the world by receiving this individualized coaching from a teacher who is sensitive to her needs.

# Holiday Traditions

Parents and teachers are eager to share cultural traditions with children – sometimes so eager that children end up with lots of disassociated ideas floating in their heads which they try hard to assimilate into their construct of the world. I fondly remember a 5-year-old who'd heard the Christmas story at church drawing a picture of "Baby Jesus in his squad car clothes;" he had no idea what "swaddling clothes" were, but he loved playing policeman so he made the words fit into something he understood! Well-intentioned teachers can add to that confusion when they try to include every possible family tradition into preschool curriculum.

During the holidays, just like the rest of the year, effective and meaningful curriculum in the early childhood classroom originates in the children's interests. Holidays and celebrations provide sparkle in life, and we all have the "sparkle" in common even though the details may be different. With the goal of honoring each child's unique background, the teacher makes room to hear and respond to the children's perspectives, questions, and enthusiasms in the course of the day rather than impose her own. One child may share news about watching candles in the menorah ["You NEVER touch them"], while another opens doors on the advent calendar ["Just ONE every day"], and another has decorated a Christmas tree ["You have to be SO CAREFUL with ornaments"]. Each of these conversations provides a meaningful moment to expand the discussion of different ways families celebrate. Teachers can guide these conversations in the moment, respond appropriately to what the children are thinking about, and gently expand their picture of the world rather than insert abstract concepts which have no context in the young child's brain.

Note too how young children focus on the concrete manifestations of the holiday, and the limits that go with these activities for them. Holidays are full of exciting new things that they are forbidden to touch or explore, eliminating their primary modes of learning. One of the most wonderful opportunities teachers can provide is a chance to fool around with all those forbidden things. We can give them candles and candle holders to use in the doll house. We can give them boxes and used wrappings and ribbons to wrap and unwrap to their heart's content. These holiday-related activities do not necessarily promote one holiday or the other, but allow children to explore the things they are thinking about just like toy dishes and stoves let them play at cooking; one child may pretend to cook curry, another hamburgers, another plantains, reflecting what they see in their own homes.

The more we can help children make sense of the world, the better we are doing at our jobs. The day at child care can be an oasis of peace and constancy during the hubbub of the holidays, with teachers acknowledging holiday events at the children's developmental level, responding to their interests with play materials, and clarifying ideas as we do in all areas. We know that homes are the right places to learn one's family's culture, and that school is the right place to help children begin to fit the pieces of home and world together, while also learning from their friends that there are many wonderful ways that life can be celebrated.



## Stressed about the Holidays?

Find more helpful articles on the BlueSkies website, including tips about enjoying the holiday season with your young children: <http://blueskies4children.org/category/holidays/>