

Rooted
Kindness

GOLESTAN
MAGAZINE

SUMMER
2023



Act Locally,
Share Globally



Dear Community Near and Far,

As we wrapped up the 2022-2023 academic year, I look back on all that we accomplished with awe and pride. If I were to share everything, it would take up this entire magazine, but here are a few highlights:

- Our first fifth grader flew forward and is moving on to 6th grade! Congratulations Amelia joun! Next year our founding Kindergarteners will be flying forward in our first graduating fifth grade *class*!
- Our second graders closed their unit on "What is a Habitat?" by getting Golestan certified as a Natural Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat (be sure to see the plaque in our Hayaat playground)!
- We added a new class this coming school year to increase our capacity after five years of expansion. With two K/1 classrooms, a 2/3 class, and a 4/5 class, we will be at our final class configuration in 2023-2024!
- This year we had five *new* Colab projects, both local and international.
- Our work with a beloved Colab project in Nepal - Sunsar Maya - was put on a brief pause when the pandemic hit and our focus turned to Covid safety and outdoor education. I'm excited to share that we're now deeply involved again and training teachers for three sites in Nepal.

Many people in our community have shared with me that they know very little about our Colab work. This magazine is a way to give you a peek into some of our projects, but it's still not enough. I plan to do a better job of sharing our work because so many of you are invested in its success. Even the parents of our students are unknowingly involved in the Golestan Colab. Without our students and teachers, we have no model to use as a starting point for rethinking how schools look, feel, and operate. Without our students and teachers, it's all just theory... just a bunch of talk about how things *COULD* be. Thanks to you, we can focus on how things *CAN* be.

As you'll read in this issue, the work of the Colab is not unidirectional. Golestan is continuously enriched by these partnerships and, in turn, we pass on what we learn and produce back to our partners. The potential for the synergism between our school, our partners, and back into our school is limitless. Now that we're coming out of the madness of the pandemic *and* our expansion, I look forward to delving deeper into the power of this synergy.

Thank you for your unwavering support and positivity. This community constantly inspires me to challenge myself; to try to push boundaries, be a better educator - a better parent - a better friend - a better human being.

I hope you enjoy this next issue. It's our longest one yet, which seems fitting for sharing with you one of our longest partnerships!



Yalda Modabber

Golestan Education
Founding Parent + Executive Director

Play is the highest form of research.

— Albert Einstein



THE GOLESTAN COLAB

OUR MISSION & GOAL

Golestan School was developed, not only to create a rich natural and cultural learning environment, but also to serve as an incubator, model, and resource for new approaches in education through the **Golestan Colab**. The Colab is a pro-bono consultancy that supports and collaborates with communities across North America—and around the world. It empowers and supports educators, parents, and community leaders to create their ideal learning environment for children.

The Colab **produces teaching materials** modeled after Golestan's own program curriculum. It researches best practices in **bilingualism & child development** and offers **pro-bono consulting** to individuals and schools either wanting to enhance their current programs or develop experiential programs for children in the following areas:

- The integration and application of hands-on and **experiential learning practices & approaches**
- **Language immersion & cultural education**
- Developing **natural playscapes & calm, beautiful learning environments**
- Setting up **COVID-safe schools & campuses**



COLLABORATION ACROSS THE GLOBE



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The Golestan Colab has collaborated with and supported over 1,200 schools, impacting 150,000+ students, 6,000+ teachers in local public schools—and over 10,000 educators worldwide.

We believe that every child deserves a Golestan experience - an education that is child-focused and inquiry based, and that allows children to experience, learn, grow, and thrive.

That's why we've developed all our systems and materials in a sharable format so that we can work with educators all over the world. We promote a culture of giving by providing hands-on support and resources all pro-bono. **The only requirement is that participants pay it forward by supporting other educators and communities.**

A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees.

— Amelia Earhart



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

JEHÁN SEIRAFI



Golestan's Emma Parandvash spoke with **Jehán Seirafi, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Sunsar Maya** about the growth of their after-school and women's literacy programs in Nepal. For more information about the work they do, [click here](#).

EP: Can you tell me about the history of Sunsar Maya? How did the program begin?

