



Go Ahead... Make a Mess

By
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*A creative approach
to children's art yields
a business model.*

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ORE THAN ELEVEN YEARS AGO, WHEN DONNA BERNSTEIN BEGAN RESEARCHING art classes for her toddler son, Corey, she quickly grew frustrated. "I couldn't find a program that shared the same vision I had," says the Millburn resident. "I saw the artwork that my friends' older children were doing in preschool and knew that something was missing." Bernstein, 45, holds degrees in elementary and special education, and felt that the art classes she found were using the wrong approach. They were "product driven versus process," she says.

"A child is told to draw a jack-o'-lantern, the teacher says the eyes go here, the mouth goes there. Inevitably, the child wants to put the eyes on the bottom and mouth on top and the project comes out 'wrong.' The adults want to see a beautiful piece, but a 2-year-old doesn't care," says Bernstein. She wasn't concerned with those aesthetics either; she wanted a class where children are allowed to find their own muse.

So, in March 1999, Bernstein rented a room in St. Stephen's Church in Millburn. Then she put together a pamphlet outlining what she had in mind: a class where kids would play with shaving cream, or goop, where they would create collages and paintings, and discover their own creativity. She mailed the pamphlet to all her friends and neighbors. Within days, the class was filled, and the Messy Artist (themessyartist.com) was born.

"I offered a one-hour art class, once a week, with twelve kids who were around 2 years old," Bernstein says. Parents were drawn to Bernstein's



Art for art's sake: From top, Henry is at work at one easel, while studio owner Donna Bernstein and Mia collaborate at another; the project station, where collages are made; Henry masters shaving cream; a free-form painting in progress.

Photographed by DAVID MAGER. Makeup by SUSAN BARBAGLIA owner of SKIN DEEP DAY SPA, New Providence, NJ

Mom 2.0

philosophy and a few months later she added another class. "I wanted to give the children tools such as glue or finger paints and let them create whatever they wanted. I wanted to offer a multi-sensory experience." While the children seemed to naturally adapt to Bernstein's plan, she did face some challenges...from the parents. "We follow a hands-off policy. The adults are asked not to touch or intervene. I feel this really builds [the child's] self-esteem and confidence. Some of the adults seem to have trouble following that rule," she says.

Bernstein taught in the rented room for a year and a half. During this time, she met Kelly Heinze, a mom of four.

"I heard about Donna from a friend. I took my first child to her class when he was 2," says Heinze, who was also juggling motherhood and her own business—a music-based program called Music Together with teaching principles similar to Bernstein's.

The two quickly became friends and decided to partner in a shared space in South Orange. "I offered the Messy Artist classes on Mondays and Tuesdays. Kelly taught Music Together the rest of the week. Parents began requesting weekend birthday parties, so I began offering those as well," Bernstein says. Five years later, the pair expanded to create the Kaleidoscope Center for the Arts, which has room for each of them to operate their growing programs full-time.

Bernstein now employs eleven teachers, and includes children up to age 11. She's currently offering 27 classes, with about 200 children in each ten-week session. "Even though my business has grown substantially, I have always main-

tained the same philosophy—children learn best through play [that allows them] to use fine-motor skills and even gross-motor skills. They have no idea they are learning."

The Messy Artist's colorful classrooms are set up with five different stations. The easel station is full of paints, markers, and crayons. At the sensory box station, items such as colored rice, beans, or oatmeal are available. The PlayDoh station and the messy station involve slime, finger paints, or even colored, cooked spaghetti. And take-home projects such as collages are done at the project station. The children can select the colors and materials they'll use for their artwork and are allowed to stay at each station for as long (or short) a time as they wish.

Shari Nolan, a South Orange mom of two young boys, is a huge fan. "Caleb actually begs me to sign him up for these classes. He literally prefers it to baseball," says Nolan of her 6-year-old.

For the younger artists, the focus is on fun and exploration. "For this age, we offer paint, glue, and markers," says Bernstein. As the kids get older, the class structure begins to change. Three-year-olds begin to learn about color mixing and primary and complementary colors. The 4- and 5-year-olds learn about storybook art, famous artists, and illustrators. School-age children are taught beginner fine-art techniques such as symmetry and

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST:
Donna Bernstein, with son
Corey, 13, who inspired her
to launch the studio.



still-life drawing. Bernstein continually adds new classes to her roster. This past fall she launched Art Around the World, a class for first through fourth graders that focuses on art history and culture.

The Messy Artist has been as successful for Bernstein's home life as it has as a business venture. "I never had to rely on childcare. When I began the Messy Artist, I only offered classes during the times when my son was in preschool. I felt it was really important for me to be home with him so I made my schedule around his," she says. She answered e-mails and returned phone calls from home and managed the paperwork at night.

Bernstein's husband, Ed, a computer software analyst, has been a huge support. "He's the Messy Artist's handyman. Whenever something needs fixing, he's the one who does it."

Now, with a 13-year-old son at school all day, Bernstein has much more time to devote to her business, which recently opened a Westfield location.

One of Bernstein's greatest rewards has been instilling a love of art in her students. "I had a special-needs child, who attended my classes before moving to Texas. I recently received an e-mail from his new school. The special-ed coordinator was interested in learning more about my curriculum because this child enjoyed art, and his mom directly attributed it to my class," Bernstein says with a huge smile. ☺



THE ART OF PLAY

"I wanted to give children tools such as glue or finger paints and let them create whatever they wanted." —DONNA BERNSTEIN

The philosophy of the Messy Artist art studio for kids is to focus on sensory exploration, rather than outcomes. The wide roster of classes serve ages 18 months to 11 years old, and includes vacation workshops (based on the South Orange/Maplewood school schedule).

**60 Valley Street (rear entrance), South Orange.
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