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 over 20 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 granddaughters, Adalyn, Aurora and Aspen.

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 9 years working in the incredible 2 year old room and also as the Lead Afternoon Teacher. She has now been at the preschool for over 10 years, and loves her role 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 Ontario, Canada. When not at the preschool, Andrea most enjoys spending time with 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. Andrea and her husband are new parents and could not be happier. They eagerly await the day he will join the preschool family as well!
2 Year Old Teachers

Jordana Kahn – 2 Year Old Teacher

Jordana couldn’t be happier to be continuing on as the 2 year old teacher, at University Synagogue Pre-School. You may already know her as the proud daughter of our amazing director, Heidi Kahn.

A passion for children has always been extremely present in her life. Starting from a young age, Jordana assisted teachers in classes with young children, both at University Synagogue Religious School and her childhood dance studio. In 2011, Jordana attended University of Utah, where she studied modern dance and later, psychology. Wanting to follow in her mother’s footsteps, she earned her Early Childhood Education credentials at Theoria Technical College. She has been teaching at University Synagogue Pre-School ever since!

Jordana’s incredible creativity and warmth make her lessons dynamic and fun. She is committed to making the transition to school as seamless and comfortable as possible for both the parents and children.

When Jordana isn’t teaching, she is most likely spending time with her family, and taking on her favorite role, as aunt to her three wonderful nieces!

Alejandra Arreola – 2 Year Old Teacher

This is Alejandra’s first year at University Synagogue Pre-School and she is very excited to be teaching with two year olds. Alejandra is a kind, loving, energetic and dedicated teacher. She is currently working towards her degree in Child Development at Mt. San Antonio College in the city of Walnut and is looking forward to completing her coursework in spring of 2021. She has 4 years of experience working with children of all ages. Her passion for teaching comes from a drive to see them grow and accomplish different milestones in their development. Alejandra believes in a developmental approach to a child’s education. She believes that exploration, social interaction and positive encouragement are the keys to a successful class experience.

Alejandra is the youngest of 6 children. With such a large family comes many nieces and nephews. They serve as her inspiration to keep learning and growing in this career path. Her family is a big part of where her passion for teaching comes from.

In her free time, Alejandra enjoys outdoor activities like going on hikes with her golden retriever, riding horses, and exploring different beaches. She also enjoys going on food adventures to try new types of cuisine. The things she loves most are her family and traveling all over the world with them.
Melody Shahidi

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 fourth 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 Dilani in the TK 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 each child to feel as comfortable and secure in her class as they would in their home.

Melody lives in Irvine with her 12 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.

Sue Kurland

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 four 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.

Ginette Aclander

With her wonderful, multicultural background, Ginette has much to add to our preschool community.

Ginette was born in Lima-Peru where she attended a Jewish K-12 School. She moved to Israel at the age of eighteen to pursue her degree in Education. Ginette received her B.A. in Early Childhood Education from Beit Berl College and worked in several preschools in Israel. Prior to moving to California, Ginette lived in Florida where she taught at Jacob Sinai Academy Preschool for 7 years. She was a lead teacher at the JCCOC and helped develop the bilingual Spanish Program. Ginette is fluent in Spanish, Hebrew, and English. Ginette strongly believes in giving children opportunities to explore their environment in order to expand their creativity and appetite for learning. She enjoys teaching Jewish traditions and holidays, and incorporates art and play as part of the child’s everyday learning process.

In her free time, Ginette enjoys spending time with her family. She has been married to her husband Haim for over 30 years and they have 3 wonderful children.
Mindy Guralnik

Mindy has taught in Jewish preschools for over 20 years. She is a very creative, fun-loving teacher with excellent communication 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 young adult children: Nicole, Joel and Sabrina. 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 shopping.

Sylvia Marom

Sylvia is excited to be a 3rd year member of the University Synagogue Pre-school teaching team. Sylvia was born in Uruguay and at a young age moved with her parents to Israel. After finishing High School she received her certified Dental Assistant Degree from Tel Aviv University, and served the Israeli Army as a Dental Assistant. After finding permanent residency in the United States she completed her Associate Degree in Child Development as well as a certificate in Child Development and Education.

