Heidi Kahn - Director

Heidi Kahn is a nationally award-winning teacher who has over 30+ years experience in the field of Jewish Early Childhood Education. After graduating from Barkly House Teachers College in South Africa, Heidi emigrated to the United States where she continued her studies in the field of Early Childhood Education.

Written up in the Los Angeles Times as someone who “Makes Teaching a Joy”, Heidi won the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) Master Teacher award in 2000, and received the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Award for Excellence in Jewish Education in 2002. She continues to remain current by attending conferences in Early Childhood Education and participates in an Orange County Jewish Pre-School Directors group, and is the current president.

Heidi is known for her creativity that she integrates into every aspect of our Pre-School. From an idea and a dream, Heidi conceived and started the Pre-School in 2007, assembled a caring and outstanding teaching staff, and has successfully grown University Synagogue Pre-School to over 100 happy students.

She enjoys teaching Parent and Me once a week, and leading the all school Shabbat assemblies on Fridays.

Heidi has been an active member of University Synagogue for 23 years. You would be certain to meet Heidi’s family either through the synagogue or the pre-school – her husband Lawrence, and her daughters Marlee and Jordana. Heidi is also the beaming grandmother, of precious Adalyn Blu, and a new granddaughter arriving this year.

Andrea Gosselin - Assistant Director

Andrea graduated from Cal State Fullerton with her BS in Child and Adolescent Development with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education. She did her internship at University Synagogue Pre-School and we all fell in love with her.

Andrea spent 8 years working in the incredible 2 year old room and also as the Lead Afternoon Teacher. This is her 9th year working at our Pre-School. She is thrilled to be working in a new position, as Assistant Director.

In her role, Andrea is responsible for Pre-School billing, documentation and licensing, as well as general administrative duties.

Andrea was born and raised in Canada. When not at the preschool, Andrea enjoys spending time with her husband, her dog Zoey, family and friends. Her hobbies include baking, playing tennis, and painting. She cherishes her family and spends as much of her free time with them as possible.
Dilani Wijayaweera – Transitional Kindergarten Teacher (5 Days)

Dilani originally came from the beautiful island of Sri Lanka. She has been teaching at University Synagogue Pre-School for over 9 years. Dilani describes herself as very loving, warm hearted and creative. Dilani excels at art with the children, and displays it beautifully on our walls. She completed her Early Childhood Education training at the Open University of Sri Lanka. This will be her 14th year teaching and her 10th year at University Synagogue Pre-School. Dilani has been successful in blending her Montessori and developmental approach to education. She has also taught in an academic setting. Dilani continues to take classes to keep up with current trends taught in early childhood education, and is inspired by the Reggio philosophy.

Dilani is a mother of a wonderful 19 year old son, Arvin. She and her family enjoy traveling and sight-seeing. Dilani is an excellent cook and loves making Sri Lankan curries. She can also be seen sharing her talents and time at the Second Harvest Food Bank every month.

Julia Weizmann – Transitional Kindergarten Teacher (5 Days)

Julia is originally from Germany, lived in Israel for three years before she moved to the United States 18 years ago. Early Childhood Education is Julia’s second career path and she has a BA in graphic design and worked in advertising and marketing for many years before she decided to follow her heart and become a preschool teacher. After earning her ECE units at Saddleback College she worked as a substitute preschool teacher and is excited to be teaching together with Dilani in the TK classroom this year.

In Julia’s opinion the preschool years are a very important and magical time. She believes that working hand in hand with families, setting goals for each individual child and using a play and interest based, child-centered curriculum to support their development is as important as a loving and nurturing environment. She found all this at University Synagogue Pre-School when she was looking for a preschool for her own children years ago.

Julia lives with her Israeli husband Guy and their two boys Daniel (11) and David (9) in Tustin. Spending quality time with friends and family and being active outdoors is her favorite past time.

Daniella Drobis – Transitional Kindergarten Teacher (5 Days)

Daniella has taught University Synagogue Preschool’s TK class and summer camp for the past 7 years, and is adored by teachers, parents, and children alike. Her gentleness and natural ability to communicate with children are the reasons we are fortunate to have her teaching here again this year.

Daniella studied at Santa Barbara College and interned at their Early Childhood Center. She has a degree in Early Childhood Education as well as her certificate and teaching permit. Daniella is very excited about the upcoming year and is looking forward to using her knowledge to help guide, support, and give children some stepping stones for life.

In her free time, she enjoys being outdoors and staying active. Daniella is very close with her family and enjoys spending time with them. She is excited about getting married this year, and we wish her all the joy in the world.

Shelley Simson – Transitional Kindergarten Teacher (5 Days)

With her warm smile and friendly demeanor, Shelley makes a wonderful addition to our Pre-School team this year! Shelley brings over 25 years of incredible Early Childhood Education with her, and is excited to be a part of the PreK, TK teaching staff.

