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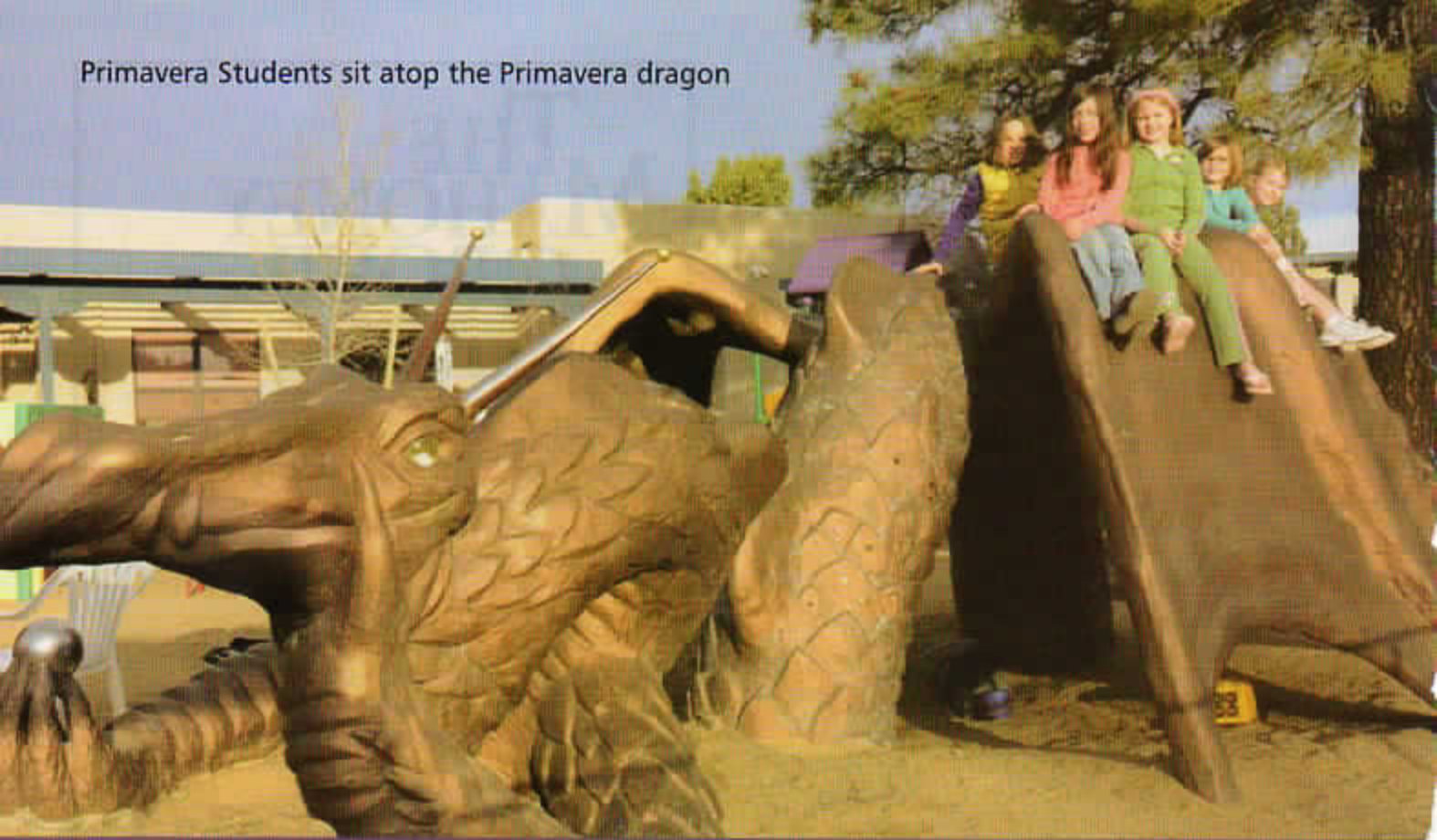
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Carol Darrow
Teaching the Whole Child

Primavera Students sit atop the Primavera dragon



Primavera School Thrives with strong leadership, community support

By Susan Hampton

The power of community was a guiding philosophy of Primavera School in 1972, and 37 years later, the veteran private school nestled in the thickets of Prescott's Copper Basin still thrives on that theory.

