



## A NEW ERA FOR THE SOUTH SHORE YMCA NATURAL SCIENCE CENTER



As the construction of the new Nature Center Preschool progresses, the excitement about the future of the Science Center campus grows.

Founded in the 1960s, the Science Center has been a regional institution for more than six decades. Through the years it grew from nature-focused programs delivered out of retired school buses - Flora and Fauna – to a permanent home on Jacobs Lane in Norwell. Programmatically, the Science Center grew from basic environmental education to include first a nature-themed summer camp in the 1970s and then a first-of-its-kind in America nature-centered preschool.

The idea was simple, but effective. The founder, Norwell's William Gould Vinal, believed there should be one place on the South Shore where kids walked into the front door of a nature center in preparation for a journey that started once they stepped out the back door. The goal was complete immersion in the natural world of the forest, vernal pools, and other habitats of the South Shore.

It worked. More than six decades later kids attending Science Center programs expect to be muddy and to be outdoors when it rains. They hope to see salamanders, toads, and frogs, and they marvel at turtles. They can explain words like vermicomposting better than most adults, and they encourage their parents to recycle at home. They embrace sustainability. They leave each day believing in conserving the environment.

In 2011, the Science Center merged with the South Shore YMCA, entering a new phase of its life. Empowered by the Y's robust financial assistance program, the Science Center became positioned to welcome even more youths to the wonders of nature education.

The Y was prepared to expand on that dream even further with four new classrooms being a targeted goal of the 2019 Leave Your Mark capital campaign but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Programming at the Science Center thrived after the initial scare, as outdoor education naturally lent itself to social distancing. When preschool



enrollment skyrocketed, it soon claimed the entirety of the old building; every room in the historic Science Center building became a classroom. The STEM education program simmered, while preschool and summer camp happily grew.

In the waning days of the winter of 2023-2024, the new building finally began to take shape. So, too, did the future of the Science Center, soon to be led by a trio of talented women in important roles: Preschool Director, Summer Camp Director, and a new Science Center Director.

“It’s been exciting to watch the new building come together,” said Jessica Hagen, Director of the Nature Center Preschool. Hagen, who is now finishing her second school



year in charge of the preschool, is accepting the challenge of reshaping the school’s physical spaces. While the building will be a central component of the school, the model is built on kids being outdoors as much as possible. “Each class has two defined areas, indoor and outdoor classrooms,” she said. “Each one is instrumental to the Nature Center Preschool process.” Preschoolers use these spaces as base camps from which they can explore the rest of the Science Center habitats, in sunshine, rain and snow.

Teacher Rachel Bond, often at the head of those explorations, has deep roots at the school. Her grandfather, Jon Bond, served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Science Center prior to its merger with the YMCA. She now works in the classroom as a teacher, cares for the Science Center’s animals and this year will serve as Director of the Nature Adventures Summer Day Camp. Her family history dovetails with those of other multigenerational families at the Science Center.

“We have parents of today’s students who came to preschool here 25 years ago,” she said. The same can be said of summer camp, a program that is also poised to expand, thanks to the new building. “It’s so wonderful,” she said. “The more kiddos we can excite about nature through our programs, the better.”

As the site’s animal care coordinator, Bond ensures interactions between the students and campers and the Center’s wildlife – both captive and naturally roaming the grounds – are safe and educational. Youths meet painted turtles, spotted turtles, a Great Horned Owl and a Red-tailed Hawk and get to know more about them throughout the year. They learn to respect wildlife and give it the space it needs to thrive.

With the Nature Center Preschool moving into its new building, the question naturally arises about the future of the historic Science Center building.

“It’s going to be a blank slate,” said Sarah Kugel, the Science Center’s new Director. “We will have a lot of spaces, indoors and outdoors, to rethink as we build the next generation of family programming at the Science Center.” Programs will begin this fall in conjunction with the opening of the new preschool building.

“We see the future of the Science Center harnessing a lot of its past, with the center being a gathering place where families can learn about nature together, whether that’s through a live animal show, a self-guided nature walk or an event like Maple Day or Cranberry Day,” said Kugel. “Nature is always transforming around us, and so, too, will our programs.”

No matter what shape those programs take, the founders’ mission remains the focal point. From day one, the goal of nature immersion has remained strong. From preschool to summer camp to lifelong family education experiences, the South Shore YMCA Natural Science Center is preparing to welcome the next generation of the South Shore’s environmental stewards.

