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ON THE COVER:
PHOTO BY XXXXX. XXXXXX.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

MIDPEN'S OPEN-SPACE PRESERVES OFFER NATURAL WONDERS

PHOTO BY SAIRA AHMED
Town Crier Editorial Intern

BY SAIRA AHMED
TOWN CRIER EDITORIAL INTERN

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District oversees 26 open-space preserves, all offering opportunities for people to venture into nature for a hike and to explore the scenery.

The preserves include a wide range of trails – from easy and flat paths to rigorous and steep ones. Cydney Bieber, Midpen's recently retired public affairs specialist, suggests that families – especially those with younger children – hike at Ravenswood, Skyline Ridge, Los Trancos and Rancho San Antonio preserves because they contain easier trails with flatter and sometimes paved paths.

Ravenswood

Located in East Palo Alto at the edge of the San Francisco Bay, visitors to Ravenswood will discover habitat unlike other Midpen preserves, Bieber said. The easy-access 2.1-mile-long San Francisco Bay Trail is mostly paved and follows the levee on the saltwater marsh, she added.

Ravenswood is a great location to see birds, Bieber noted, as it is one of the many wetlands along the Pacific Flyway, in which a variety of migrating birds travel through. Alongside migrating birds, hikers can see a number of local ones, including sandpipers, avocets, great blue herons, white pelicans and egrets, according to Bieber.

“It has a kind of hidden beauty to it. There’s a real unique beauty to the marshlands there.”

– CYDNEY BIBER

There are also raised boardwalks, overlooks and signs detailing the wetland habitat on the San Francisco Bay Trail. The trail is open to both cyclists and pedestrians.

King tides overtake the marsh at times in December and January; these are the highest tides of the year, Bieber explained.

She said the difference between low tide and high tide shapes a different experience depending on the time of day one visits.

“One of my favorite things about Ravenswood is that the preserve changes a couple of times a day,” Bieber said. “In low tide, you get these muddy channels that weave through the vegetation out in the marsh, >





and at high tide, the water comes in and it's all of these beautiful green waterways that you can see running out to the bay."

Bieber added that Ravenswood is her favorite of all of the Midpen preserves.

"It is so different from some of the other places that we've seen," she said. "It has a kind of hidden beauty to it. There's a real unique beauty to the marshlands there."

Skyline Ridge

Featuring multiple easy-access hikes on the edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Skyline Ridge in La Honda is another good place for families to visit, Bieber said. The

landscape includes Alpine Pond and the half-mile trail that surrounds it. That's where visitors can spot dragonflies, cattails and ducks, according to Bieber.

She recommended another hike around Horseshoe Lake, which is deeper in the preserve (a 3.3-mile roundtrip hike from Alpine Pond). Bieber said kids love the mile-long loop around the lake because they get to explore the pond and its features.

There is also an audio-guided hike option; visitors can download it to their phones from the Midpen website, then listen to it while walking to learn more about Skyline Ridge.



Wildlife abounds at Midpen's array of preserves.
PHOTOS BY SAIRA AHMED | TOWN CRIER EDITORIAL INTERN

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The David C. Daniels Nature Center at Alpine Pond is closed for the winter season but will open again in April, Bieber added.

“Lots of people visit (the center) and it’s nice,” she said. “All of these trails (around the ponds) are flat, easy and great for kids.”

Los Trancos

Located in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Palo Alto, Los Trancos is known for being a good place to learn about earthquake geology. Bieber said it boasts a 1.5-mile trail that wends along the San Andreas Fault, one of the longest and most active faults in the world.

Los Trancos also offers plenty of shade on hot days, thanks to the mostly tree-covered trails.

Like Skyline Ridge, there is also an audio-guided hike option at Los Trancos available for download on the Midpen website. It mentions all the points where the fault goes.

“There’s actually a fence in there where you can see the fence has shifted,” Bieber said. “One part of the fence is on a different plane than the other now, and that’s because of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.”

Rancho San Antonio

Rancho San Antonio is Midpen’s most popular preserve, Bieber said, because it is located in the most urban area – in Cupertino, close to the Los Altos border. It’s where many people get their introduction to Midpen. >



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“Rancho is a really fabulous preserve because there is so much wildlife there,” she said. “You can see deer, turkey and sometimes you’ll see a coyote. People can dip their toes into what going to a preserve is like, then they can see what other preserves have to offer.”