Led by Carol Darrow, school director for 18 years, the staff and teaching team at Primavera are a small but dedicated cadre. Strong teachers with varied backgrounds, a small classroom environment, parent involvement and community support are just a few of the founding principles of Primavera School that have endured the decades.

Back in 1972, Primavera was as raw as the country that surrounded it. The 16-acre parcel and its buildings were a

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**Rebecca Ruffner,
Primavera founder**

former goat farm – the ideal organic start for founder Rebecca Ruffner's vision of a different learning model for young children.

"I wanted to create a program where all young children could be successful learners, and teaching was based on new understanding of a hands-on, participatory learning process, not the old Greek model of pouring information into the mind," Ruffner explained.

Ruffner procured the land through a donation from philanthropist Cynthia Earl and opened the doors to 20 students, ages 5-8. The premise was classroom as community, where students learn from interaction with each other, their environment and their teachers. The close relationship built among the students and their teachers would be key

to their lifelong success.

Ruffner's ideals held ground as the school persevered through its first decade of growth. "We were fortunate to have a handful of committed parents and board members to see us through the lean times and guide us toward sustainability," Ruffner said. "I am sure many people were skeptical of our staying power, as most schools which were started outside the public system at that time were folding within a year or two."

After Ruffner retired as director in 1982, the school went through an era of change and uncertainty. A nonprofit school that relied on private funding, the community, and tuition for financial support, Primavera struggled through many years of fiscal instability. But it emerged whole under the leadership of a new director in 1990, Carol Darrow, formerly Primavera's pre-kindergarten teacher.

Darrow had significant obstacles to overcome. Besides budget shortfalls, the school had a growing need for facility improvements to keep pace with growing enrollments, while maintaining the trust and support of the Prescott population who still viewed Primavera, albeit fondly, as the "hippie" school. Darrow steered the school through by holding to the code established by Ruffner: focus on the whole child, involve the parents and build an authentic school community.

"Carol Darrow deserves all the credit for keeping the doors open and growing the program and the campus to its current



Carol Darrow, director, with a Primavera student.

"[Carol] started as a pre-kindergarten teacher, but she has carried the vision forward for over 20 years now!"

**Rebecca Ruffner,
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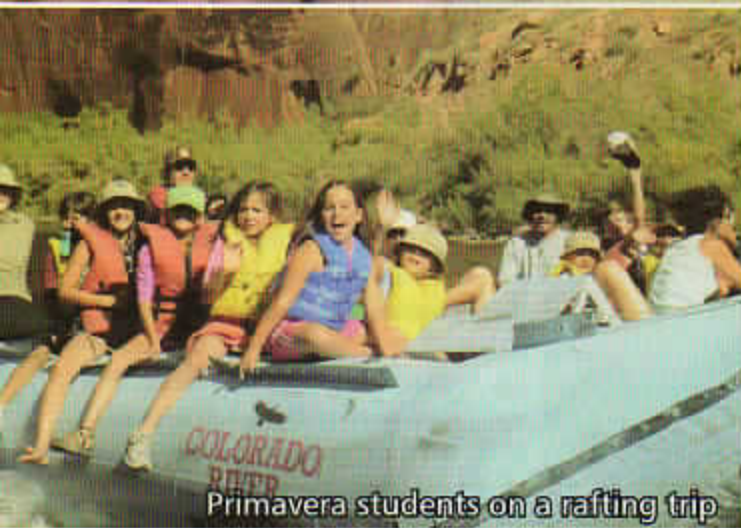
Today, a strong fundraising program includes the annual Primavera auction, wine tastings, a golf tournament, and sales, such as the third graders' recent bake sale that netted \$500 in one day. Gifts, along with tuition from a robust student body, support Primavera's ongoing operations. The current capital campaign is seeking funds to complete the construction of a multi-purpose "Field of Dreams" that will enable Darrow to grow the Intersession program and expand the physical education offerings. Donors can have a brick placed in the walkway and engraved with their child's name for a \$180 donation.

