Haven

A Revolutionary New Preschool in Gladstone, offering parents a new approach to blending family, career, and life.

Members' workspace at Haven

Article by Alice Roche Cody • Photography by Erin Kiernan

Emily Killion calls her daughter Avery her COVID kid, born four months before the shutdowns and at-home her first two years with little outside interaction. When Ms. Killion's New York City marketing job went remote, she and her husband blended their respective jobs with Avery's naps and feedings. As her daughter became more mobile, Ms. Killion looked into daycare options but never signed up due to Coronavirus concerns.

Then she learned about Haven in Gladstone, a revolutionary new preschool that checked all her boxes and more: close to the train, a nurturing educational program, onsite gym and workspaces for parents. When Haven opened in September, Avery played in the toddler room while Ms. Killion worked remotely in the office upstairs, next to other moms and dads.

"I spent two years working at a desk in my guest bedroom, and to be in a co-working space around other adults is amazing," said Ms. Killion. "The blend of work and life is now so easy." She even finds time between calls for a quick workout.

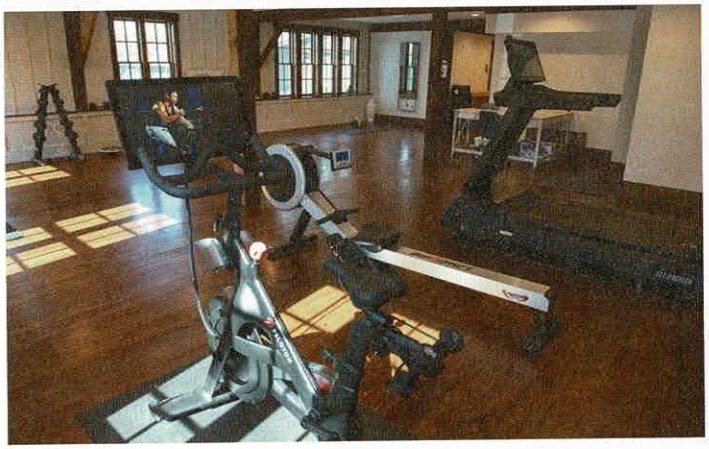
Haven also healed the isolation this Long Valley family faced. "We moved in the early part of the pandemic, and we didn't have a big social network in the area," said Ms. Killion. "We met other families, and now we hang out on weekends. The kids are friends, and we're friends. At traditional drop-off daycare, it wouldn't have

this social element." And Avery is thriving, too. She's counting, learning her colors and constantly singing her favorite song, "The Wheels on the Bus."

Through its family-care approach, Haven provides the space for connection, a true refuge after long periods of pandemic separation. Located at 17 Mendham Road, Haven offers preschool for children up to age 6, Monday through Friday, from 8 am to 6 pm. Parents can work on-site and pick flexible family schedules, such as half-day or whole day, one to five days a week. The school's philosophy is a blend of Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia approaches, meaning it's sensory play-based and seeks to foster independence while building self-worth and resilience.

Haven found its home in Gladstone thanks to Bedminster resident Christy Johnson, who joined forces with Britt Riley, the mastermind behind the family-care concept and co-founder of the first site with Morgan Everson in Newport, RI. "I had the idea and Christy ran with it," said Ms. Riley. "Christy introduced us to the area and the need for quality childcare in the community. It's a small town with one main street, and we're creating a heart for it by bringing together families who have children in common and want proximity to childrearing, work and fitness. People coming together in this space sit at desks, look out the window and bond over their kids. We have access to different community helpers, and we become embedded in the community."

Already, Haven has nestled itself seamlessly into the area, prima-



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rily by providing 20 jobs to its neighbors. And parents frequent local businesses, grabbing lunch at Gladstone Corner Deli & Grill, dashing to Cocoluxe and enjoying an early meal at Gladstone Tavern before pick-up. Then there's the civic-minded focus. Children walk to the library to check out books. They fill wagons with canned goods to deliver to the food pantry down the street. In the fall, firefighters visited aboard their truck. Then preschoolers decorated a mitten tree and families donated gift cards for Heartworks. So far, one student has received a full-time scholarship, and fundraisers will assist more local kids.

