



Sandi Dexter, author of *Joyful Play with Toddlers*, is an occasional television guest and was recently recognized for her teaching.

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# Preschool honors longtime teacher

By JAMES BUSH

It's snack time at the Wedgwood Cooperative Preschool. Sit yourself down and have a bite of ... sushi?

Yes, sushi. Today is Thursday and the last day of the class unit on Japan. It's also the final day of Toby Jay's special week, so his dad, Nelson, and mom, Tiffany, are leading the sushi-making effort.

"I lived in Japan for two and a half years and became a big fan of Japanese food," says Nelson. He notes that many class members, who range in age from three to five years old, haven't yet picked up the stigma of eating uncooked fish, or the fear of trying new foods. (As a backup, sushi containing just rice and a few vegetables, and rice balls are also available to the snacking students.)

It's yet another journey for Sandi Dexter's students, although technically, they've never left their classroom in the basement of Wedgwood's Faith Lutheran Church. A table holds class members' "passports," with a rubber stamp on each page symbolizing the exotic places they've sampled as members of Sandi's class. It's not always an international lesson: earlier this school year, Michigan and Colorado got their turn along with France and Israel.

Studying other places and celebrating students' special weeks are two of the many traditions Sandi has helped

establish during her 20-plus years at Wedgwood Cooperative Preschool. Pressed into service as a substitute when the regular teacher was marooned in Yakima by the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens, Sandi took over the preschool's toddler group (one and two year olds) in 1983. She also taught the "Pre-Threes" (ages two- to three-years-old) for a few years before taking on the three- to-five-year-old group, the oldest of the preschool's three age groups, some 15 years ago. She was honored for her 20 years of service to the school in an April 26 ceremony, which included the presentation of an apple tree, which is planted on the grounds of the church.

A "special week," for those who might be wondering, is Wedgwood's version of a very long birthday, says Sandi. As celebrating student's actual birthdays could be complicated by the calendar (multiple students can have similar or identical birthdays, birthdays can fall on weekends, and some students' birthdays fall during the summer months), the special week format allows

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for an even division of group attention among class members. (The Wednesday of your special week is the date of your Wedgwood “birthday” celebration.)

These week-long examinations of other lands coincide with students’ “special weeks.” For instance, given his Dad’s experience living in Japan, a unit on that country was a natural focus during Toby’s special week. Sandi, who traveled to Japan for two weeks with her son’s dance company, and has hosted several Japanese exchange students in her family home, was more than qualified to help out.

Even as the sushi is being made, students are all over the basement classroom. Some are working to assemble bags of bath salts as Mother’s Day gifts. Others are playing with blocks or listening to stories read by volunteer “Library Larry.” As a cooperative preschool, at least five parents or adult volunteers are in attendance each school day, giving Sandi (or “Teacher Sandi,” as she is known by her young charges) the opportunity to flit from group to group or give kids special attention.

One corner of the classroom is reserved for non-directed activities: the so-called “Light Bulb Lab,” features paper, pens, and scissors. Even as Sandi is explaining the purpose of the lab, a trio of boys arrive with the brainstorm of making a pirate hat for Mitsu,

the class mascot (a well-loved stuffed mouse). That’s a great idea, says Sandi.

Many parts of the two-and-a-half hour-long classes used to be spent outside in good weather, but Sandi says she generally keeps the kids inside so they can get into deep play. “That’s so important to get beyond that typical play with something and get deeper into it,” she says.

She knows what she’s talking about. Sandi is the author of the book, “Joyful Play With Toddlers: Recipes for Fun with Odds and Ends,” has taught many workshops and has appeared several times on National Public Radio’s “The Parents Journal” (a program which unfortunately isn’t carried on the Seattle NPR affiliate).

Sandi and husband, Bob, have lived in Seattle since 1967 (minus a couple years for Bob’s Army service) and have two children, Kate Clemens, 30, and Neil Dexter, 27, a former Wedgwood Cooperative Preschool student.

While she enjoys carrying on the preschool’s traditions, there is one thing she would like to change. She’d prefer to see it renamed “Wedgwood Community School” in recognition of the program’s success. “There’s nothing ‘pre’ about it, this is a school,” she says. “Kids are learning here.”

**For more information about Sandi Dexter or her book *Joyful Play with Toddlers*, please see [www.ParentingPress.com](http://www.ParentingPress.com) or call (800) 992-6657.**