



a program showcase

Lu Nistou, Beaulieu sur Mer, France

by Michael Kalinowski

Toward the end of the 19th century, as the Côte d'Azur of France developed into a world destination for the wealthy, Beaulieu sur Mer became a favorite residence for European royalty and rich Americans such as the founder of the Singer sewing machine company and the publisher of the *New York Herald*. Today it is a pretty Mediterranean resort known for its mild weather and as the sister city to Tempe, Arizona. However, it is becoming increasingly known for its memorable school for young children.

It might be expected that a relatively affluent community would have a good school, and it does. Located on the grounds where the Russian writer Anton Chekhov spent several summers between 1891 and 1900, the site then housed an Anglican church followed by another villa, and was then rebuilt into an école maternelle in 2004. This school has an enrollment of 132 girls

and boys organized into five classes: two Petite classes (3-4 years), 1 Moyenne class (4-5), and two Grande classes (5-6). Before (7:30-8:30 a.m.) and after-school (4:30-6:30 p.m.) care is also available. Beaulieu has a well-educated international community and many parents speak two or three languages. Thus, parents bring their children to school with high expectations. The school's name, Lu Nistou, means little boy in old Niçois, the archaic dialect of the inhabitants of Nice and the surrounding area.

According to the director, Grégory Petitjean, the purpose of this program is:

... that each child reach for their highest possible level. And our objective is to get the best out of each child's capability. We want to help each child learn to work for himself. The way you learn starts here. To me, the école maternelle is the most important part of the entire school system, for it is here that children learn to live in society and learn to count, to begin to read, to follow instructions, and to work with others.

M. Petitjean is a happy man because he is engaged in both of his passions: sports and teaching. He knew when he was little that he wanted to be a teacher so he could become a director. He believes he always had a good connection with children and started teaching children karate. He went on to train as a school





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teacher. After completing his stage (student teaching placement) for his first professional assignment, M. Petitjean went to a different school each day. On Mondays he worked at a school for 'socially difficult children,' on Tuesdays he was assigned to a school in an economically depressed area, on Thursdays he worked with deaf children, and on Fridays he stood in for a director in her classroom. As a result of this flexibility and the quality of his work, he was offered a temporary position as director of Lu Nistou, while the headmistress left to enjoy her new baby. His was a provisional role because of his age and limited experience. By the end of the year, parental and community support helped him become the permanent director.

Sports and literacy are important themes for this program, and every day all the children are engaged in sports activities. The program is currently working to promote basketball and Taekwondo. M. Petitjean works with 75% of children from his classroom on sports each day, while 25% visit the library next door.

Many teachers are no longer interested in becoming a director, for in France a director has a release of only one day out of the classroom for administration, and the remainder of time is spent in the classroom as a teacher. Thus, the time allocation for administrative duties for a director in France is quite different than that for most directors in America. M. Petitjean says, a French director has "... two posts. Two jobs, both of which are different. It is hard to apply oneself completely in class as a teacher because I am frequently pulled out for administrative tasks."

The director role is not greatly appreciated and results in only 100 Euros (\$122) extra each month for considerable additional hours and stress. Furthermore, in France a director is responsible for security and is the 'boss' of the assistants, but not of the teachers. Therefore, in effect, the director is "the boss without being the boss." He can't tell a teacher what to do; technically, teachers are responsible to the area education inspector. If there is a problem with a teacher, Petitjean can flag it. He meets

monthly with the same supervisor, but it appears to be a somewhat convoluted system.

Petitjean tries to propose projects that are interesting and draw in the teachers, the parents, and the community. It appears to be working well. Occasionally the mayor stops by. There is a high level of parental support and involvement, so this director feels lots of support. That, according to M. Petitjean without a hint of irony, "makes it easy."

The author appreciates the gracious assistance of Laura de la Rocha in the preparation of this article.

For further information, please contact:

Grégory Petitjean

Director, Lu Nistou

15 Boulevard Paul Deroulede, Beaulieu sur Mer, France

Phone: 33. 04 93 01 01 84

e-mail: ecole.0060803R@ac-nice.fr

The Program Showcases were developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education.

They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world.

Selected programs will appear in future issues of *Exchange*, and are also available on www.ChildCareExchange.com.