Inside its newly refurbished barn walls, Haven has built its own tight-knit community charged with a joyful energy. At the front desk, Michka McCarthy set the tone on a recent visit with her warm welcome. Things were hopping in the infant room, where a teacher was paired with every baby present. A woman held a boy in blue as he gazed out the window, while another changed a red-haired infant. A youngster looked at a fabric board book with her helper. In here, the student-teacher ratio is two to one, double the state's requirement. "We have an arm for every baby," said Jessica Katchen, child development director, who explained the ratio for all other classrooms - yearling, toddler and preschool - are also above New Jersey standards.

Down the hall in the toddler room, a child swept the floor as a little girl reached into a plastic bin filled with pink and red rice and valentine containers. A teacher helped a boy put on his coat for the

playground and another helped a tot into snow boots. In the middle of the room, a lad slept soundly, not yet ready to leave his naptime dreams.

Nearby, in the feeding room, nursing moms or parents who give bottles can grab a quiet moment with their babies between meetings. Next door is the fitness center, a bright space with a treadmill, HOIST Fitness equipment and a Peloton bike. This is where Ms. Johnson hopes to make more connections with caregivers. As head of Health & Wellness, she leads dance classes and empowers parents to step up their fitness game. Who better than this seven-time Ironman athlete? Also a nutrition counselor, she loves sharing favorite recipes, like her gluten-free quinoa banana pancakes. Her Haven roots run deep, as she's on the board of directors and her daughter, Sarah Moynihan, teaches in the toddler room. Ms. Johnson remembers those hectic days when she had four children under four (no twins!). Now, she's happy to help young families find balance. "People are not going back to work in-person full-time, not spending five days a week in New York City; they can do it remotely and build stronger, happier families," she said.

Upstairs, in the largest high-ceilinged workspace, two moms sat at wooden tables as another spoke on her cell. Inside one of the two sound-proof booths, a woman took a Zoom call in complete privacy. Haven's general manager, Krissy Binder, explained: "We have online bookings for desks and pods in this room. Now we're working at capacity, with 21 bookings a day." Similarly, spots at the

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school are filling up as well, nearing its 55-student limit. She pointed to the side windows that overlook the playground. "Throughout the day, parents turn their chairs around to look out the windows to the see playground and garden areas," she said. "Sometimes, they crack the windows open to hear the sounds of the children laughing and playing."

At the beverage counter, a dad poured his coffee. His son, Paul, started this week in Miss Sarah's classroom and he expressed his gratitude to Ms. Johnson. "We left a box of chocolates to thank your daughter for the extra TLC," he said. "Paul cried the first day, and now he's happy to be here."

Next door, in the community room, a mom checked emails in front of more windows above the playground. Behind her, on the bulletin board, hung lesson plans and student birthdays, and parenting books rested on a nearby table. Up a few stairs, in yet another vast work space, Paul's dad settled in with his coffee.

A few weeks ago, as Alison Williams took calls upstairs for her new concert production company, her son's teacher reached out. "She said, 'I know it's your work time, but we want to show you something,'" recalls Ms. Williams. "My son had learned to read, and she knew I'd want to see this momentous occasion. It was such a special moment. Watching how proud he was as he showed me his brand-new skill is something I'll always treasure."

Throughout her day, she loves glancing up from her screen to see her children, 2-year-old Scarlett and Wyatt, age 4, run around outside. "It's amazing to see the kids interact with different age groups in such a supportive, encouraging environment with the freedom to explore," she said.

For her Bedminster family, finding this haven has been life-changing. "When you move to a new area, usually you have to wait until your kids are in grade school to be part of the community because preschool is 'drop and run.' Haven affords a special opportunity to be part of the community."

Haven is located at 17 Mendham Rd., in Gladstone. To learn more, please visit havengladstone.com or call 908-997-9098