

F IS FOR FOREST: *A New Kind of Kindergarten*

BY HALLIE ANDERSON

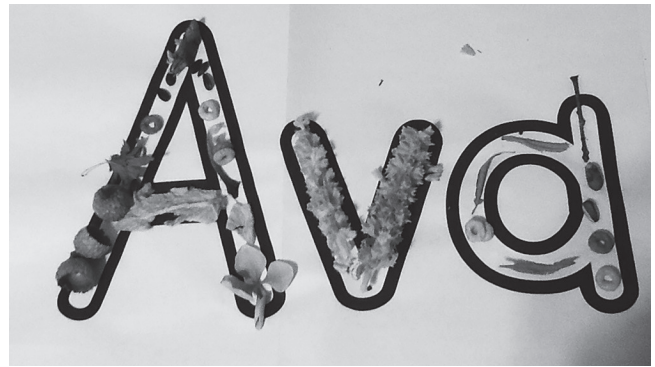
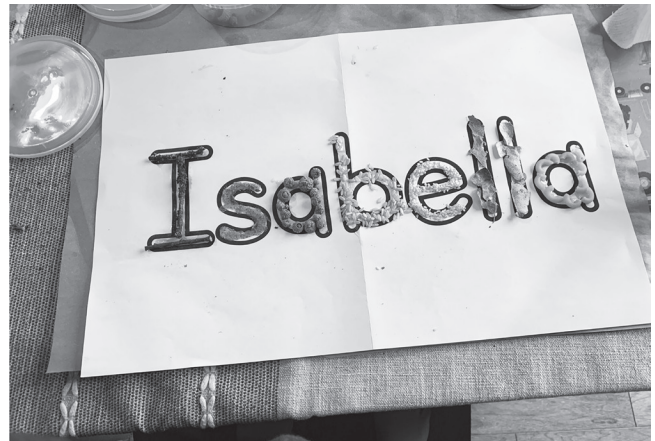
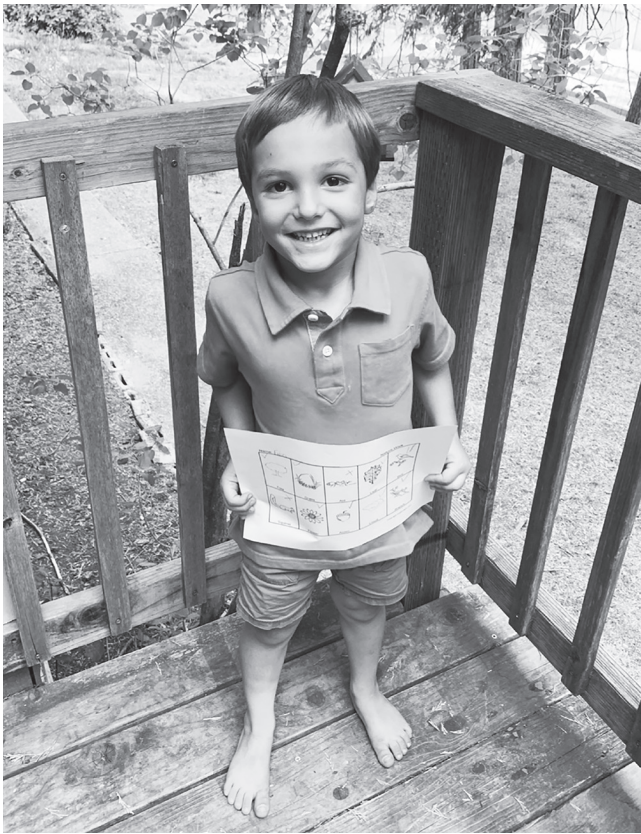
Laminated alphabet letters, plastic counting blocks, sticky desks and chairs, carpet stains, cluttered cubbies, noisy toys, and the smell of inky markers and waxy crayons. Most would recognize this kind of Kindergarten classroom anywhere. But a couple of Northern California Seventh-day Adventist schools have been offering a new kind of Kindergarten class that, quite literally, is a breath of fresh air: Forest Kindergarten.

The concept is fairly simple. Forest Kindergarteners spend every day of their school year outside, learning hands-on lessons from nature. They learn to dress for the weather as they experience seasons and explore the world around them in these early years of life. While the concept is new to Seventh-day Adventist school staff, students, and their families, Forest Kindergarten has been offered throughout the world for decades, with origins in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany dating back to the 1950s.