Fluent in Hebrew, Spanish and English, Sylvia strives for open and thoughtful communication between herself, the families and the children. Sylvia has many years’ experience teaching preschool age children. She believes that children learn best through play, and fosters their creativity through art and exploration.

When not in school, Sylvia enjoys spending time with her amazing husband Jacov, and her free time baking or cooking. Sylvia is the proud mother of Motti, Avital and Gil, and grandmother to seven lovely grandchildren (some of which we have had the pleasure of teaching at our preschool!)
Transitional Kindergarten Teachers

Dilani Wijayaweera

Dilani originally came from the beautiful island of Sri Lanka. She has been teaching at University Synagogue Pre-School for over 10 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 18th year teaching and her 12th 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 21 year old son, Avin. 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.

Farishta Shalemi

This year Farishta is excited to be a part of the amazing Transitional Kindergarten Class this year. Her passion for teaching children is matched only by her love for children.

Farishta was born and raised in Afghanistan, she 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 preschools in Orange County for over 10 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 them.

Farishta is very happy to be at University Synagogue Pre-School and is looking forward to a rewarding year with your children.
**Netta Hazan**

Netta has come to University Synagogue with a vast and diverse teaching history. Netta completed her Bachelor’s Degree at Beit Berl University in Israel, where she majored in Children’s Literacy. Netta then worked as an elementary school teacher for seven years, working with age groups from Kindergarten to 6th grade.

Netta and her husband moved to the United States in 2005 with their 3 year old daughter. In the following year they welcomed their second daughter. Netta enjoyed being an active mom in her daughters’ lives.

After several years of tutoring and working with children at home, Netta decided to go back to school and study Early Childhood Education. She knew she wanted to work at a synagogue because of the importance of passing on the Jewish tradition. Netta believes firmly in the philosophy that every child is different and deserves to be treated as a unique individual.

In her free time, Netta loves to read, listen to Israeli music, cooking and eating.

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**Liz Do**

Liz recently moved back to California after living in Florida for the past eight years and is originally from Arizona. She comes from a family of educators, and knew she wanted to be a teacher from a young age. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education from Arizona State University. Liz then moved to California, where she met her husband, and earned a master’s degree from San Diego State University in Curriculum and Instruction for Elementary Education. After teaching both elementary school and preschool in California, Liz moved to Florida in 2012.

In Florida, Liz worked in a Jewish preschool for five years while her own children attended the preschool there. Liz also taught elementary school in Florida, and became active as a leader in her daughters’ girl scout troop. Liz has three children, and she enjoys camping trips, the beach, and spending time outdoors with her family. Liz loves to travel to new places and try new restaurants. She is excited to be back in California, living close to family again.

Liz believes that the biggest gift she can share with your child this year is a love for reading.

She believes that setting a strong foundation in reading from an early age is critical to developing a lifelong relationship with books. Her goal is to make a significant impact on each child in her class, and to create self-directed, lifelong learners. Liz is looking forward to piloting University Synagogue’s kindergarten program this year.
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.

Aviva Lazarescu
Clay Play - Mondays
Aviva has taught clay to children for the past 12 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.

Gayle Jacobson
Adventures with Flannel Stories – Wednesdays
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.

Iona Pally
Math Magic - Tuesdays
Hebrew - Wednesdays 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.

Bridget Ridgeway
Creative Dance - Tuesdays
Bridget Ridgeway is an energetic and caring dance teacher. For the past six years, Bridget has been introducing the joy of dance to students of all ages. Bridget received her BA in dance from California State University, Fullerton. She also holds her certificate in dance form Victor Valley College, a dance teacher certificate from University of Nevada Las Vegas, and is a certified Rhythm Works Integrative Dance Instructor. Currently Bridget is a full time instructor and head of the junior program at Academy of Dance, as well as teaching pre-school dance at the Montessori Schools of Irvine. When not teaching dance, Bridget loves spending time outdoors with her husband Rocky and two dogs Axl and Rose. Bridget is very excited to share her love for dance with new friends!

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.