



- ☒ Grapes
- ☒ Fortune cookies
- ☐ Blue motorcycle

## The pint-sized patrons of Bunnell House

By Scott McCrea

There were serious issues to be dealt with on

UAF's Fairbanks campus May 13, 2010.

On the third floor of Signers' Hall, the suit-wearing contingency was dealing with budget deficits, a planned protest for that Sunday's commencement ceremony, student concerns over rising tuition, and the usual bustle that accompanies the closing days of an academic year. In the Bunnell House Early Childhood Lab School, there was an issue of far greater magnitude being dealt with by the pint-sized patrons who spend their days there.

The blue toy motorcycle was missing.

And they were counting on me to find it.



UAF alumni in this story: Scott McCrea, '94; Todd Paris, '83; Ned Rozell, '90; Connie Slater, '04; Paige Vonder Haar, '91, '96, '97

Let me back up a second here.

When asked if I would be willing to write a day-in-the-life article on the Bunnell House for this magazine, I immediately said yes. After all, when one spends most of the workday on campus dealing with budgets and protests, spending any amount of time in the company of small children is a nice change of pace.

You see, at UAF, the Geophysical Institute churns out research, Financial Services churns out paychecks and the Graduation Office churns out diplomas.

At Bunnell House, they churn out smiles.

Not a bad place to spend the day, indeed.

**7:20 a.m.** ☹️

I arrive 10 minutes early to begin my day, wanting to make a good first impression. There is already a parent and child waiting outside: Ned Rozell and his daughter, Anna. They arrived by bike,

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with Anna being pulled in a trailer. It was Anna's first week at the Bunnell House, and as they waited outside with Anna clinging to Ned's leg, it was clear that she wasn't quite accustomed to the whole separation situation yet.

Despite Anna's concerns, her dad knows he is leaving her in capable hands.

"It's a great place," said Ned. "We love it here."

I let myself in through the downstairs entrance and am greeted by one of the teachers, Connie Slater. Connie started at the Bunnell House in 2003 as a practicum student from the early childhood education program and never left. I help her set up the classrooms until she lets Ned and Anna in at 7:30.

Dad's ready to go, but Anna isn't. This was a common theme that morning. While some of the children dropped off couldn't wait to join their friends the second they got there, others, like Anna, apply an octopus-like grip to their parents in their refusal to be left behind.

Eventually, Connie manages to get a tear-streaked Anna interested in an activity long enough for Ned to make his way out the door. They choose a location by the window. "You can wave to Daddy as he bikes away," explains Connie.

Seconds later Ned is seen out the window, biking his way up behind the UAF Fire Station. He turns to wave to Anna. She doesn't notice. She's already engrossed in an activity with Connie. The sorrow over her daddy's departure fades away as her day at the Bunnell House begins.

### Early education

Don't try calling the Bunnell House just a day care center in front of the dedicated staff. While it is true that the school does provide high-quality licensed care to children (ages 3 years through 6 years) of UAF students, faculty and staff, its main mission is to provide observation experiences and a practicum for students studying early childhood education.

But university students aren't the only ones who receive an education at the school. The child-centered environment is rich in learning opportunities for the children who make their way off the school's extensive waitlist and into the building. Among the skills children acquire are problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, competence, healthy attitudes and positive self-worth.

These are the skills one needs to get on in life, or to deal with budget deficits and student protests.



**A little after 8 a.m.** ⌚

Things are picking up on the main floor. As the father of a 3-year-old and a 10-year-old, I know that children this age are not supposed to drink coffee. As I observe the frenetic energy of the children as they dive into activity after activity, I wonder if some parents make an exception to that rule.

I have already become Mr. Popular. The children aren't shy about coming up and insisting I join them for some game. And join them I do. Soon I am helping Josie, Lizzy and Molly run a fashion show while they try on a variety of colorful hats. They are disappointed that my head is too big for any of them, and I have to



admit that I am, too, because they really are very pretty hats. The next thing I know, I'm helping James and Alex construct a road out of blocks.

Eventually, the line between me playing with toys and becoming a toy myself becomes blurred. I become a runway for toy planes that zoom down the length of my arm, while others find me to be the ideal height for a jungle gym. Worried that the barrage of attention might scare the day's guest away, Connie comes over

The book tells of a friendless little fox and his efforts to make new friends. While reading the book, Trina asks the children what are some ways we can make friends.

"You can say hi!" says Abby.

"You can say good morning!" says Wyatt.

I frantically take notes, not for the article, but because, by golly, like little fox, these are things I need to know how to do.



and reminds them of their manners. She need not worry. By that time I am starting to wonder if they have any applications for employment.

### New life in an old building

The school is in the oldest structure on campus still in use; it was built in 1922 by President Charles Bunnell. Staff offices are in the attic, the main floor is set up for children three years old and young 4-year-olds, and the lower level is for older 4-year-olds through the 6-year-olds.

"We have a lovely, historical building that provides that cozy, nurturing feeling that we want for our small children," said lab school director Paige Vonder Haar. "We also have access to a wonderful campus, which is perfect for a nature walk, a visit to see a raven sculpture or to go caroling at the chancellor's office at Christmas."

### Mid-morning ⌚

The Spiderman that I draw for my friend Wyatt looks more like a mummy, according to Todd Paris, the UAF photographer who showed up to take pictures of the day. Todd's presence makes me scowl, not because of his insult to my Spiderman, but because as he traipses around the room with his fascinating camera equipment, my status as Mr. Popular begins to diminish.

After we all clean up after ourselves, we join teacher Trina Bilbrey for morning circle time. Arms are stretched, feet are wiggled and silly songs are sung before everyone sits cross-legged for story time. On the docket for today: *Fox Makes Friends*, by Adam Relf.