JS: I was living and working in Nepal, and connected with three other people who were doing the same. All of us had absolutely fallen in love with the place and the people and the work that we were doing. So it really began as a way to give back to a place that had given us all so much. We started really small, by doing scholarships for children living in an institutional home, making sure that these children had the books that they needed, backpacks, uniforms, and things they'd need to get to school every day. We did that for a couple of years, and when I came back to the States, and they did too, we reached out to our friends and family and began to grow that program.

After a couple of years, we had to decide: do we want to continue to expand this? Or do we want to find a way to have a deeper, more meaningful impact? And that's where the idea of the after school program was born. There was nothing like it in Nepal at the time.

Our goal is to take a holistic approach to our services. Children in Nepal are able to attend government run schools every day, which are very focused on rote learning and memorization. And so part of what we wanted was to provide a rich education, to give them the critical and creative thinking skills that they could take into their classroom. But then there's all these other things that they don't have at home, because a lot of our children either are living in institutional homes or in extreme poverty. And so, in addition to the academics program, we make sure every child gets a healthy meal every day, twice annual medical and dental care, and we have a full time mental health therapist on staff. We see these as the foundation that children need for healthy development so that they can go back and learn and can create their own pathways out of poverty.

The after-school program launched in 2014, and members of the Golestan Colab actually went to Nepal to train our teachers, and help set up the program and classrooms. They really provided the foundation of the program. I was pregnant at the time, so unfortunately I couldn't go - I actually had my first child, the week that we opened up the after school program - it was like having two babies!

EP: How has the program grown and expanded over time?

JS: After the after school program was running for a couple of years, we started to think about what else we could do to support the children and also support the community. Because our kids are at school during the day, we had our teachers as well as the space available during the school day. That's when we created our women's literacy program. Our program is very much focused on life skills. A lot of literacy programs will just teach you reading and writing, so that you can read a book, but we wanted our women to be able to go out and to improve their everyday lives.



So we teach them things like how to calculate taxes and discounts so you're not taken advantage of at the market, how to fill out a government form, or how to ask questions at a doctor's appointment and take notes. Every woman in our literacy program also receives twice annual medical and dental care.

The third piece of our program is our teacher training program, which unfortunately, has been on hold during COVID, but we hope will restart this year. We share our curriculum and resources with teachers in rural areas who don't have access to any professional development. These are teachers who teach in mud floor classrooms, who have maybe one book for the entire class. And our teachers do an amazing job making learning fun and interactive and impactful with such limited resources. If you look at our social media, you'll see they create these amazing projects, like working lungs out of two liter soda bottles and straws, or balloon powered cars, or battery powered cars made out of cardboard boxes. Just these incredible STEM projects made out of found items.



And I should mention the last piece, which is not part of our core programming, but has come about out of necessity, which is emergency relief. In 2015, there were devastating, deadly earthquakes in Nepal. Because we were already on the ground there, we were able to get out and provide immediate food relief, distribute needed supplies, and do some rebuilding. And then we did the same thing during COVID. Most of our families are day laborers, so when the country shut down, they didn't even have enough money to get through the week. We provided food distributions for 18 months and fed over 2000 people. We also had to adjust our programming, as everybody else did, shifting to online learning, at home learning kits, those kinds of things.

EP: What do you feel like were the biggest challenges that you've faced as the organization has grown, that you feel proud of being able to overcome?

JS: One thing is the process of creating something that's brand new in the country. From what we know, this was the first after-school program of its kind in the entire country. Getting buy-in from the community, and training teachers, and growing the program, was all a lot of work. So we're really proud that now, the members of our team are being seen as thought leaders in the country. Just this last year, the local municipality asked us to put on a multi-day STEAM camp. Hundreds of students from all over the district came for this three day camp. Many of the students had never been exposed to any type of STEAM learning in their primary school, and they got to participate in these hands-on projects and learn while doing so. Also, the US Embassy holds an education roundtable with educators across the country, and we're proud to have been invited to speak each year.

For our women's literacy program, the biggest challenge was convincing the community of the usefulness of the program. When we first started a lot of the husbands, brothers, and fathers did not want our women students to attend, and it was a real struggle to even allow them to get to the classroom. We started the program in 2017, and as time has progressed, and the community has seen the outcomes, things have really changed. We've had some women who have opened up their own businesses now, and other women who can now work in their family stores and help support their family. There's a lot more buy-in and, and a lot more enthusiasm, so we don't see the same resistance anymore when new students want to join us.

