

# Parenting PEOPLE

## Nurturing the Creative Child

When asked about children and creativity, Estelle Condra doesn't mince words.

"Creativity is something we were all born with — it's that spirit we all have, some lesser and some more ... but, we have it and soon it can be squelched by so many things: Negative criticisms, television, not asking questions of your child open-endedly, and then children are made to conform, to fit into a certain hole. We, as parents and educators need to be aware of that to lead our children and to nurture first of all ourselves and then our children."

So begins a wonderful conversation with Estelle Condra, owner and creative head of "Imagination Station," a Green Hills after-school drama enrichment program for children and teenagers (up to age 15). But that's not all. A South-African-turned-Nashvillian performer, writer (her children's book, *See the Ocean* will be published next month), lecturer and teacher thoroughly committed to her life's work based in the creative imagination, Estelle is an extraordinary woman filled with positive energy and a desire to share her insights with others. The fact that she is legally blind has never stopped her. Though at times it has been a source of anguish for her and has caused her pain, she has always

sought to seek out the positive aspects of her life. She is no ordinary run-of-the-mill woman.

To get a handle on Estelle, you need only ask. She is more than willing to talk about her life, both past and present. Born in South Africa to well-heeled parents, the influence that Estelle's mother had on her was immense. She taught her children to be fearless and not to listen to their own drums.

"I think the reason why I am so *into* creativity is, my mother was totally rebellious against any kind of rules or

regulations. And, for a woman

who was a part of the Dutch Reformed Church, a very strict religion, well, she would say, 'Well, God will



understand that I am respecting him, but I have to do other things!' ... my father would just about die! But as a child who was raised on a farm and who did a lot of the things boys would do well, by the time she was an adult, she probably thought, 'What is this? Now I'm supposed to behave differently?'"

Having worked with children in innovative thinking since she was a young woman in South Africa, Estelle knows the importance of childhood play — and how it should weave itself into a creative adult life. Playtime might be in the mud, in water, in what-have-you: It is the key to opening up the creative doors.

At "Imagination Station," where three teachers work with children (up to nine at a time, three days a week) parents are asked to be a part of the initial process. They are encouraged to accompany their children to class, take off their business jackets or high heels and get down on the floor with the others. From these beginnings, stories are read, tales are woven and ideas are brought to life. Children can use any of the costumes or props they'd like.

"We have props out of the gazoo! Tons of stuff which we use. For example, I put the phone in the middle of the room and I say to the children, 'Now, you have to use this object for something other than what you might use it for! And a child might pick it up and shout, 'Hello, control tower?!'"

The rewards for Estelle are found when she discovers children using themselves in unique ways; some former students have gone on to study drama, education and other forms of creative communication. She is touched deeply when they return to see her. However, the fact that they do return demonstrates that they too have been touched. ♦