

PETALUMA ARGUS COURIER

A leader in education, Gilmore touches many young Petaluma lives

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Susan Gilmore, a leader in the child care community, started her career earlier than most.

The 57-year-old Petaluma resident laughed as she recollected her makeshift schoolroom filled with suitcases converted into desks in the attic of her childhood home in San Francisco, with a student body made up of neighborhood children she bribed into attendance by offering Girl Scout cookies as an incentive.

Gilmore's passion for education hasn't wavered, though she's come a long way from the attic classroom to become a prominent community leader.

After studying child development and psychology and spending 10 years as a teacher, Gilmore saw an emerging need for full-day, year-round childcare in Marin County. Recognizing the gap in services, she founded the North Bay Children's Center in 1986.



The mother of two has been honored with a Jefferson Award for public service, as well as an Excellence in Leadership award from the Heart of Marin, along with Nonprofit Leadership Award from the North Bay Business Journal.

"I'm very proud of what we've accomplished," she said. "I'm so grateful for the people and the amazing team. ... I have a huge sense of pride and gratitude."

The award-winning North Bay Children's Center, which started as a single care facility serving 60 children, will soon encompass an eight-campus network serving 465 children in both Marin and Sonoma counties after the upcoming opening of a new preschool at Petaluma's Valley Vista Elementary School. With Gilmore serving as the executive director, the organization provides developmentally-based educational programs for children between the ages of six weeks and 12 years old.

"What we continue to be is groundbreaking," Gilmore said. "We understand the changing needs of the workforce and of the families in the community we're serving. ... It's not only serving and producing services for the current workforce, but really looking at producing services for the success of the future workforce."

Gilmore said the nonprofit organization, which has a volunteer board of directors composed of community leaders and parents, and 87 employees, focuses on the key issues, such as the childhood obesity epidemic and the achievement gap. The center's "Garden of Eatin'" program, one of the state's first on-site learning gardens for kids under the age of 5, was recognized by the California State Legislature and organizations such as the National Garden Association and The American Journal of Public Health, among others. The organization also touts programs for bolstering literacy and school readiness.

"What we really look at, in addition to providing high quality early care and education, is addressing issues that could impact the futures of our children," Gilmore said, adding that early childhood education plays a large role in the success of youth as they advance in life.

Cynthia Murray, president and CEO of the North Bay Leadership Council, said that Gilmore's leadership in early childhood education was critically important for North Bay children.

"Susan Gilmore is well known in our communities for her tireless service and visionary efforts to ensure that all children in Marin and Sonoma counties have the same essential early start for future success," she wrote in a Community Awards of Excellence nomination letter. "Susan is a valuable asset to our community."

Gilmore, who served as the Petaluma Educational Foundation board of directors president and is also involved with other local organizations, said she's grateful for the opportunity to help shape the next generation.

“These kids are our future. There’s so much promise and opportunity,” she said. “We have the ability to make such a difference in the lives of so many.”

Within her own organization, Gilmore said she’s also had the ability to help her staff advance and succeed as they grow along with the organization, which continues to expand.

“It’s pretty amazing when I look back at that and what we’re doing now,” she said. “No one could ever have imagined the scope and reach.”

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