EP: I'd love to hear more about how you've collaborated with the Golestan Colab in the past.

JS: The generosity of the Colab and Yalda is beyond anything we could have imagined. There wouldn't be a Sunsar Maya without them. It would have taken us years to develop a curriculum, so for them to just give it to us, and then also provide training pro bono, has been incredible. After the trip to set up the program in 2014, we met with the Colab weekly, doing regular check-ins and zoom calls with our program manager. Yalda and the Colab has also provided me with so much education and support in doing this right, not only in building our program, but as a mentor and sounding board.



In 2016, we brought the program manager here and he spent two weeks of training at Golestan. We were able to observe all the classes at Golestan, but also meet with other members of the community. He was able to visit the Edible Schoolyard, and the Colab also set up an occupational therapist to meet with him, because that's something most people don't have any access to in Nepal. That was in 2014 and the program manager has since moved on. Yalda has just joined our board, and she is continuing to provide training to our new program managers. It has been an ongoing partnership that we are so grateful for.



Our teacher training program was largely born out of a desire to pay forward what the Colab has done for us. I wish we could have after school programs across the entire country, and reach every student, but that's not possible in reality. So we thought about what we could do to reach as many students as we could in a positive way and share this type of learning with them. That's where the teacher training program came from. The teacher training program has been on pause during COVID, but this year we're working to restart it and hopefully expand it to a much bigger and more robust program. So not only are we working directly in certain schools, we are hoping to work with local municipalities and districts to spread the creative, inquiry-driven, child-centered approach to learning that we use in our programs. We want to pass on what the Golestan Colab has done for us and reach as many teachers and students as we can.

COLAB DIARY: OUR WORK WITH SUNSAR MAYA

YALDA MODABBER

Emma Parandvash spoke with Golestan's ED **Yalda Modabber** about the Golestan Colab's relationship with Sunsar Maya.

Emma Parandvash: The Golestan Colab and Sunsar Maya have a long history of collaboration - tell me more about the relationship!

Yalda Modabber: I already knew Jehán through another professional relationship, and I liked and respected her a lot. When she shared the idea of the project, it was in the very early stages. She had learned about the Colab, and came in to share with me the concept of developing an after school program, and we started to talk about the type of support that we would be able to provide. This was about ten years ago. I remember being so excited about this project and the mission behind it, I really wanted to help. It was especially moving because of the living conditions of the children that the project would support. And so we put all hands on deck.



At the time, Jehán and her colleagues had never been involved in education, they had no frame of reference for how to run an after school program. We were building something from the ground up with people that were on a steep learning curve, and without a strong established team in Nepal. Some Colab partners that we work with already have an established team and we work together to evolve and enrich their work. In this case, it was from scratch all the way across the world.

Those were the factors that made it a little bit more challenging, but also exciting. It's also a culture and language that I wasn't familiar with, but fortunately my colleague who was working with us on this project had spent a lot of time in Nepal. So we just hit the ground running and started to develop the curriculum and training materials. As Jehan was hiring people, we started to collaborate with the folks that she was working with over there. And then we scheduled a 10-day trip, during which three people from Golestan (including myself) were able to go, and it was really magical.

EP: I'd love to hear more about that trip - 10 days is a short trip, but it sounds like it had a big impact.

YM: We brought a lot of things with us - we put out a call to our community and collected a lot of materials, including a big suitcase full of legos. We also collaborated with Fiona Wong, an occupational therapist we work closely with, to bring supportive materials that would be hard to source locally.

We had met with the team that Jehán and her colleagues had been working to hire remotely before going to Nepal. We put together a plan for training the teachers knowing that there was going to be a pretty steep learning curve. The approach to teaching in Nepal is completely different from what we do, and we didn't know who these teachers were and how much experience they had at the time. Thankfully, Jehan had already found a space and everybody was so open and excited, it really made our job so much easier.