A 1-mile walk on an easy trail offers access to Deer Hollow Farm, which many kids love to visit because of the animals, Bieber said. The farm is home to cows, pigs, goats, sheep and chickens, among other animals.

The gift of the outdoors

Bieber said that experiencing the outdoors as a kid is beneficial, as it allows them to appreciate what is outside of their comfort zones and their screens.

“Taking your kids outdoors and giving them that experience is really giving them gifts that they can take with them for years and years,” she said. “We have people on our staff who have grown up hiking in our preserves, and the knowledge and love they have for taking care of nature and the open-space lands is incredible. That was instilled in them early on, when they got to go out and experience these things firsthand.” ❁

For more information on Midpen and its preserves, visit openspace.org

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Keeping kids involved in sports

FUN & FITNESS

BY ANDY DOLICH
SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

There is a growing gap in playability for young athletes who show unique skills. They are singled out to join traveling teams and elite squads before they know how to tie the shoelaces of their hyper-expensive athletic footwear.

The downside of this trend is that many youth are no longer running around playing just for fun. Their parents or coaches have decided what is best for their sports futures. They are told to specialize in their best sport or a sport that fits their body type. This is a recipe that is contributing to the growing national trend of childhood obesity and sports inequality.

We have seen what is happening to many school programs in sports and the arts. Many of them are now either “pay to play” on the team side or eviscerated as part of cost-cutting. Physical education in many schools is ancient history. I can remember the days when you could play dodgeball in PE and hit players on the opposing team low and high without being dragged into the principal’s office. ➤



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There are several themes underlying the challenges of keeping the youth of our country engaged in sports that can help them in later life:

- **Nutrition.** You are what you eat.
- **Lack of PE.** Many schools no longer offer comprehensive PE programs.
- **Lack of community playgrounds.** People fear for their kids' safety, and there is a lack of well-supervised public playing areas.
- **Video game-aphrenia.** Kids' thumbs these days are more developed than their biceps or calves.
- **Social networking.** Much of which has led to a more sedentary lifestyle for young people.
- **Lack of creativity.** What new stick and ball games are being created by kids today?
- **You won't be a star.** Sorry, go play for another team or give up the game.

By the numbers

The youth sports market is immense. Statistics reveal that 50 million kids participate in organized sports in the U.S. annually.

The youth sports industry accounts for \$5 billion in spending every year. At every level of play, the color of the fluid that flows through the engine of sports is green.

The level of participation in youth sports leagues is six times higher than high school and 100 times more than NCAA programs.



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St. Francis High volleyball player Taylor Williams, right, tries to get the ball past two San Ramon Valley defenders. PHOTO BY T. MALLIE BRATHWAITE

There are more than 14 million kids (under age 18) playing youth soccer in this country annually.

Youth sports tournaments are a \$17 billion business.

Economic impact

Families can spend up to and beyond \$2,000 a year paying for their kids' youth sports participation.

It can cost up to \$4,000 per summer for team travel if a child is good enough to play for an elite travel team.

Money spent on sports-related equipment, uniforms, team fees, travel, lodging and food can easily cost a family thousands of bucks per child per year.

If your young superstar is an elite little competitor, the total package could reach \$10,000 or more. That doesn't include personal coaches, the time parents may take off from work and babysitting for kids left behind.

Specialization

The statistics are concerning. A survey conducted by the Aspen Institute found that overall, youth sports participation in the U.S. is in decline. The numbers reveal that 38% of kids are playing team sports today, down from 45% a decade ago. If you watched the Little League World Series, the Aspen Institute's "Project Play 2020" project stood out with its "Don't Retire, Kid" commercials, in which frustrated child athletes announce they are quitting youth sports.

The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports reported that more and more young athletes in the 12-14 age group start to focus on one sport even if they are multiple-sport athletes.

Elite athletic talent at a young age is often misjudged by parents, coaches and others. The gold ring of a potential college scholarship or financial windfall from a pro contract can be delusional. Little ones can grow big, slow can become agile.

The concussion effect

When you look at soccer by gender, girls suffer higher concussion incidents than boys, according to a study by the American Journal of Sports Medicine. Soccer concussions are directly related to heading the ball. >



Los Altos High's Andrew Yuan dribbles the basketball past a Homestead High defender. PHOTO BY T. MALLIE BRATHWAITE



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The journal states that the most dangerous sport is football, followed by soccer, wrestling and girls basketball. The growth of youth lacrosse is sure to add additional concerns for the parents of multisport athletes.

