



Students in Union the County College Paramedic Program go through a training exercise at the college's Plainfield campus. The certificate program is approved by the New Jersey Department of Health and Human Services – Office of Emergency Medical Services.

G A T E W A Y R E G I O N A L  
*Inside*  
B U S I N E S S

## You're Such a Smartycat

By Rod Hirsch

Michelle Oppelt is on a mission to help groom the Ben Franklins, Thomas Edisons and Bill Gates of tomorrow. A former biological science major at Rutgers University, Oppelt was disappointed by the lack of emphasis on sciences at her son's pre-school.

"What they did was take the kids on a nature walk with no real explanation as to what was going on, that was pretty much it," she said. "I realized more could be done, just to show kids that science could be fun."

Determined to make a difference, Oppelt

designed lesson plans for a 10-week hands-on basic science course for children ages 5-12 and preschoolers which became Smartycat Kids in 2007.

"It was rent a room at a church, see who signs up and from there it went to working with recreation departments and getting in touch with schools," she explained. "Now we have programs all over New Jersey."

Today Smartycat Kids is doing its part to make science fun and appealing.

*(Continued on page 3)*

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*(Continued from page 1)*

According to the program's website, "Children learn best through discovery. Smartycat Kids' unique science enrichment programs give children a 100 percent hands-on way to explore many areas of science including: biology, chemistry, physics, engineering, technology, earth science and green science. Children learn to conduct experiments, test out their own hypotheses and work in groups to find creative solutions, all while enriching their problem-solving skills. Activities (include) building roller coasters, launching rockets, designing skyscrapers, conducting chemistry experiments, studying live animals, constructing robots or generating electricity."

Statistics show that children in the United States are lagging behind other nations in the sciences. South Korean 15-year-olds placed sixth in science in the most recent international rankings released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development while U.S. 15-year-olds came in 23.

American college students also seem to be shunning the sciences, even though science-related fields offer a positive outlook for jobs. Career One Stop of the U.S. Department of Labor reports that of the 25 fastest-growing occupations in the United States between 2008 and 2018, those requiring a bachelor's degree or greater include biomedical engineers, scientists, biochemists and biophysicists and physician assistants. Yet CollegeStats.org reports that the most popular college majors in the United States include communications, criminal justice, marketing, psychology, political science and sociology.

Oppelt emphasizes a hands-on approach and hires instructors with science backgrounds who share her philosophy.

"In chemistry we make things bubble, ooze and change color," she said. "The kids enjoy that and they love dry ice, robotics...they love the animals and anything that turns into slime."

Smartycat Kids scores high marks with recreation departments offering the classes, which usually run 45 minutes once a week for 10 weeks. The average cost per class is \$13.

"I like how they handle the kids," said Traci Kastner, program coordinator of the Westfield Recreation Department. "They allow the kids to have fun...It's not like a classroom with a teacher up in front of the room."

"There's lots of activity. The teachers are great, they get the kids involved and they wind up loving science. They don't even realize it because they are having so much fun."

"It's an excellent program," said Ralph Bernardo of the Clark Recreation Department. "We love them. We (had) them here in the spring and we're going to have them here again in the fall."

Charles White, a Westfield resident whose two daughters aged 3 and 8 attended Smartycat Kids programs, says his 8-year-old has been challenged and captivated by the experience.

"Often times we'll just be driving around in the car and she'll blurt out 'I know how that works' and I'll ask her how she knows and she'll tell me, 'I learned that at Smartycat Kids.'"

"She's got about 10 different things on the top of her dresser in her bedroom from the classes," White added, noting a hovercraft made from a CD, the squirt-top of a water bottle and a balloon. "Some of the things (they do) with the kids are very creative, like the hovercraft to teach the principles of physics, friction or lack thereof, things like that."

White is a strong believer that the sciences should be stressed at a young age.

"It is really, really important as a parent that our children get a solid science background and the fact they don't start a concentration until the sixth grade is pathetic," he said. "That's way too late to lay down that scientific method observational approach of cause and effect. You've lost them by that age."