Often, with some of the Colab work, there's a shift in mindset that can get a little tricky. And those challenges are often very rich, and wonderful in their own ways. But working with a team that's just so hungry to learn and so excited and open was incredible – anything that we said, they embraced and ran with it. But yes, we had a lot of work to do in a short period.

The training sessions started with breaking down what the concept of school is, and each of them sharing their own experiences. In that process, we learned so much about the people on the team. To be honest, it was very emotional. Some of them had had very traumatizing shaming experiences as students. Once we started to hear their stories, we realized how much more important this work was than we had known.



While in Kathmandu, we met the children who would be served by the program. They were living in orphanages that were overcrowded and smelled like urine. The children were wonderful. They were friendly, curious, and affectionate kids despite being malnourished and in many cases physically and sexually abused. Many had developmental delays, and all of them were living in a dysregulating environment. So the big challenge was, how do we develop a program that's going to provide the support these kids need to give them a chance at a decent life?

In the training workshop, we worked on how to set up a learning space that would be grounding and calming for children that didn't have access to safe spaces in their lives. We took a field trip to the top local Montessori preschool after we had done some initial training. When we debriefed, it was so amazing to see how much this team had picked up in the first couple of days of the training. They noticed things like too much stuff on the walls, they saw all the elements that we talked about being grounding for children, they picked up on that immediately. They were also able to call out things that weren't child-centric. It was wonderful to see this, that shift had happened so quickly – I'm convinced it was because they were so open and so excited.

Then we started to dig deeper into lesson planning. We worked on the curriculum and helped them develop a plan for the coming few months that reflects their values and culture. We also helped design the physical space. They worked so quickly – on day one, my colleagues and I went to the space, and there was absolutely nothing there. It needed flooring, painting, furniture, even some plumbing. By the time we left, there was a ribbon cutting ceremony and the after school program was ready to open. It was amazing. That could never happen here in ten days.

After the trip, we had regular meetings with the team, and eventually we were able to bring some of them here to train with us at Golestan. We also connected the visitors with Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard, an after school arts program in Berkeley, a local Occupational Therapist, a second grade classroom at a local public school, and others I'm forgetting.



EP: Can you tell me more about how the Colab was able to fund Golestan's participation in this project?

YM: The work that we do for the Colab is all pro bono, and on occasion, when the people we work with have the funds, they'll pay for us to travel to them, but that's not common. We don't do as much travel as we'd like because sometimes we just don't have the budget. In this case, we couldn't do this work without going there. It was just impossible.

So we put out a call to our community for support, and people donated their miles to help us fly out. And then we had some reserve funds from fundraising. The majority of our donors support our school because of the Colab work. Many of them aren't members of our immediate school community. Some have been impacted by our work by sending their children to a Colab school for example, while others are just inspired by it. Basically, fundraising enabled us to do this work.

EP: How did this project impact the Colab's work with other organizations?

YM: It was so inspiring to have participated at that level. And you know, you often learn by teaching. We got deeper into our practice and better at it. We were able to see the tangible results of that work, which was priceless. A lot of the materials that we developed for the training we use with other groups today.

And then finally, we started to bring those communities together, having different teams collaborate with each other, including our team. We connected our teachers with the teachers in Kathmandu, and established a Facebook page where they would exchange ideas and photos, following the same curriculum. So many of our teachers would come to me and say "What they're doing is incredible. Look at this, I got this idea from what they were doing there." And then we got our kids to start to collaborate. They would do similar projects and share with each other and write letters to each other. And some of that trickled down to some of the other groups that we've been working with. Ultimately, it was a very profound experience that really built our practice.



Compassionate thought is the most precious thing there is. It is something that only we human beings can develop. And if we have a good heart, a warm heart, warm feelings, we will be happy and satisfied ourselves, and our friends will experience a friendly and peaceful atmosphere as well. This can be experienced community to community, country to country, continent to continent.”

— Dalai Lama



JOIN THE MOVEMENT!

