

## Nature's Playhouse

Unique programs set in an all-natural, yesteryear play environment.

**Shelli Liebman Dorfman**  
Contributing Writer

**S**ometimes Layla Hill, 6, goes to work with her mom — for a reason almost no other kid can boast.

Her mom, Mikki Hill, is an owner of Nature's Playhouse, a play and wellness center in Ferndale where moms-to-be take unique classes and workshops like hypno-birthing, parents study infant massage and baby sign language, kids play and participate in creative programming, and free support groups are offered in areas from breastfeeding to LGBT parenting.

For Layla, who attends Sunday school at Aish HaTorah in Oak Park with her older sister, being at work with mom often means it's time for a belly dancing class.

Mikki Hill and her partners — Sarah Doyle and Juliana Schewe — purchased Nature's Playhouse last November.

Even before the business went on the market, Doyle, a licensed master's level social worker (MSW), had planned to contact the previous owners.

"Right before she was going to reach out to them, she saw that Nature's Playhouse was for sale," Hill said. "That took Sarah in a new direction — to buy the business."



**Nati Tolwin, 2½, of Huntington Woods, Nachi Milworm, 2, and Moshe Milworm, 5, of Southfield, arrange furniture in a wooden house.**



**Juliana Schewe, Mikki Hill and Sarah Doyle in the Nature's Playhouse space**

Doyle contacted the infant mental health program at Wayne State University in Detroit seeking someone with a strong clinical background in the field. She was referred to Hill. Through other contacts, the two were introduced to Schewe, a trained Anusara-inspired yoga instructor, who had come to Nature's Playhouse the two previous summers with her now-3-year-old son, Luca Jackson.

"As a teacher during the school year, the only times I could partake in activities were during the summer months," Schewe said. "The classes I attended with my son were a lot of fun for both of us. He likes to interact with other kids and share activities with me. I was elated to be able to be a part of such a great space [as an owner] and continue a great resource for the community."

### FAMILY AND FRIENDS

In addition to Nature's Playhouse ownership, all three women teach there and bring their own children to programs.

Doyle leads and also attends drop-in play classes with her 16-month-old son, Christopher.

"We both benefit from the time there in that we get to be together and create friendships with others," she said. "Nature's Playhouse creates such a unique play space, and it is truly heart-warming watching the bonds form between the mothers and families."

Schewe, a visual artist with master's degrees in fine arts and art education, teaches prenatal yoga and belly dancing. She belly danced during her entire first pregnancy and labor and, at Nature's Playhouse, teaches both an adult belly dance fitness class and a kids' belly dance workshop.

An infant mental health therapist and a licensed MSW, Mikki Hill leads the infant massage course as well as workshops in areas including home child-proofing, potty training and helping children adjust to a new baby. She also provides individual social work therapy in infant mental health with a focus on

pregnancy and post-partum difficulties.

Although Hill's daughter Sianna, 9, is too old for the programs, "she finds it so calming that she asks me to take her there to do homework," said Hill, who adds that the mission of the center is to "return to the play experiences of earlier generations as an alternative to noise-filled, over-stimulating play.

"Nature's Playhouse is a space for families to disconnect from distractions and connect with their children," Hill said. "Our overall goal is to support families in ways that will strengthen their ties to one another."

Carly Dibble, who brings Luca, 2, to drop-in play classes has discovered just that.

"My daughter always has a wonderful time at Nature's Playhouse," said Dibble of Huntington Woods. "It provides an environment that allows her to expand her creativity, while socializing in a relaxed environment."

Nature's Playhouse is working hard to make sure dads are included, too.

Aside from assorted session, "dads also can experience quite an adjustment to parenthood so they may also benefit from individual therapy, and we are working on a support group for dads," Hill said.

For Adam Levey, visiting the center is all about being with 4-year-old, Eve.

"My daughter's favorite spot in Nature's Playhouse is the treehouse," he said "She could climb around and play for hours while I just sit and relax. The place is sunny, the toys are all made of natural products and she has a lot of fun. Nature's Playhouse is a great spot for some daddy-daughter time. We just drop in and play!" \*

*Nature's Playhouse is located 318 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale. For details about classes and support groups, go to [naturesplayhouse.com](http://naturesplayhouse.com), call (248) 955-3219 or email [info@naturesplayhouse.com](mailto:info@naturesplayhouse.com). The space is also available for rental for birthday parties.*

## National Mentoring Month

When Barry met Jules.

