

## close-up

# Educator emphasizes 'positive, productive' students

*Mwalimu, formerly known as Donna Evans, has co-owned an alternative home school since 1973 — the first five years in Long Beach and in Compton for the past eight years under the name Childrenspace. It serves ages 2 to 12 with preschool and elementary instruction. About 50 students are currently enrolled. Of those, 10 are residential students while the others commute. The school has four full-time teachers, one part-time teacher and a secretary. Tuition is \$70 per week for residential students; \$55 per week for commuters. There is a sliding scale for families with more than one child enrolled. On the first Sunday of each month, Childrenspace, 1108 E. Peck St., presents a music and poetry program from 3-8 p.m. that is open to the public. Co-Owner Mwalimu was interviewed recently by a Press-Telegram staff writer.*



Press-Telegram

Donna Evans, who prefers to be called Mwalimu, teaches at the alternative education class she founded in Compton in 1978.

**Q.** Why did you start a school in your Long Beach home?

**A.** This school really started when my kids were about 2 and 3 years old. I knew I didn't want to send them to public schools. You don't get the knowledge that you are supposed to give something back. And I really wanted to instill in them the fact that they owe their community something — the black community wherever they were living.

**Q.** What happened after you made this decision?

**A.** I was attending Long Beach State and there were other students who also had young children. So, we started a play group in our yard. Each week, somebody would take the children. Then, we started to see that they needed other things. Like, we would take them on field trips and to special programs on campus.

I met a woman named Yolanda Reed. She'd had a school in her home and had taught in public schools for 10 years. Yolanda and I sat down and just started putting our ideas together and worked the whole thing out.

**Q.** How does Childrenspace operate?

**A.** We offer reading, math, science, geography, physical education and gardening. The school is open from 8 a.m. to about 3:30 p.m., but children stay as late as 6:30 p.m. Breakfast is served to residential students and they all get lunch and snacks.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the children clean up the yard and houses. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we have physical education. Each day at 9:15 a.m., the children have a 30-

minute meeting. They talk about world and local events that have happened overnight. On Mondays, they have to bring in an article on South Africa, and we have daily news reports. And one of the children may have an announcement. Then, we have some values that we go over each day. They also sing songs. Occasionally, if there's a serious problem, somebody will be put on the hot seat.

**Q.** How is the instructional program organized?

**A.** When children come here, they're tested in reading and math. Then, the elementary school is divided into four groups according to ability levels. So, you may have a child who does fourth-grade math and fifth-grade reading. We use standard math books after third grade. I also use a lot of Montessori materials.

**Q.** What is the goal of Childrenspace and similar schools?

**A.** Our goal is to develop children who will eventually be able to take care of themselves. For me, it really means that children will have the tools necessary to make the correct choices — positive choices for themselves. It means that, when you become an adult, you are prepared to take care of yourself and your family — earn a living and contribute to whatever community you decide to be in. You become a positive, productive person.

**Q.** What else makes Childrenspace different from public schools?

**A.** We don't deal with traditional holidays at all — at least not at the school. We're also vegetarians. To us, this means we serve no meat products, no dairy products, no

refined sugar, no refined anything, no breads, none of that. The older children bring their own snacks and they are asked to bring fruits, natural fruit juices, dried fruits, or popcorn. But once in awhile, somebody will bring in something that they know they're not supposed to do.

**Q.** What other activities do you provide for the students?

**A.** We go out a lot. We have a field trip every two weeks, but most of them are related to science. Our science instruction is split into four areas: earth, air, fire and water. And we try to concentrate on each one of the areas. But we don't go to any commercial places.

**Q.** Is it harder being a student at Childrenspace?

**A.** One thing you'll notice if you're here for awhile is that the peer pressure here is to

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■ **Quote:** We named our school Childrenspace because we wanted it to be a place for children — where they could be safe and in a positive environment.

■ **Job:** Co-founder, director and teacher at Childrenspace — a private, alternative school in Compton.

■ **Family:** Divorced; two daughters, Mshairi, 15; Virgo, 14.

■ **Birthplace/age:** Los Angeles/44.

■ **Last book read:** The World and Africa, by W.E.B. Dubois.

■ **Interests/hobbies:** Cultural programs, developing education curricula.