



Rivka Seeman

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A Little About Me and What Drew Me to Sunflower

Hi, I'm Rivka. I grew up in New York City, though my early summers were spent camping with my family and later attending sleepaway camp. Both make up many of my most joyful childhood memories. I was an avid reader and, like most children, born with a hunger to learn and to develop mastery in different areas. The thing I enjoyed least of all was, unfortunately, school. Even as a teenager, I began to notice a disconnect between how happy and energized I felt at summer camp: where activities were largely optional, where there were lazy afternoons lying in the grass, talking to friends or reading a book, where I felt genuinely free. In contrast, I felt constrained in school, where I couldn't go deeper into a subject without falling behind in the curriculum, where I didn't feel comfortable speaking up, where I sometimes felt like I wasn't living my own life.

Those early experiences planted something in me. They made me pay attention to what childhood is supposed to feel like, and how often it falls short. I imagined that when kids grew up and graduated high school, they suddenly became powerful enough to fix things, but they moved on and didn't look back. I promised myself at 16 that when I was old enough to do something about it, I would look back.

When I stepped onto the playscape at Sunflower Creative Arts for the first time, I felt a palpable sense of relaxation; the kind I remembered from camp or from being outdoors with my family. Not at all what I experienced in school growing up. It was exactly what I know childhood should be: children playing out in nature, in community, largely making their own decisions about how to spend their time, whether to paint, or glue pieces of wood together to build a structure, or dig up worms, or pick berries off a tree. I heard adults speaking respectfully to children, in a way rarely heard in schools, where the

word "respect" too often means deference to authority rather than something children are deemed worthy of receiving.

I have spent nearly twenty-five years in education. I spent the bulk of that time teaching in a play-based early childhood program, bringing children out into nature in parks in New York City, having children grow, cook, and taste vegetables and fresh herbs, and advocating for non-punitive discipline and for allowing children to feel their feelings and giving them the safety to express them. I have educated parents. I have supported self-directed learners through my work with homeschooling families and raised a self-directed kid of my own.

I brought inner-city kids from Chicago out into the woods of Wisconsin for a life-changing week immersed in nature, play, and experiential learning. I have directed schools that were lovely but more traditional than Sunflower and gently nudged them toward greater respect for children and for play.

At this point in my career, I'm tired of gently nudging. I want to throw myself wholeheartedly into giving children what they deserve. Sunflower is the place where everything I believe and everything I've built finally come together.

How My Background Shapes the Way I Think About Play, Nature, and Arts-Based Programs

My background has given me a deep trust in what children are capable of when we create the right conditions and then get out of the way. A truly play-based program is not a place full of fun teacher-designed activities with particular learning outcomes in mind. It is a place where children choose their own pursuits, and where those pursuits naturally fall right in the zone of providing challenge without undue frustration- because that's where the drive to play takes us.

Nature and the arts deepen that process in ways that are hard to replicate with manufactured materials and a set curriculum. Nature is endlessly variable and alive. It responds to children in real time: the mud is different after it rains, the worms are hiding on hot days, the berries are ripe one week and gone the next. Time in nature nourishes us physically, mentally, and spiritually. Art offers a different kind of open-endedness. There is no single right answer, no product to replicate. When children paint or build or create with loose parts, they are making decisions, solving problems, and expressing something from the inside out and doing it for the sheer joy of it.

What my years of experience have reinforced for me again and again is that these are not enrichment activities layered on top of a curriculum. They *are* the curriculum. Play is how children develop confidence, resilience, creativity, and social competence. It is how they work out their fears, practice being powerful, and find pure, unabashed joy. Our job is to trust that, protect the space for it, and help families understand what they are actually watching when they see their child at play.

A Moment That Captures Why Play Matters

It is hard to choose just one moment, because children bring so much richness and depth to their play when they are allowed to dive in fully.

I think of a toddler on a three-step climber. She goes up and down, up and down, again and again, totally absorbed. And then one day she stops. Not because someone told her to move on, but because it got easy. The challenge was gone, and so was the fun. She regulated her own learning without anyone intervening.

I think of my son Joey at five years old, rollerblading for the very first time in a roller rink. He fell constantly, every minute at least, and each time I saw a look of real pain cross his face. After an hour of this, I looked at him with empathy and said, "Are you ready to go home?" He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "No, too fun!"

