

IT'S ALL CHILD'S PLAY

Juilliard meets Disney at the Valmonte Center in Stafford

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STAFFORD — The Valmonte Center for Performing Arts was in full swing Thursday about 4:30 p.m.

In the private-lesson rooms on the north side of the building, a 7-year-old boy was picking a guitar while up the hallway a 16-year-old girl belted through a voice lesson.

Across the center, 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds in the Music for Little Mozarts class scrambled to their pianos in search of notes on their keyboards as a hip-hop class was minutes away from stepping into the main studio for a dance session for 6- to 12-year-olds.

And a handful of parents gather outside the studios, sitting and watching their children on monitors strategically placed throughout the waiting area.

"It's the happiest place you can imagine," said Nancy Korecky, 43, of Forked River, who has been a voice coach for 10 years and teaches at the center now. "This is the biggest thing that has happened to the area."

After school lets out most weekdays, parents and their children roam in and out of the center, past murals of a funky modern New York subway, Central Park and Times Square. The atmosphere at the center is lively, and interest is increasing.

"It's growing on a daily basis," said Joe Valmonte, the 34-year-old president and chief executive officer of the center, which he describes as a cross between Juilliard and Disney. "Whether you want to be serious or you want to have fun, this is the place to be. Everything I create is something I would have wanted to see or have gone to."

Valmonte taught piano house-to-house for 15 years before he opened the center last year, in various spots throughout Stafford. It wasn't until September that he found a permanent site on Route 9.

"Joe came to the house and gave Drew lessons," Paul Shives, Stafford's township administrator and an Ocean Acres resident, said about his 16-year-old son's piano lessons with Valmonte. "He improved quickly."

So much so, Drew Shives now studies with Valmonte's teacher at Rutgers University and wants to study piano in college.

"Joe is about creativity. He makes it fun and he understands what appeals to kids," said Shives, 51.

Valmonte, who grew up in Barnegat and lives there now, has performed since the age of 5. And he's done a lot, including run a children's entertainment company, voice-over work, and performed on cruises and at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. He also understands how to teach the arts, having studied with Juilliard professors, at Berklee College of Music in Boston and Westminster Choir College at Rider University, among others.

"If the kids are having fun, their minds are open and you can teach them anything," Valmonte said.

Part of his philosophy is to create performance opportunities for students, building confidence and self-esteem.

Shives continues to have his children work with Valmonte. His daughters, Amanda, 14, and Katie, 4, study piano at Valmonte's center, which now boasts close to 250 students. Valmonte says the ages range from 1-year-olds in the Mommy and Me dance and music classes to a 75-year-old piano student.

"It is much needed in the community," Shives said. "I've never seen a place like it."

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