

# Building upon success at North Shore Synagogue

*Shariee Calderone*

**Location:** North Shore Synagogue in Syosset

**Setting:** A small space wedged between four walls connected to the synagogue and the school.

**Leaders:** Barbara Flack, NS Director, Tara and Allison, Educators.

Walking through the glass doors leading into the alleyway outdoor classroom I'm completely overtaken by the high level of energy and enthusiasm. In the small space are 14 or so children sitting, squatting, reaching, doing, pondering and peering. Not only were the *children* fully engaged but so too were Barbara and the other educators as they happily let the children be, well children.

As I snapped pictures and heard secondhand stories of the teachable moments that happen in their outdoor classroom each day – even in winter when painting the snow is a favorite activity – I had the chance to ask Barbara and Tara about the evolution of their classroom, and what they were eager to share with me from this past year. Considering North Shore Synagogue holds the distinction of being one of the first Synagogue-based preschool settings on Long Island to create an intentional outdoor classroom, I thought it would be interesting to learn, what's next. Below is just some of what I witnessed during my tour, and at the end of the photos read a few snippets and observations from my conversation with Barbara, Tara and Allison.



CONCENTRATION: THIS LITTLE GIRL WAS SPYING THE THREE PIECES OF STACKED WOOD IN THE LOWER RIGHT CORNER OF THIS PICTURE AND WAS SEARCHING FOR JUST THE RIGHT PIECE TO COMPLETE HER OWN WORK OF ART.



COOPERATION: THESE TWO BOYS NOTICED THAT THE WATER IN THE LITTLE GIRL'S BUCKET WAS RUNNING LOW SO THEY WENT AND FETCHED MORE WATER FOR HER. WHILE DOING THIS THEY LEARNED THAT THE BIGGER BUCKET CARRIES SIGNIFICANTLY MORE WATER THAN THE ONE THEY WERE FILLING UP



LEARNING BY EXAMPLE: THE LITTLE GIRL IN THE BACKGROUND BY THE FENCE HAS LEARNED THAT THE BEST WAY TO GET WATER OUT OF A RAIN CONTAINER RUNNING LOW IS TO TILT IT EVER SO SLOWLY. THE RESULT, A BIT MORE WATER JUST WHEN YOU NEED IT!



INDEPENDENT PLAY: ALTHOUGH THE SPACE MAY SEEM SMALL AT FIRST GLANCE, IT DOESN'T PREVENT CHILDREN FROM FINDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS. THIS LITTLE BOY TRIED SEVERAL TIMES TO GET HIS TOWER BALANCED JUST RIGHT.



GROUP WORK: HOW MANY HANDS DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE THE PERFECT MUD PIE? SEEMS LIKE IT'S A JOB FOR AT LEAST 4 CHILDREN IN A CLASS THAT VALUES AN ALL-HANDS-ON-DECK APPROACH FOR IMPORTANT PROJECTS.



ENCOURAGEMENT: TARA KNOWS WHEN HER STUDENTS MAY NEED A LITTLE EXTRA MOTIVATION. BECAUSE HER STUDENTS ARE LESS ANXIOUS OUTDOORS AND ENGAGED IN CREATIVE ENDEAVORS, SHE SEES THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY TO HELP ONE OF HER STUDENTS SEE HOW HIS WATER CREATIONS QUICKLY FADE AWAY IN THE RISING TEMPERATURES.



DISCOVERY: "YOU HAVE TO CRUSH IT AND SMELL IT" REPEATS THIS LITTLE BOY OVER AND OVER. FINDING ROSEMARY IN THE GARDEN, HE QUICKLY LETS EVERYONE KNOW THAT THE SECRET TO SMELLING THE "LEMONY" SCENT IS TO "CRUSH IT AND SMELL IT"! OF COURSE!



NOTICING: FINALLY, I WITNESSED AN ACTUAL SHEHECHEYANU MOMENT WHEN THE LITTLE BOY TO THE LEFT OF TARA FOUND THE FIRST LADY BUG OF THE SEASON. TARA DIDN'T PAUSE FOR A MOMENT BEFORE SHOUTING, "IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT" AND BECKONED EVERYONE TO COME AROUND TO SEE AND BE WOWED.

#### SOME FEATURES INCORPORATED INTO THE SPACE:

- Rain barrel bungeed to the fence gives children free access to water play
- Old colorful rain boots with pansies planted inside decorate the space
- Low planting boxes with herbs and flowers
- A year-old grape vine to help make Shabbat celebrations more experiential
- Tin pans mounted onto the fence for a music area
- Wood blocks, tree rounds, shovels and buckets
- A raised wooden staging area with a pole for a curtain

When Barbara and I walk around the corner towards the east wall of the school she excitedly shows me the 7 brand new raised beds that have just been built. Appreciative of the dedication and support that she receives from the Parent Association, who made the new beds possible, Barbara describes the different vegetables that will be planted this Wednesday: tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, squash, string beans, broccoli.

#### IDEAS GENERATED AS WE TALKED:

- Finding ways to document the learning that takes places in the outdoor classroom including involving parents who might be interested in be an “observer reporter”. Take pictures and post to FB or be added to a weekly reflection.
- Adding climbing bean archways between the beds, over the doorways (but not blocking them for safety reasons)
- Adding another sound feature near the water, maybe something inspired by Japanese gardens where children can stream water and create different sounds

*Barbara Flack is the Director of the Nursery School at North Shore Synagogue. For more information on her outdoor classroom, she can be reached at [bflack@northshoresynagogue.org](mailto:bflack@northshoresynagogue.org)*