

Local mom proves all kids are scientists

By Laura Follis

When Hannah Oujdani was 3, she invented a recipe for "Bubble Ice Cake": Take one extra large plastic bowl. Add toddler-size handfuls of salt and sugar, two to 20 shakes of pepper, and a generous sprinkling of cinnamon, dill and oregano. Add several squirts of dish soap. Cover with water. Squeeze in several drops of food coloring and watch it swirl. Stir vigorously. Pop flying bubbles. Place concoction in freezer. Remind mom to check it every few minutes. Remove and poke holes through layer of thin ice. Put back in freezer. Remind mom to check it every few minutes. Take a nap. Wake up. Run to freezer and find mixture is slushy. Stir slush until melted again. Put back in freezer. Go to preschool. Come home. Run to freezer and shriek with glee to find a frozen-solid lump. Leave on counter to slowly melt. Stab, mash and mix until bedtime.

Hannah, now a 9-year-old fourth-grader at Penny Creek Elementary, wants to be a writer, but her love for science remains. Her mom, Monica Oujdani, founder of Science Express, credits Hannah and her 7-year-old brother Samir — an aspiring astronomer in second grade at Silver Firs Elementary — with "pulling the inner scientist" out of her.

"I see a natural love of science in my children. They love to get messy and see how things work for themselves," said Monica.

Like many parents, Monica struggled to balance work and family life. First, she wanted to be there for Hannah and Samir — homework, PTA, soccer games and swim meets. Second, she craved the challenge and freedom of running her own business. Third, she wanted to explore the field of early education, an interest sparked when her children attended a co-op preschool.

She also saw a need for early exposure to science. "By the time kids get into middle school, it's too late to encourage and develop that natural curiosity," explained Monica. She

often thought back to Hannah's Bubble Ice Cake and what made it so special. It was simple, kid-made and often messy. Monica decided she would use the lesson of the Bubble Ice Cake to make science fun for kids.

That's how Science Express, now in its second year, was born. Monica, who refers to herself as a "mompreneur," holds a Bachelor of Arts in political science and a Master's in public administration. While acknowledging she is not a "traditional" scientist, she believes her kid-centered approach is what makes Science Express successful.

"I look at science from the same view as my audience and I always kid-test my ideas," she said. That's why Monica tweaked her Junior CSI class. Fingerprints alone weren't exciting enough for her son Samir. He wanted to know other ways forensic scientists find clues. So she added a section on finding clues in the dark using ultraviolet light and glow powder. The class is now one of her most popular.

Monica now takes Science Express on the road through "traveling fieldtrips" to local schools. "Once we visit a classroom, we're almost always invited back," Monica said. "The students have so much fun and the teacher can relax and participate without worrying about the mess or whether the experiment will work." And, because Monica knows all too well that even 3-year-olds love science, she also brings Science Express to preschools and birthday parties.

Monica is especially passionate about connecting with girls. "When I saw the statistics on girls and science — that many lose that innate interest by third grade — I thought of my Hannah and her crazy experiments. I want her to know that science is for everyone."

And what does she think about Hannah becoming a writer? "Science and writing are a great mix," says Monica. "I'll hire her to write about science."

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