

Ministry Minute

WECC & Rise Early

“Go Tell It in Vancouver”



World leaders in childcare and education recently got a glimpse of Westwood's success in the field at the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Kellee Nelson, Director of Westwood's Early Childhood Center (WECC), and Kylie Cooper, Director of Rise Early Learning Center at Rise on 7 affordable housing development in St. Louis Park, were invited to share their work as part of a conference panel.

"We got to present our story on how the community of Westwood Lutheran Church made this huge impact on the local community of St. Louis Park, Kellee said.

She also said, "The conference's primary aim is to build relationships that expand perspectives, provoke new thinking, and share stories that inspire different ways of thinking about how people can come together to create something really beautiful for the community."

With its 40-year history of quality childcare and education, Westwood has been a shining example as it committed to developing a similar program tied to St. Louis Park's efforts to provide quality affordable housing.

The two programs use a Reggio-inspired and nature-based curriculum. WECC's program, which serves 97 children, is faith-based, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and earns the highest Parent-Aware rating.

The Rise Early Learning program, which is in its first year, currently serves 43 children and has begun work toward those same accreditations. Its core effort is in family-focused program design, braiding housing, wrap-around supports, and high-quality childcare. About 40 percent of its families pay privately, and 60 percent receive financial support through state and federal subsidies or local scholarships. Rise Early provides an inclusive and anti-bias approach to early childhood and welcomes and celebrates everyone from every background, Kylie said.

Nearly 700 people from 54 countries attended the Vancouver conference, which also offered information and discussions on race, equity, trauma, climate change, AI, and what those topics might look like with early childhood education.

"Our common cause is to help children and families. As an educator, what I appreciate about this conference is that we stay plugged into current topics and issues, and we can bring that back to the work we do, inspire change, build on our practices, and strengthen our program," Kellee said. "More than just a conference on early childhood education, it's a community."

Those attending the panel's presentation were particularly interested in Westwood's collaborative model for connecting housing and childcare and what that did to build community support for the Rise Early program.

Kellee and Kylie pointed to Westwood leaders' work with other community leaders on gathering and examining data on affordable housing needs, community meetings, and WECC's long-standing reputation for quality education and care of the community's children.

"We use quality practices, and we are a model program for others," said Kellee, who has directed the WECC program for about 10 years. "We were comfortable taking the lead."

At the conference, Kellee and Kylie had the added benefit of connecting with experts in the curriculum they offer and authors of relatable books. They even made a connection for Westwood's Tanzania project.

"I was excited to meet an individual I've followed for years. This is someone I looked up to in my career and really focused on in my professional work, degrees and certifications with regard to the quality of care, wellness of staff, and compensation," Kylie said. "Now we're actually putting some of that work into action."

Kellee's takeaway: "I think attending this conference really allows us to share our ministry beyond our church and local community as well as learn from others."

