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Community Roots Academy Celebrates 10 Years in Laguna Niguel

CREATING A NEW PARADIGM IN PRESCHOOL THROUGH EIGHTH GRADE EDUCATION

ARTICLE BY DAN PITTMAN

What began as the seed of an idea for a new kind of public charter school shared by two dedicated educators who believed that students could learn by doing as they actively explored complex real-world problems and challenges around them, has in just 10 years blossomed into a full-fledged learning community, **Community Roots Academy (CRA)**.

As a public charter school, CRA provides a tuition-free educational choice for parents with students in kindergarten through eighth grade who choose to have their children educated in an innovative learning environment. While the Capistrano Unified School District is CRA's charter authorizer the school is governed by its own dedicated board of trustees.

Under the visionary leadership of co-founders, Executive Director of Operations and Resource Development Eve Fine and Executive Director of Education Jeremy Cavallaro, CRA has evolved into an innovative and close-knit charter school located at 29292 Crown Valley Pkwy in Laguna Niguel.

The pair was well prepared academically. Jeremy completed Harvard University's Principal's Institute. He earned his master's degree in Educational Leadership at New York City's exclusive Bank Street College. He is a doctoral degree candidate at the University of La Verne. Eve holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree from UCLA and a master's degree in Education Leadership from

Hebrew Union College. Both worked in elementary education before joining forces.

As they labored to design what kind of school CRA would become, Eve and Jeremy determined that project-based learning would be at the center of this model learning community. There would also be a complementary emphasis placed on the mastery of fundamental academic skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, initiative, effective communications, adaptability, evaluating information and imagination.

Semester-long projects are now used as frameworks to simultaneously teach students multiple, fundamental disciplines and essential 21st Century skills. At CRA, students learn by doing as they actively explore complex real-world problems and challenges that promote environmental awareness and stewardship.

Over the past 10 years, CRA students have advocated for endangered species, raised awareness of local water pollution and health concerns, designed, and operated a pop-up restaurant and an eco-friendly student store. They have created art galleries, designed, and installed a rainwater catchment system at school, published books, created short films, and even sent a vessel into outer space.

Throughout these projects, they have developed deep connections to the academic content, discovered the power of their voices, and ultimately inspired change.

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They have become independent thinkers, responsible citizens and active community members who understand the connections between academic disciplines and their practical applications in the real world.

CRA also values and promotes the arts. Over the last 10 years, a robust performing arts program has been developed. An award-winning orchestra with opportunities for beginners and advanced players has been established. In addition, the school also sponsors a full-scale after-school musical each semester for interested students. CRA offers a weekly visual arts course for elementary students and middle school students have the opportunity to continue their art education through the visual art electives.

Guiding students through their education at CRA depends upon the faculty members. Fortunately, they are well-educated, certified teaching professionals who are devoted to providing quality education to their students. They are driven first and foremost by their desire to help them to succeed and strive to create a tangible difference in their lives. The school's administrative staff also has a wealth of experience to draw upon.

Under the Learning Communities brand, Community Seedlings Preschool was established in accordance with the acclaimed Reggio Emilia philosophy of teaching, learning and advocacy for children that originated in Northern Italy. Educators at Community Seedlings' San Clemente campus have created a learning environment where children ages two and one-half to five years grow based upon their natural curiosity and innate ability to learn from experience.

CRA's Community Care Club (CCC) keeps students engaged and learning before and after school and during breaks. CCC's licensed program provides everything from engaging projects, enrichment clubs that teach art, science, sports, cooking, gardening, and technology skills to name a few, plus special events and field days, child-initiated discovery centers, playtime and homework assistance - all conducted on CRA's safe campus.



Co-founders Jeremy Cavallaro and Eve Fine