Pam Brown, the school's most veteran member, joined the Primavera community as a parent and teacher in the mid-1970s, and today teaches 5th grade and French. Her son, Jason, graduated from Primavera in 1979. "At the time it was the only school we found that addressed our needs for Jason to be treated as a complete person, not just as young child to be 'educated,'" Brown said. She still stays in touch with many former students. "They all remember so many diverse things from their time at Primavera, but I would say that one of the main memories for most of them is the teachers. It is a constant thread that runs through their conversations. Teachers are so powerful in young people's lives."

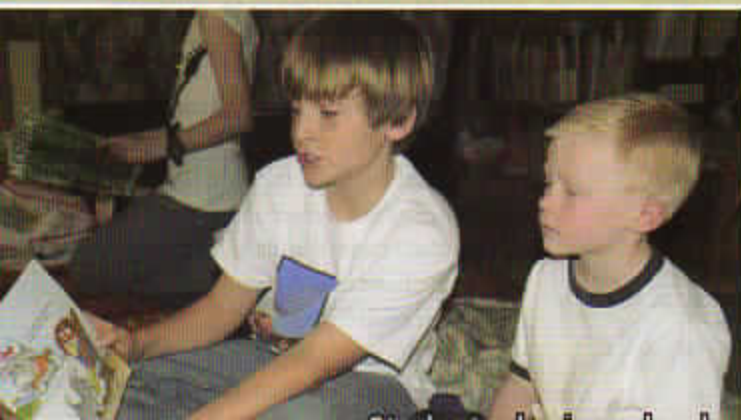
Currently, the school serves 130 students in preschool through fifth grade



A Primavera student fingerpainting



Primavera students on a rafting trip



"Primavera has high academic standards and my children have benefited from the small teacher-to-child ratio. In addition, Primavera has provided music, foreign language, art and physical education. These programs are always in danger of being cut in the public schools."

**- Michelle Beck,
Primavera board member & parent**

dents. The small class size allows individualized instruction and flexibility to adapt to each child's unique learning style. The format also allows the teachers to "teach to their strengths," a facet Darrow said contributes to the school's "whole child" premise.

"Educating the whole child means promoting emotional and physical well-being as well as creativity and critical thinking," Darrow said. "Education must include more than the basics to ensure a deservedly brighter future for our children."

The success of Primavera students is not measured by state-mandated standardized tests. Rather, the children receive evaluations based on direct observation, standards-based benchmarks, and authentic assessments based on real-world experiences, Darrow said.

Primavera parent and Board president Michelle Beck has two boys, Elliot and Henry, who have attended Primavera for six years. "Primavera has high academic standards and my children have benefited from the small teacher-to-child ratio," Beck said. "In addition, Primavera has provided music, foreign language, art and physical education. These programs are always in danger of being cut in the public schools."

Primavera incorporates as many of the local resources as possible in its studies, including trips to Heritage Park Zoo, Highlands Center for Natural History, Yavapai College, Mingus Springs Camp, Prescott Fine Arts and many others. Elementary school students also travel to Phoenix for Arizona Science Center exhibits and, in third and fourth grades, river rafting on the Colorado River and Catalina Island in California. This year, they hosted their first school science fair as the teachers work to incorporate more science study into the curriculum. French, Spanish, music, art, computers and physical education are a part of every student's experience from Kindergarten on.

While Primavera students get an elite education, it's not one reserved for an elite population. This year, 50 percent of the students receive financial aid from

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Students catch up on some reading



Students enjoying a day in the pool



Carol Darrow, Primavera Director

“Educating the whole child means promoting emotional and physical well-being as well as creativity and critical thinking.”

-Carol Darrow

the school in the form of partial tuition waivers, with funds raised through the Arizona State Tax Credit program and awarded to students by the Orme Primavera Schools Foundation. Scholarships are awarded based on need, merit and family circumstances. Tuition for K-5 students is \$450 a month, plus a \$350 annual activity fee – a real value compared to comparable schools in

Phoenix where tuitions can reach over \$1000 a month.

Though the philosophy lives on, it's a long journey from being the alternative school in town to delivering on a promise of a high quality, private school education that prepares students to be life-long learners. But Darrow and her staff deliver consistently on that pledge.

For information about enrollment and scholarship opportunities at Primavera, call Carol Darrow, (928)445-5382. You can also visit their new web site, www.primaveraschool.org.