I think of a child leaving the play kitchen to care for a baby doll, and when another child opens the oven, she calls out that she's still using it. An adult points out that she left ten minutes ago. She explains that she put a cake in the oven to bake and then her baby woke up, so she's caring for the baby while the cake bakes. That is sophisticated, complex thinking, and she is barely three years old.

These moments stay with me because they capture something essential: the thing that makes something fun is often the very thing that makes it hard. It is the right amount of challenge. It is the struggle for mastery. Play is how children see what they are capable of, and when they are in that sweet spot, you do not have to motivate them or redirect them. You just have to protect the space and get out of the way.

What Community-Building Looks Like to Me

For me, community-building starts before anyone walks through the door on the first day

of school. At Kane Street Kids in Brooklyn, I always opened the school year with a family picnic. I wanted families to meet each other, and to meet me, in a casual, relaxed way rather than only in the context of drop-off logistics and paperwork. It gave children a chance to play together, especially nice if they hadn't seen each other over the summer, and it gave teachers an opportunity to connect with families outside the structure of the classroom.

I also believe that strong community starts with the teaching team. I always planned a team-building activity during orientation week-an improv class one year, an escape room another-so teachers could laugh together and build trust before the intensity of the school year began. I also wanted co-teachers to have relaxed time together outside of school, and since I didn't think my board would cover teachers grabbing a lunch out, I bought each teaching team a Starbucks card so they could grab coffee together during that prep week. The second year, I had everyone take a selfie together on their "coffee date" and hung the photos in the school office. I felt that seeing each other as people, not only as colleagues was the start of a solid working partnership.

At its heart, community-building is the daily practice of making sure that children, families, and staff feel seen and valued. It is not one big event. It is the accumulation of small, consistent moments where people feel that someone is paying attention to who they actually are. It is learning the special name that a child has for their grandparent or the name of a child's cat. It takes time to develop. It doesn't happen all at once. It is built in the small moments, day in and day out.

What It Means to Me to Serve Children in Under-Resourced Communities

I feel called to this work. I believe every child deserves a wonderful childhood and a solid foundation that is going to serve them throughout their lives. That belief drives every professional decision I make.

One thing that has struck me deeply in my experience working in under-resourced communities is the over-emphasis on academics and structure, driven by an understandable but heartbreaking belief that those children cannot afford to play, that they need to catch up, that there is no time to waste. The result is that the children who need play the most are often the ones who get the least of it.

That saddens me, because play is not a luxury. Play is the foundation. It is how children build the confidence, the resilience, the problem-solving skills, and the social competence that will serve them for the rest of their lives. A program like Build & Play is not just a nice community offering. It is an act of faith in what every child is capable of, and a commitment to making sure that a child's zip code does not determine whether they get to have a real childhood.

What I Hope You'll Come to Know About Me

I hope you will come to know me as someone who is warm, approachable, and easy to talk to. I believe in being someone families feel comfortable coming to, whether it's with a concern, a question, or just something they want to share, and knowing they'll be met with real attention and care. I take pride in building real relationships with families, the kind where a parent feels comfortable pulling me aside to share a concern or a celebration, and trusts that I will respond with care and honesty.

I also hope you will come to know me as someone who is willing to be brave on behalf of children. Throughout my career, I have advocated for what I believe children need, even when it meant pushing against convention or having uncomfortable conversations. I have worked to bring healthier food into schools, removed food dyes from classrooms, and introduced organic snacks and vegetable tastings with toddlers. I have eliminated outdated discipline practices like time-outs and taking away recess, and even bribing with stickers, and replaced them with approaches that teach children to understand their feelings and find better strategies for getting their needs met and I taught their teachers right alongside them. I didn't just make those changes in my own buildings; I co-led a session at a NAEYC conference on moving beyond punitive discipline, because I believe these ideas need to spread far beyond any single school. These were not always popular choices, but they were the right ones.

Sunflower Creative Arts represents a new chapter for me. I have spent years gently nudging institutions toward the values I hold, and now I have the privilege of leading one that already lives them. I do not take that lightly. I intend to honor the legacy that Susan built, to listen deeply and learn from this community, and to bring my full self to the work of protecting and strengthening what makes Sunflower Creative Arts extraordinary. I am so looking forward to meeting all of you.