As we learn more about the effects of playing sports on the safety of our children, the greatest headache for parents will be what to green-light and when to put up the stop sign. The key is to keep kids moving by giving them the chance to play multiple sports at their level of interest and ability.

Looking for an answer

There are several organizations doing magnificent work in promoting childhood health and wellness. They are committed to keeping young people, coaches, parents and educational and recreational administrators focused on having kids playing for fun and fitness – not fame and fortune. Many of these groups are based in the Bay Area: Positive Coaching Alliance (positivcoach.org), Playworks (playworks.org), the National Fitness Campaign (nationalfitnesscampaign.com), the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame Youth Fund (bashof.org), the First Tee national golf program for young golfers (thefirsttee.org) and the Aspen Institute (projectplay.us).

Andy Dolich operates Dolich & Associates, a sports consultancy, in Los Altos. A local resident, he has more than 30 years of experience as an executive for professional baseball, basketball, football, hockey and soccer teams.



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Learning with LETTERS

BY ELLIE ANGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

4 ways to incorporate early literacy in everyday activities

after learning a concept, it would finally click and they would be able to demonstrate their learning.

I experienced a similar “aha” moment with my daughter recently when she learned to write her name.

It started with her wanting to learn the letters in her name a few months ago. We started with the first letter, and she quickly learned that “C” is for “Chloé.” From there, it trickled into something similar: words with the same letter and then other letters

in her name. I provided my daughter with opportunities to practice her new skills informally throughout the day.

Then, a few weeks ago, she was sitting at her working table drawing a picture and began to dictate the letters of her name all by herself. She came to me and said, “Look, Mama! I wrote my name!” It was one of the most memorable moments I’ve experienced as a parent. Just like my students, she was able to take her prior knowledge and assemble it together. ➤

As an early childhood educator, I am a strong proponent of teaching early literacy skills.

I would tell my kindergarten students they were creating magic when applying the skills into practice. These were “teachable moments,” where

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Following are some ways parents can incorporate early literacy learning in everyday activities with young ones.

Stickers and sensory bins



When my daughter first showed interest in letters, I wanted her to be engaged while learning and become familiar with the physical shape and movement of writing letters. Sensory activities are great for practicing fine-motor skills and learning the shape of each letter.

One activity I did was write her name with a pen and then take stickers and stick them along each line. I also did this with other simple words, such as “Mama” and “Papa,” and some of her interests, including “moon” and “stars.”

Another sensory activity parents can do is set up a sensory bin with rice and have children trace the letters or include items inside that start with the same letter (for example, “C” for “carrot,” “cabbage,” “crayon”). This helps develop vocabulary skills as well as phonemic awareness.

Word searches

As a lexophile, I enjoy word search puzzles. I also love having my daughter involved in my interests. I recently printed a word search, and my daughter was curious about it. I thought it would be fun to make it more applicable for her and have her do her own version – a word search of letters. We started with the letters she knows, like “C” for “Chloé.” I had her circle any “C”s she found in one color. Then I asked her what other letters she saw. This activity helps build letter awareness and other essential skills.

Reading books

When I was teaching in the classroom, I made sure to allot at least 20 minutes a day to reading. I’d either read a book to my class or they would read books to themselves (or a partner). I do the same with my daughter at home.

Books help develop other early literacy skills, such as sequencing (what happens first, second and last) and print awareness (pointing to letters and words in a book). This will trickle into learning sight words as kids get older.

Picture books are also a great way to develop narrative skills and support imaginary play. An example would be asking your child an open-ended question such as: What do you see on this page?



Nature and the outdoors

Children can learn so much from being outdoors. One of the games we like to play when walking home from school is spot the letter, shape or number. Similar to I Spy, we search for things in that category. This also helps build print awareness – and helps recognize and be aware of words and letters all around us.

Sometimes, I like to challenge her a little bit by asking her to create her own letters. For example, there is a park with a sandbox we visit after school. We often build letters out of rocks, sand, sticks or anything else we might find.

It’s amazing to see what she comes up with.



Children are like sponges. Parents, educators and caregivers can guide them and be facilitators in their learning. ★

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