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## **Making a difference for Children**

**By Leslie Rutberg For The Register-Guard**

Diane Amundson sits in her office surrounded by pictures of children whose lives she has shaped and modeled. There are photos of her own three children, of course, including those of her son, Tyler, who died at age 11. But there are also photos, some yellowed and worn, of a few of the children who've come through her classes. And there have been hundreds of such children, as Amundson has taught child development at Thurston High School, and run the preschool program across the street, since 1993. The licensed preschool at the Child Development Center serves as a learning lab for Thurston High students and for interns from Lane Community College and the Springfield Academy of Arts and Academics. Students progress through an early childhood development curriculum in their own classrooms, then work one-on-one with the preschoolers to apply skills, strategies and concepts. After nearly 20 years, Amundson has seen many of the program's children through several life stages: Preschoolers have come back to her classroom as high school students, and then returned again to enroll their own children in the preschool. Despite the years, some students are instantly recognizable. Amundson has a group preschool picture, for example, that includes one boy sticking out his tongue and grinning. "He came in as one of my high schoolers and I knew him immediately," she says. "He was the same fun joker." Many of her students have had such a positive experience in her classes that they go on to pursue careers working with young children -in pediatrics, teaching, special education and even preschool instruction. The high school students learn how to engage different temperaments. They learn to help shy children speak up, and help more aggressive students practice patience. They also learn about their own abilities. Some come into the program without any experience, unsure of how to begin a conversation with a young child. By the end of the program, some of those same students are hired as baby-sitters by the preschool's parents. "The age combination really works," Amundson says. "The preschoolers look up to the high school students. They really appreciate them, and it builds confidence for the high school student. They see themselves in a different way and it makes a difference in how they are in their own life." The most important lessons, however, might be those that her students apply within their own young families. "One of my former preschool students, whose daughter is now enrolled, told me that if it wasn't for this course, she wouldn't be the same parent," Amundson recalls. "And her mother, who was there, said, 'If it wasn't for this preschool, I don't think you would be the same person you are today.'"

When Amundson first began her teaching career, the importance of preschool wasn't as widely understood or accepted as it is today. It's accepted wisdom these days that preschool teaches skills such as patience and conflict resolution that are fundamental to success in later years, Amundson says. "Especially now that kids are going to kindergarten in such large classes, sometimes 30 students, we do a lot of work to build their confidence so that they'll feel comfortable in a crowd," she says. One of the ways Amundson helps shy children speak up is through a drama curriculum. "We do a lot of play-acting -'The Three Little Pigs,' 'Goldilocks,' 'Three Billy Goats Gruff' and at the start some of them don't want to talk at all. But after a few weeks of hanging back, they start trying on the costumes. By the end, they can't wait to get up on stage." The preschool's professional staff has been virtually the same for 18 years, and has become a family for Amundson. In some cases, they're literally family: Amundson's mother, Serena Krehbiel, is on the staff, and her granddaughter, Addison Nelson, attends the preschool. And at one point, Amundson's daughter, Kassie Nelson, worked at Thurston High. "That was pretty fun -to have all four generations here at once," Amundson says. The preschool "family" became all the more important to Amundson when she lost her son, Tyler, when the scooter he was riding crashed into a pickup truck in 2001. Tyler wasn't wearing a helmet at the time and the injuries he sustained severely damaged his brain. He was in a coma for nearly two weeks when doctors determined that he wouldn't recover and had to be taken off life support. The community, including Amundson's colleagues, rallied around her and her family. Folks in Springfield, in Eugene and even in Portland organized meals, made visits, sponsored fundraisers, and sent cards and flowers. Amundson says what she remembers is how everything was taken care of so that she and her family had the space they needed to grieve their loss. "The support we got from this community was unbelievable -the smallest letter or note in the mail meant so much to me, still means so much to me," she says. "That's maybe the most powerful lesson that comes from Tyler's death: that when there's tragedy, even the tiniest thing you can do for someone can make a world of difference." In the midst of her own tragedy, Amundson found the strength to keep making differences, both big and small, for others. Two weeks after her son's funeral, she returned to work at the child development center. She remembers how difficult it was some days to be at work, but she always welcomed every student with a smile. "I knew," she says, "that if I greeted them with a smile, every day, just that simple kindness might change their life." She also helped to change the lives of kids all over Oregon. Amundson was integral to passing Senate Bill 795, a state law that requires all children under 16 to wear a helmet while on a scooter. When she was first approached to support the legislation by sharing Tyler's story across the state, Amundson thought she wouldn't be able to do it. "I prayed about it," she says. "And I said, 'Whether or not I have the strength to do this, give me the strength,' because if one child is saved by this law, it will be worth it." Amundson was successful; the bill passed in 2003. Since that time, Amundson has spoken to hundreds of students about the importance of helmet safety, including those high school students that her son would have graduated alongside. "It's bittersweet," she says. "Seeing Tyler's classmates come into my class each year, keeping up with them, watching their feet get bigger, seeing them grow up."

But she says she's heartened by all the people whose lives were touched by Tyler's friendship. Eleven years later, his grave is still decorated with baseball hats, letters and other trinkets left by his classmates. She still gets calls from many of them during the holidays, and this year, on the anniversary of his death, she reunited with Tyler's grade school sweetheart and her father while they were visiting the cemetery. "It gives me hope, when I see what we can do for each other as human beings," she says. "Everyone has compassion in them. We just need to find it, bring it out."