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ODC Network forms collaborative partnership to open second nature-based preschool

Subhead: Community gains new early childhood resource

HOLLAND, Michigan (November 5, 2020) – Little Hawks Discovery Preschool, a community-based preschool program operated by the ODC Network on the campus of the Outdoor Discovery Center, is excited to announce that they are opening a second preschool, Seedlings Discovery Preschool. This program will be launched as part of a community collaborative aimed at not only increasing access to preschool, but also supporting teacher development.

Ottawa Area Intermediate School District has been operating a preschool in partnership with Hope College for two years. Over the past year the ODC team has engaged in numerous conversations with the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, Hope College, and a few community leaders around the idea of opening a second preschool that would operate in the heart of downtown Holland. “The goal of opening this second preschool is to address two strategic areas the ODC Network is focused on. First, we were interested in bringing high-quality nature-based preschool to an urban environment where we can illustrate to the community that you do not have to be at the Outdoor Discovery Center to successfully run a nature-based program, and secondly, we wanted to serve a broader population by operating in the center of the City,” shared Travis Williams the ODC Network’s CEO. Over the course of this coming school year, OAISD will work with ODC to provide leadership and staffing support for the preschool classroom, with the goal of transitioning operation over to ODC. “OAISD is excited to partner with ODC over the course of the next year to bring nature-based learning into an urban setting. This partnership supports the strengths of all stakeholders involved, creating a high quality environment for children and their families to learn,” shared Dr. Tami Mannes, Director of Early Childhood, OAISD.

The ODC started Little Hawks Discovery Preschool in 2013 as part of a strategic partnership with Hamilton Community Schools. Due to the widespread community interest and demand for the program, the ODC has since assumed full ownership expanding it to a community based preschool program serving children from all areas of the community. The program operates on the Outdoor Discovery Center campus and has been very popular since the inception. “When we started the Little Hawks program, we were able to fill to capacity in the first year. Ever since then we have had waiting lists that have reached as high as 200 students. The nature-based model paired with our amazing staff have made this program a huge success,” shared Williams. “Our goal with opening a new preschool is to expand our opportunity to serve more families. We also want to take advantage of a partnership opportunity with the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District and Hope College.”

The new preschool will serve as a model teaching program for Hope College. Hope students studying the field of Early Childhood Education can be assigned placements with the ODC program where the pre-service teachers can learn first-hand about not only early childhood education, but also the nature-based program model.

“Children who attend will, together with their teachers, discover how to integrate their senses and natural curiosities to make sense of the world. As teachers our goal is to scaffold their discoveries to foster not only a love of learning but also a love for nature and the act of being outdoors - all within the city limits,” shared lead teacher, Kara Green.

The program is currently operating out of a space on Hope College's campus. The ODC Network has formed a new partnership with Pillar Church and the program will move to the church campus in January. "We are very excited to partner with Pillar Church. They have a beautiful new facility in the heart of downtown with ample greenspace to make this an ideal program location. We love finding partners like Pillar who believe in our mission and want to help magnify our ability to positively support and impact families in our community," shared Williams.

"We are extremely excited for the opportunity to partner with the ODC, Hope College and OAISD," Jon Brown, one of Pillar's pastors shared. "We say we want to be 'a church for the city' and this partnership provides us another wonderful opportunity to live into that commitment. I'm thrilled that we are collaborating to pursue the common good of our community and the flourishing of our children."

If you are interested in enrolling your child in the Seedlings Discovery Preschool, or would like to learn more about the program please contact Rachel Hucul, ODC Network's VP of Early Childhood Education at rachel@outdoordiscovery.org. Se habla Español en Seedlings Discovery Preschool - Spanish/bilingual speaking families may contact Vanessa Gutierrez at vanessa@outdoordiscovery.org.

In 2000, a local nonprofit Wildlife Unlimited of Allegan and Ottawa Counties formed a partnership with the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District to create an outdoor education center that would serve the Allegan and Ottawa counties schools and community. This entity was the Outdoor Discovery Center (ODC). Nine years later, the ODC merged with the Macatawa Greenway Partnership to leverage and expand their missions. That was the beginning of a significant growth period for the ODC. Today, 10 total business divisions have been developed that drive our goals to redefine education, restore and conserve land and water, and to make our community the best place to live, work, play and learn. Our breadth of services led to a name change to the ODC Network which serves as the parent organization that performs essential, mission specific work to drive community change, growth, and impact in conservation and education.



Additional Project Partners: Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, Hope College, and Pillar Church