TOGETHER, LET'S SET A NEW STANDARD FOR EDUCATION

The Golestan Colab offers pro-bono support to educators and communities in the form of workshops or one-on-one consultations in these and other areas:

- **Long-term Planning & Visioning**
- **Transformation of Space: Indoors & Outdoors**
- **Financial Modeling**
- **Teacher Training**
 - How to integrate nature into the curriculum
 - Hands-on & heuristic approaches to learning
 - How to develop & transition into a holistic approach to teaching
 - Language & cultural immersion



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You can play a role in the continued growth of Golestan and the communities it supports by clicking **here**. We welcome your contributions to:

- **Golestan's Annual Fund:** This supports the school so that the model we use for The Colab is sustainable and of the highest quality.
- **Tuition Assistance Fund:** Help make Golestan School accessible to children of all backgrounds, resources, and privilege.
- **The Golestan Colab:** Supporting the Colab enables us to continue this work near and far.

GOLESTAN IN THE NEWS

We are thrilled that our work continues to be recognized as part of a variety of important conversations. Click the links below to see & hear more.

- 02.22.23 Parents Press:** Golestan is voted Top Five 2023 Parents Press “Best of” in the categories:
1. Bilingual Preschool
 2. Private Independent Elementary School
 3. Progressive Elementary School
 4. Bilingual Elementary School
 5. Alternative Learning Styles Elementary School in Contra Costa County.
- 02.22.23 Governing:** The Future of Community Design – Reimagining Schoolyards to Improve Health and Learning.
- 10.04.22 Living Schoolyards Act:** Golestan’s campus redesign featured in Fact Sheet for Senate Bill: Living Schoolyards Act
- 07.01.22 Parents Press:** Golestan is voted 2022 Parents Press “Best of” in the category of Top 5 Elementary Schools in the Bay Area.
- 09.24.21 Knowable Magazine:** Delta: Rethinking Risks for Kids and Schools
- 06.18.21 Architizer:** Stromberg Architecture is a 2021 Architizer A+ Award Finalist (Kindergarten Category for Golestan School)
- 05.22.21 Archinect:** Schools Turn to Architects as the Pandemic Mandates Collaboration With Long-Term Impacts
- 05.09.21 L'interlude Podcast** with Great Teacher Steve (18 Episodes)
- 04.30.21 Green Schools Catalyst Quarterly:** Overcoming ‘Green Fears’ – Strategies for Safe and Joyful Learning in Outdoor Classrooms
- 03.22.21 Best of Berkeley:** Golestan School Selected as Best Non-Profit in 2021
- 03.20.21 NPR/KQED:** Celebrating Persian New Year Amid A Pandemic
- 03.14.21 CBS News:** Schools Without Walls: Lessons in Outdoor Education
- 12.16.20 La Cantina:** Featured Projects – Golestan School
- 12.08.20 NPR/KQED:** Korean, Swedish and Persian Dishes for Winter Solstice
- 11.17.20 Teach For America:** Three Schools Reimagining What a School Building Can Be
- 11.12.20 American Institute of Architects:** People’s Choice Award for Design Excellence; Selected as Top Three Finalist: Design Excellence in Change and Resources
- 10.28.20 Architizer:** Competition Winners Announced! Best Commercial Project: Golestan School by Stromberg Architecture
- 10.21.20 Berkeleyside:** Enrollment is Down 5% at Berkeley Unified as Some Parents Make Other Plans
- 09.17.20 ABC News:** El Cerrito School Serves as a Model for Outdoor Learning Amid COVID-19
- 09.07.20 BBC News Brasil:** Outdoor Schools that Inspire Returning to School in the Pandemic
- 09.04.20 Patch:** 10 Contra Costa Schools Cleared To Open
- 08.29.20 ANTV Vietnam Television Report (Reuters):** Learning Solutions During the Pandemic in the US: Outdoor Classrooms (written in Vietnamese)



WITH GRATITUDE

We are deeply grateful for the ongoing efforts and energies of Golestan's Teachers & Staff; Golestan's Board; the Golestan Community Association (GCA); our generous Donors, Corporate & Community Partners; our tireless Volunteers; Class Room Parents; and our incredible families & children.

To find out about volunteer opportunities, [click here](#). To learn about many ways to support Golestan's School & Colab—including providing items from our wishlist or sponsoring students—[click here](#).

It is because of your *rooted kindness* that we can continue to expand our school while creating positive change in the greater community. Thank you!



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**We are Kind
We are Thoughtful
We are Courageous**