**S**eventeen-year-old Jules Erb has shot up from 4 feet to 6-foot-2 over the past six years. But when it comes to this young man's growth, his height is the least of it.

A participant in Jewish Family Service's Mentor Connection, Jules has benefitted from his relationship with mentor Barry Kelman in far more ways than his mother, Robyn, ever could have hoped.



**Debbie Feit**

"Jules has totally matured," she says. "He's grown into a wonderful young man, and I believe that Barry has had a massive influence over that."

January is National Mentoring Month and research has found that students with mentors have better school attendance and are 55 percent more likely to be enrolled in college.

According to [www.nationalmentoringmonth.org](http://www.nationalmentoringmonth.org), "By sharing their own life experiences, mentors provide students with a clear vision of what their future could look like. The impact is that, statistically, students with mentors are more likely to continue school through higher education."

Robyn reached out to Jewish Family Service back in 2009 in search of positive role models for Jules and his younger brother, Aidan, after their father abandoned the family.

"I wanted my sons to see that there are men out there who don't do that," she explains. "I needed someone who could teach my boys to be men. That's something I can't do."

But it was something Barry could do. And when he heard that JFS was looking for mentors, the newly retired attorney decided to learn more about Mentor Connection.

"Mentor Connection is a non-sectarian program serving Oakland County," says Natalie Kahn, MSW, and Mentor Connection program coordinator. "We match youth with volunteer mentors who make a one-year commitment to meet with their mentee twice a month for activities they both enjoy."

Additionally, the program hosts



**Mentor Barry Kelman and his mentee Jules Erb.**

several activities each year for all mentors and mentees, such as a summer barbecue, trip to the cider mill and movie night. “We try to get donations to subsidize what our mentors pay for out of pocket,” Kahn says.

Mentor Connection makes the child’s preferences their priority. “We won’t admit the child into the program if they’re not interested,” Kahn says. “We want them to be comfortable so they’ll get something out of the experience.”

Becoming a mentor is a lengthy process that goes beyond filling out an application and coming in for an interview. Thorough background checks are conducted, and once an applicant has passed, they go through training before they are officially accepted. The training session reviews the details of the program as well as covering topics such as boundaries and recognizing child abuse. Only then will a match be made.

Barry and Jules first met in a bookstore and talked for an hour, mostly about books and movies. Jules thought Barry was very nice. Barry was impressed with the then-11-year-old’s vocabulary. “Whatever reticence I had going in disappeared,” Barry says. “I realized this young boy needed me, and though I didn’t realize it at the time, I needed him.”

Over the years the pair has had many outings — from visiting Greenfield Village to attending baseball games to going sledding. But Jules’ true passion is movies; he’s introduced Barry to genres such as Japanese anime and, in return, Barry has shared classics such as *Citizen Kane* and *North by Northwest*.

“He has an encyclopedic knowledge of movies of every stripe,” Barry says. “I’ve learned as much as I’ve taught.

We are both students and teachers.”

Jules will be continuing his education when he attends Wayne State University in the fall where he plans to study, no surprise, film.

Ask Jules about his relationship with Barry and he’ll tell you that it’s one of the most wonderful things to have happened to him. “The best part of having a mentor,” he says, “is just having someone close to talk to and to share experiences with.”

According to his mom, “Barry has had such a positive influence over Jules in his schoolwork, his entry into manhood and in trusting another person. I couldn’t have asked for a better match for my son.”

Adds Barry, “I view the time I have spent with Jules as a gift he has given to me. I have learned patience and how to listen without judging. It certainly wasn’t easy all the time. It was challenging sometimes, but anything worthwhile is.”

Mentor Connection is always accepting new mentors and has a specific need for men living in Oakland County to mentor boys. (The program dictates same-gender matches.) If you are interested in learning more about becoming a mentor, know of a child who would benefit from the program or would like to make a donation to help support the program’s operating costs, contact Natalie Kahn at (248) 592-2264 or [nkahn@jfsdetroit.org](mailto:nkahn@jfsdetroit.org).

“I’m happy I took the plunge and I invite — no, implore — others to do so,” Barry says. “You’ll get support and guidance from the great staff and other mentors. You’ll give a great gift, but with a bit of luck you’ll get much more.” \*

*Debbie Feit is communications manager at Jewish Family Service.*



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