Shelley grew up in Philadelphia. She completed her Associate’s Degree in Applied Science for Early Childhood Education and has also studied at the Gratz College of Jewish Studies. Shelley has years of experience in Judaica and Religious studies. Shelley believes in a developmental approach to teaching. She fosters an environment rich with questions, problem solving and exploration. Shelley loves to tell stories and hearing the children’s thought processes and reactions.

Shelley is very close to her family. She loves spending as much time as possible with her children, grandchildren, mother and sister. In her free time, Shelley enjoys taking walks or drives enjoying all the beauty that SoCal has to offer.
Mindy Guralnik – Prep for Pre-K Teacher (5 Days)

Mindy has taught in Jewish preschools for over 14 years. She is a very creative, fun-loving teacher with excellent communications skills, a strong classroom presence and a great passion for helping children learn and grow.

Mindy received her bachelor’s degree from Cal State University, Northridge in Early Child Development with a minor in Psychology. She believes that children learn through play while in a nurturing environment where they can express and explore their individuality.

Mindy and her loving husband Burt have three children: Nicole (22), Joel (19) and Sabrina (17). Mindy prefers to spend her free time with her family. She enjoys their company the most, whether hanging out around the dinner table, venturing out to the beach, or to shop.

Linda Ascher – Prep for Pre-K Teacher (5 Days)

Born and raised on the East Coast, Linda received a B.B.A. from Hofstra University in Long Island. Since moving to Orange County, Linda has received her Early Childhood Education accreditation and has been teaching in Jewish preschools for several years.

The children love her warm and calm demeanor. Linda can occasionally be seen teaching her class yoga and relaxation techniques. She admires the Reggio philosophy and pulls from it daily to inspire her students. Linda firmly believes that children learn best through play and that it is critical to their development at an early age. She is looking forward to another year of watching your children grow and develop.

Linda is married to Steven and they have two beautiful daughters who are passionate about dance. When she is not teaching, or with her family, Linda likes to walk around the lake in Woodbridge.

Sue Kurland – 3 Year Old Teacher (5 days)

Sue was the first teacher hired when University Synagogue Pre-School opened in 2007, and received a Master Teacher Award from the Pre-School. She has been teaching for more years than she cares to admit! She is a graduate of California State University, Northridge.

Sue believes that by setting up the environment to be challenging yet success oriented, children expand their world physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. She feels that the greatest gift we can give young children is the gift of growth and self-esteem.

Sue has a wonderful and supportive husband and best friend, Don, and three delightful adult children-Jeremy, Cayla and Rebecca. Sue and Don also have two adorable grand “pups” who they love to spoil whenever they get the chance. Family time is extra special whenever they’re together! Sue and Don enjoy the theatre, walking, reading, the beach, game nights with friends, and quiet evenings together.

Melody Shahidi – 3 Year Old Teacher (5 Days)

Melody was born in Tehran, Iran. She moved to the United States in 2004 and earned her Early Childhood units at Irvine Valley College. Melody has spent over 7 years working with children and this is her second year at our school. Her warmth, calm demeanor and creativity are an incredible addition to our preschool. Melody is so excited to be working with Sue in the 3 year old room this year.

Melody believes that the early years in a child’s life are the most critical in their development. Because they are growing and learning at a phenomenal rate, she strives to always create an environment filled with exploration, and encouragement. Melody loves for each child to feel as comfortable and secure in her class as they would in their home.

Melody lives in Irvine with her 9 year old daughter, and family time together are the most special moments for her. In her spare time, Melody excels in painting and art. She works out of her art studio and loves to explore all new artistic endeavors.
Natalie studied Early Childhood Education at Saddleback College here in Orange County, and is completing her Bachelor’s degree in Family and Human Development. Natalie has over 10 years experience working and teaching in a traditional pre-school classroom. Her calm demeanor allows children to feel safe and cared for. Natalie believes in a developmental approach to teaching, and loves implementing expressive and creative activities and lessons with the children. Natalie is known for sweetness and gentleness.

Natalie grew up in Washington State and Orange County and is the oldest of four children. Outside of working Natalie enjoys traveling and outdoor activities such as walking to the beach, biking on the Newport Peninsula, hot yoga and spending time with her friends and family.

Natalie loves teaching at University Synagogue Pre-School and is honored to be a participant in this developmental time of your child’s life.
**Alicia Eastman - Afternoon Teacher (5 Days)**

Alicia graduated from California State University, Fullerton with a BA in Child and Adolescent Development, with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education, and is currently completing her Multiple Subject Credential. Alicia began working with us as an intern during 2013 and fell in love with the program, staff, and students. Alicia has loved working with young children as far back as she can remember. She volunteered in a nursery classroom while in high school and never looked back! This will be her 5th year at University Synagogue Pre-school.

