

BELVEDERE NURSERY SCHOOL

By Susan Cluff

Belvedere Nursery School began as a WPA project in 1939, making it the oldest nursery school in Southern Marin. It was started by a determined group of mothers led by Audrey Rey who urged City Council to apply for a WPA nursery school grant. When they were denied, they insisted that a City-wide election be held to decide the issue and won. The first nursery school with about 30 children opened at the City library in a back room of the Belvedere Land Company building on Beach Road.

The nursery school concept originated in England in the 1920s – it was for "nurturing" young children, encouraging them to learn through active play, drama, art, and outdoor activities with an emphasis on creativity and imagination. During the Depression when many public schools had to close or cut back on classes and activities, the WPA funded local nursery schools to give work to unemployed teachers. Parent education, good health and hygiene were also part of the program.

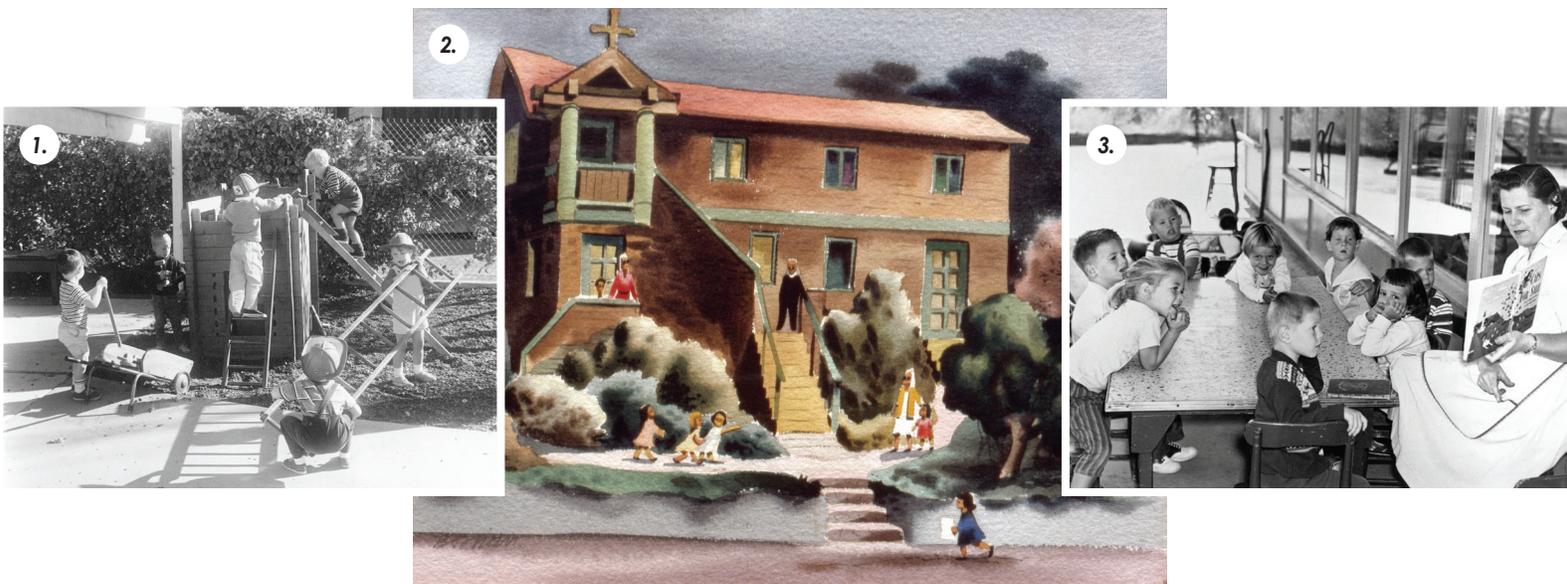
With the onset of World War II, nursery schools became more and more important as men and women working in the defense industries needed care for their children and wartime mothers pursued volunteer activities like Red Cross training, nutrition and home nursing courses. When federal funding ran out in 1944, Belvedere Nursery school became an independent parent cooperative with local mothers and grandmothers acting as assistant teachers.

The school moved to temporary quarters in the Sunday School rooms of the original St. Stephen's Church on Acacia Avenue in Belvedere. A site was then found at the City limits near where the Boardwalk Shopping Center is now and plans drawn up for a one-room rectangular building. After several years of vigorous fundraising - barn dances, game nights and rummage sales - the school building was built in 1950 with the help of parent volunteers. Subsequent additions were made about every five years until it was redesigned and remodeled in 1970.

In 1953, the school became a non-profit corporation with professionally-trained staff and a Board of Directors. By 1955, 90 students were enrolled with both morning and afternoon classes. In 1968, the Hawthorne Nursery School was created at the Community Congregational Church on Rock Hill Drive, becoming a Pre-Kindergarten program in 1969. Today, Belvedere-Hawthorne Nursery School's reputation is well known throughout Marin County and can count two and even three generations among its students.

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"The Tradition Starts With You."



1. Kids at Play, 1965.

2. From 1944-50, Belvedere Nursery School had temporary quarters at the original St. Stephen's Church on Acacia (watercolor by Bob Bastian).

3. Director Barbara Ryall leads story time. The first professional teacher hired in 1953, she retired in 1982.

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