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Vellotti's Camps Mix Chess and Fun

Anne Wallace Allen
Staff

“Treasure Valley kids learn about competitive chess surrounded by puppies, kittens, ducks and a trampoline”



Kyle Larsen, 10, contemplates his next move during a chess match at Vellotti's Chess Kids day camp. Daniel Vellotti and Ava Harmon, well-established figures on the Boise chess scene, host five chess camps as well as four Lego camps during the summer.

Just half a mile from the heavy traffic of West State Street sits a one-acre oasis in Collister where ducks splash in a pond and a horse named Stormy dozes in the shade of his barn.

This is the spot where a dozen kids at a time converge for summer camp at Vellotti's Chess Kids, a freewheeling chess-and-Lego haven with a 100-year-old farmhouse and a large organic garden.

"I think it's heaven on Earth for kids," said Stephanie Almeida, whose 5-year-old daughter went to a week-long Lego camp this summer.

"I felt like I was going into a whole different world when I went through those gates," Almeida said.

Daniel Vellotti and Ava Harmon are well-established figures on the Boise chess scene. Vellotti teaches or coaches about 350 children in chess in the Treasure Valley, either at school programs or individually.

Harmon's 8-year-old son, Luke, is ranked sixth in the country after coming in fourth overall at the national chess championships in May in Nashville, Tenn. Teams that are coached by Vellotti win top honors at tournaments around the country.

But there is little sign of the competitive pressures that go along with chess at the summer camp, where the small group of children mixes informally in a clubhouse decorated with coaches, chess books and the many dozens of trophies that the family has won.

At the chess camps, the kids receive instruction or play chess together on the computer while cradling the new kittens; for a break, they visit the ducks, jump on the trampoline or play capture the flag.

There is much talk these days of restoring the childhood of yore, when children enjoyed long periods of unstructured time in the summer, not the lessons and school preparation now recommended by many educators.

While that playtime might be important, kids at Vellotti's chess camp said they were there because they loved it.

"It's a good way to learn and to teach your brain and to figure out stuff," said Erin Schmitt of Boise, a fourth-grader at Riverstone International School. Schmitt has been going to Vellotti's summer camp since she was in kindergarten, her mother said.

"This was completely her idea," said Sharon Schmitt, who does not play chess. "She latched onto it; it was introduced to her in school, and she just really enjoyed it."

Harmon and Vellotti work full time to promote chess in the Treasure Valley. They help run tournaments, and Vellotti teaches in several elementary schools. Research shows chess is good for children, Harmon said, adding that more colleges recently have started offering chess scholarships that can be won at tournaments.

Harmon and Vellotti run three week-long chess camps at their home in the summer, and two more at Riverstone and Riverside Elementary School. They also run three Lego camps at their home and another at Riverstone. During the school year, they offer private lessons and after-school programs, including a sold-out afternoon chess program just for girls.

Their sons, Daniel Vellotti and Carl Harmon, both national chess champions, help tutor the kids at camp.

The organic garden, the menagerie of ducks, bunnies, kittens and Springer Spaniel puppies make the place more fun, Harmon said. And they provide a break from the tough intellectual work of playing chess.

"People are starting to understand that there's a connection between keeping the kids interested and keeping them challenged," she said.

It's clear the kids are drawn to the animals. Girls who once cradled kittens full time while they played chess at Vellotti's Chess Kids have gone on to win trophies at tournaments.

"We say, 'She came for the kittens; she stayed for the chess,'" Harmon said.