Alicia believes that every child has their own unique learning path and strives to meet the needs of each child individually, while creating a fun and positive learning environment. In her free time, Alicia loves to travel, read, be outdoors, and try to pet every dog she sees! She is passionate about health, animals, and education.

**Sheila Dreyfuss - Afternoon Teacher (3 Days)**

This will be Sheila’s 11th year at University Synagogue Pre-School. She looks forward to co-teaching with the Stay and Play staff this year! Sheila attended Cal State Northridge and earned a B.S. in Communicative Disorders-Speech Therapy. Sheila loves teaching at University Preschool and believes that these early years are a perfect time to help children develop problem solving, sharing, and other social/emotional skills.

Sheila has been a member of University Synagogue for many years. She loves singing, which is no surprise since her father was a cantor, and enjoys incorporating music and songs as teaching tools in the preschool curriculum.

In her spare time, Sheila enjoys spending time with her husband Larry, family and friends, traveling, and walking around the Woodbridge Lake with their dog. Sheila and Larry have three adult children; Michael, Shawn and Caitlyn.

**Farishta Shalemi - Afternoon Teacher (5 Days)**

This year Farishta is excited to be a part of the Stay and Play team again. Her passion for teaching children is matched only by her love for children.

Farishta was born and raised in Afghanistan, received her BA in Bulgaria, and lived in Germany for 4 years as a refugee. She became an Early Childhood Educator, and has taught at a Jewish pre-school in Orange County for 8 years.

She is married to Fahim and they have two children. Farishta enjoys spending her spare time with her family. They are her most important and first priority. She loves long walks, swimming at the beach and cooking for the people she loves! Lucky us! Her mother still lives in Germany and a highlight of her year is to visit her.

Farishta is happy to be at the University Synagogue Pre-School and is looking forward to a rewarding year with your children.
Leslie Van Houten
Music, Rhythm & Rhyme - Mondays
Leslie has been teaching the music enrichment at the Pre-School for over 8 years.
The purpose of her music program is the nurturing of a young child’s musical experience within their developmental capabilities. This is achieved by emphasizing fundamentals of music including: tempo, dynamics, pitch, rhythm and melody through simple songs that relate to a child’s world of fantasy and experience. Leslie lives in Laguna Niguel with her husband Mark, and they recently became grandparents. Leslie loves to play tennis and golf, and enjoys painting.

Gayle Jacobson
Adventures with Flannel Stories - Tuesdays
This enrichment class will focus on literature through flannel board stories. Flannel board stories are always loved by pre-school age children. This class is taught by our beloved teacher Gayle. Gayle has taught at the Pre-School for 8 years. This class will also incorporate crafts and cooking pertaining to each story. The goal is to increase the love of literature for each child.

Aviva Lazarescu
Clay Play - Mondays
Aviva has taught clay to children for the past 11 years. She believes that children feel good about themselves when they are creative...clay is good for self esteem & self confidence. Not only will they enjoy the process, but they will enjoy the end results as well. She holds two Bachelor degrees in psychology. Aviva is from South Africa & is happily settled in Irvine. Her family consists of her husband, Rami, three children and a dog named Lucky.

Iona Pally
Math Magic - Wednesdays
Hebrew - Fridays with TK
Iona has been an Enrichment Teacher at University Synagogue Pre-School for several years, bringing enthusiasm and joy in each of her classes.
Math Magic is an interactive, developmentally appropriate class aligned with the standards and goals of the California Preschool Learning Foundations. This class focuses on numeracy including cardinal and ordinal numbers. Concepts include patterns, classification by single and multiple attributes, and shapes.
Hebrew enrichment is a fun conversational Hebrew class using themes including family relationships, parts of the body, colors, animals, transportation, dinosaurs, space and the calendar.

Jordana Kahn
Creative Dance - Wednesdays
Jordana has been trained in dance for over 20 years. She has been a teacher at Academy of Dance for the last 4 years, where she was recently promoted to be the head of the studio’s Junior Dance Program. Jordana is also a certified Rhythm Works Instructor, a wonderful integrated dance program focusing on children with special needs. Jordana brings dance and movement to new levels with her vibrant, fun and creative approach.

Coach Tiara Kelley
Sports Buddies - Thursdays
Sports Buddies uses an approach to strengthen a healthy Mind and Body connection, through a structured program of mental fitness and physical activities. Physical play incorporates decision making, problem solving, and positive communication. By combining motion with sports games such as basketball, soccer, football and movement, we can give your child a holistic experience that builds life long skills.

My Gym - Fridays
My Gym teachers use a great combination of energy and humor to build self-esteem and confidence through a variety of warm-ups, relays, manipulative skills, tumbling skills, games, puppet shows, and MUCH MORE!