Redwood Adventist Academy (RAA), located in Santa Rosa, California, and Pine Hills Adventist Academy (PHAA) in Auburn, California, are two schools currently offering Forest Kindergarten programs in the Pacific Union Conference.



“Pine Hills Forest Kindergarten promotes a nature-immersion education, inviting the integration of literacy and mathematics into the students’ discoveries in the forest,” the PHAA website states. “Follow-up lessons and



activities that connect to what the children have discovered during their nature explorations are used to enrich and enhance their outdoor learning.”¹

PHAA sits on ten acres of land and RAA on twenty-two acres. This is PHAA’s first year offering Forest Kindergarten, while RAA begins its second. Esther Nanasi teaches ten Forest Kindergarteners for PHAA and Steven VandeVere has welcomed nine students to his class this year.

VandeVere explains that he was first introduced to the teaching style at Lester Coon Adventist School in Apison, Tennessee, when he attended Southern Adventist University studying to be a teacher. He says that last school year was his first year introducing the concept to RAA. He believes this is yet another unique selling point for small Adventist schools, placing them in a niche that stands out among the many options parents have for their children today.

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Science also supports the value of Forest Kindergarten, further boosting its selling points. As referenced on RAA’s website, studies have shown that Forest Kindergarteners benefit from better social, communication, and concentration skills and are less likely to struggle with obesity and ADHD symptoms.²

“Our community is excited about it,” VandeVere shares.

Nanasi shares the same enthusiasm for PHAA’s Forest Kindergarten class, saying, “This has always been on my heart.”

She says that while the philosophy may look like just playing outside every day, it is interpreted as work and learning for children in that age group.

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While given the freedom of the outdoors, there is structure to a Forest Kindergartener’s day. PHAA offers a

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fully outdoor experience, while RAA has tried both fully outdoors and a hybrid of indoor and outdoor learning. Either way, students quickly find that Forest Kindergarten comes with longer hours than the typical half-day Kindergarten usually spend at school. At PHAA, a Forest Kindergarten's day begins at 8 a.m. and ends at 3:15 p.m. At RAA, the day begins at 8 a.m. and concludes at 2:45 p.m. In both instances, their time outside consists of walks, story time, and nature scavenger hunts, while also incorporating learning through music, art, and gardening.

“Curriculum is carefully and thoughtfully planned out based on observations and assessments of the children’s play, ideas, questions, and discoveries,” the PHAA website states. “Reading, writing, mathematics, arts, and language are incorporated into the daily happenings in the forest. Small teacher-child ratios allow one-on-one scaffolding to foster individual needs. Teachers strive to help each child meet the NAD (North American Division) as well as the California State standards.”

Both schools are also working to meet the expectations of their counties as the new school year has begun during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. RAA in Sonoma County is careful to follow social-distance guidelines and are exclusively outdoors. VandeVere planned to try more of a hybrid of indoor and outdoor learning for his class, but has adjusted the plan to fit within the county restrictions for the time being.

As for PHAA’s class, they have begun the year online through distance learning and are anxious to get out into their forest environment as a group. While the online school arrangement is not ideal for a curriculum designed to keep students off devices and outside of four walls,

Nanasi strives to keep their experience as nature-based as possible until they can meet together. She provides each student with projects that will take them outdoors into their yards, giving them opportunities to learn hands-on from home.

“I hope they will learn how to appreciate nature and find God through nature,” Nanasi shares.

Both schools in the Pacific Union Conference believe this is the exact intention of the program and find inspiration from Ellen White’s words in *Education*, p.100:

To the little child, not yet capable of learning from the printed page or of being introduced to the routine of the schoolroom, nature presents an unfailing source of instruction and delight . . . from the loftiest tree of the forest to the lichen that clings to the rock, from the boundless ocean to the tiniest shell on the shore, they may behold the image and superscription of God. (100)

Endnotes

1. <https://sites.google.com/phaaonline.com/pinehillsforestkindergarten/home>.
2. <https://www.weloveredwood.com/about#heading-40031>.



HALLIE ANDERSON is a freelance marketing and communications specialist based in the foothills of Northern California. After studying journalism and public relations, she graduated in 2017 from Walla Walla University where she found her passion for storytelling.