### Lunchtime ⌚

The fact that I am a little too big for the Bunnell House becomes evident when I pull up one of the tiny chairs to a tiny table to join my new friends for lunch and my knees end up next to my ears. Lunch is pleasant, and we go around the room comparing what each one is having and looking for similarities in color. Sawyer, who is seated next to me, has chunks of smoked salmon in his lunch. I consider asking him to trade for my ham sandwich but I am pretty sure that goes against Bunnell House rules.





After lunch I bid my main-floor friends goodbye and head downstairs for the second half of the day to spend it with the older children. Perfect timing, as Pammy Fowler, a teacher at Bunnell for almost 15 years, is just getting the children ready for nap time. They are spread out on the floor, blankets pulled up around them, while soothing Spanish guitar music plays in the background. Pammy helps the more restless children by rubbing their backs for them. Eventually, the guitar music is competing with the sounds of yawning, and one by one, everyone is asleep.

The teachers use nap time to catch up on prep work. I use the time to check the day's e-mail on my iPhone, though, as I look around in envy at the slumbering children, my own eyelids struggling to stay open, I realize there is something else I would much rather be doing.

### Mid-afternoon ☺

Nap time ends around 2:30 p.m. Some children come out of it faster than others, but all come out of it ready for snack. As I



*The author gets a crash course in sandbox etiquette from some of the class of 2027.*



was never able to get any smoked salmon from Sawyer, I am ready for snack as well. I join them at the table for grapes and fortune cookies, and I read the various fortunes to each of the children. One of my snack companions is Peyton Ferguson, daughter of Alaska Nanook hockey coach Dallas Ferguson, so the conversation between the two of us revolves around how well the Chicago Blackhawks are doing in the NHL playoffs.

After snack I am introduced to a whole new world of toys and activities, from tile matching to a toy called Jacob's ladder that has to be explained to me about five times.

"I want to glue my hair to your head," said Lily, who would emerge as my bestest friend for the day.

"Why's that?" I ask her.

"Because I like you," she smiles.

### Late afternoon 🕒🕒🕒

From 4 p.m. until closing, it is all about outside time, and I join everyone for a bevy of games and activities, including playing soccer and enjoying a delicious pie made out of sand. Again, I am the one everyone wants to hang out with, not necessarily because I am a lot of fun, but because I can leave the fenced-in area to retrieve toys and pick dandelions for some of the kids to give to their parents.

Slowly but surely, the parents arrive, much to the delight of the children, who run excitedly into their arms upon arrival. Conversations are had with teachers, the children list the day's activities and any works of art created that day are shared. Those parents who saw me in the morning applaud me for still being alive.

And then there are four: Lily, me, Pammy and Connie. Lily's mom arrives right at the stroke of 5:30 p.m., and the last child is gone. Lights are turned off, doors are locked up, playground toys are put away and with the early evening May sun still high in the sky, the day at the Bunnell House comes to an end.

There were serious issues to be dealt with on UAF's Fairbanks campus May 13, 2010.

At the end of the day, those issues were still there.

Budget deficits, protests over commencement, student concerns over tuition, and the bustle of the end of the academic year would continue to be addressed by the university's suit-wearing contingency.

And the blue motorcycle? It was found before lunchtime. Not by me but by James. Wyatt worked with him, and apparently it was found under one of the tables, tucked in amid a pile of zoo animals placed there by Josie and Abby.



Scott McCrea, '94, is director of UAF Marketing and Communications and, after spending a day at the Bunnell House, is considering a career change.



See more cute kid pics at  
[www.uaf.edu/aurora/](http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/).





Preschool director by day,  
rollergirl by night



## Holy skate key, Batman, it's “Rolla Ghou!”

Tutus and fishnets might not be the most appropriate clothing to wear when one is director of the Bunnell House Early Childhood Lab School. But when Paige Vonder Haar assumes her alter ego of “Rolla Ghou!” as one of the hard-hitting, fast-skating, Fairbanks Rollergirls, or FBXRG, she fits right in.

Huh? Preschool director by day, rollergirl by night?

“Rollergirls are often nice, educated women no one would suspect of being in roller derby,” she explains. “They are mothers, wives, graduate students, artists, teachers, hair stylists and yoga instructors.”

Vonder Haar, who says she grew up with a skate key around her neck in the wilds of suburban Baltimore, got involved with the Fairbanks group after seeing a poster at her child’s school advertising a derby bout, or game, where part of the revenue would benefit the school. She went to the bout with her family, had a great time, and her then 10-year-old son, Douglas, urged her to join.

“A month later my family went to an open house the Fairbanks Rollergirls hosted and asked if they had a geriatric league,” she joked. “The answer was it didn’t matter how old I was, I was welcome. That was a Saturday. I joined and was at practice on Monday.”

Vonder Haar chose her alter ego (an important component of being a rollergirl) because her then 9-year-old daughter, Haley, had trouble pronouncing her Rs, and when she said “roller girl” it sounded a lot like Rolla Ghou!

The FBXRG have been thrilling local fans for one year now. Rolla Ghou! hasn’t competed in a bout yet, but she can be seen in the middle of the track as a nonskating official. She is also involved with the many community projects the FBXRG participates in.

“The organization is a community-service league,” she says. “Every bout raises money for an organization, cause or family in need.”

So, Rolla Ghou!, if a little girl from the Bunnell House said she wanted to join when she grew up, what would you advise?

“Learn to skate so that when they are old enough — and their parents have insurance,” she laughs, “they can join the junior league.”

