

Speedy the turtle ushers generations through Belvedere Nursery School

Children from pet's first class are now in their 40s

By **DEIRDRE McCROHAN**

dmccrohan@thearknewspaper.com

The generations of local students who have cycled through Belvedere Nursery School in the past four decades all have one classmate in common: Speedy the box turtle, the class pet and oldest denizen, who is believed to be turning 40 this year.

A check-in with Speedy is the highlight of a visit by the school's younger alumni, says Kathleen Parker, the executive director of Belvedere-Hawthorne Nursery Schools, which include the Belvedere school on Cove Road Place and the Hawthorne pre-K program on Rock Hill Road.

"When kids come to visit, they always want to know, 'Is Speedy still there?'" Parker says.

When Parker arrived 38 years ago, Speedy and his partner, Slow-Poke, a gift from a local family, had already been in residence a few years and were fully grown.

About 15 years ago, Slow-Poke relocated to the big terrarium in the sky. Since then, Speedy has looked to the teachers and the young students for company and entertainment. It is estimated Speedy could live to age 70 or 80,



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From left, Harper, Katrine and Jay enjoy learning about Speedy the turtle at Belvedere Nursery School earlier this month. The turtle's believed to be approaching 40 and may live another 40 years.

meaning he'll likely meet nearly 1,000 more children in his lifetime.

Belvedere Nursery School is a play-based nursery school, which gives its students a lot of unstructured time to choose where and what to play with, but they do set aside time for thematic lessons and "circle time," during which the children sing and do movement activities.

Speedy is part of both. He's the star of simple learning sessions on pond

habitats and wildlife and, during certain circle times, he's the main attraction. On those days, Speedy is taken out of his glass-walled tank and placed inside a circular enclosure formed by plastic building blocks. The children sit outside, and Speedy is allowed to run around within the circle, Parker says.

And she does mean run.

"He can really move quite fast," she says.

From the confines of his tank, Speedy

also has front-row seat for the kids' circle-time concerts. Parker says he becomes very alert and attentive, with his nose pressed up against the glass wall facing the classroom, as the sitting children sing such classics as "You Can't Make a Turtle Come Out" or "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes."

Speedy can also provide a boost of confidence for more tentative students who may be feeling a bit anxious being separated from their parents, Parker says.

"We often suggest to Mom or Dad to bring a strawberry for Speedy to eat. It gives the kids a job and an enticement to come into school and feed Speedy.

"It's helped generations of kids make that transition from being at home to being here at school," she says.

The strawberries are placed in a small plate in the mezzanine of Speedy's terrarium to prompt the turtle into some gentle aerobic exercise to get the treat, although Parker says sometimes he takes a shortcut on his way back. He will flop himself over the retaining wall onto the ground floor; if he lands upside down, he just rights himself.

"He's very acrobatic," Parker says.

His diet includes fruit as well as mealworms, raw hamburger and dark leafy greens.

"He tends to eat more in the summer," says Abigail Vare, director of Belvedere-Hawthorne Nursery Schools. "Turtles generally hibernate but he doesn't really hibernate because of the habitat he's in, but he doesn't eat as much in the winter."

Speedy, who is recognizable as a male because of his red eyes, needs fresh, clean water, which the staff changes every other day and, being a cold-blooded reptile, he needs a warming lamp when the weather is cool. He needs trips to the veterinarian only occasionally and is in



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Speedy the turtle at Belvedere Nursery School is believed to be turning 40 this year, and with his lifespan of 70-80 years may be class pet to thousands of local children.

good health despite what could be called a case of dandruff on the top of his shell. His nails have to be trimmed, which has to be done when school is not in session and which Parker describes, laughingly, as "a bit of an ordeal."

The children all seem to love Speedy, Vare says.

"Even if they don't have a strawberry to feed him, they usually come over and say good morning when they arrive," she says.

Three-year-old Hugh Rockwell is among Speedy's fans.

"I like that he hides in his shell and I get to feed him strawberries," Hugh says. He notes he also likes to watch the teachers feed Speedy worms.

Caroline Homich says she would like to bring Speedy to the park.

Her classmate, Jamie Goldberger, suggested Caroline bring him to the park in a backpack and go down the slide. His brow knitted with concern as he added, "But it's slippery."

Speedy is such a favorite that, in 2014, parent Jessica Sterling-Malek published a children's book about him, "Speedy the Turtle," on the heels of her 2013 book, "Lily the Leopard Gecko." Both were illustrated by Jason Goad and are available on Amazon.

"He definitely has a personality, which is a kick," Vare says of Speedy. "He does things on his own time and is very self-directed. He won't eat his worms on command." He also shows a lot of interest in what the kids are doing near him, she says.

Other live animals come and go at the nursery school; a clutch of baby chicks was brought in for the kids to watch earlier this year and, currently, in another corner of the room, the class is babysitting some tadpoles as they mature into frogs. But Speedy is there to stay — for at least another 30 or 40 years.

Reach Tiburon reporter Deirdre McCrohan at 415-944-4634.