

Brushing your teeth, tying a shoe or putting on a shirt pose little problem — unless you're retarded.

Retarded people might spend days, weeks or months learning a particular skill, but not without help. And Elizabeth Waechter of the Pearl Buck Center offers more than her share of help.

In a world where people change jobs an average of eight times during a lifetime, Waechter has worked at the same 'job' for the past 25 years. She is the director for and teacher at Pearl Buck Center, a school founded to help mentally retarded people live and work in 'normal' society.

Following her arrival to Eugene with her husband in the early 1950s, Waechter immediately began to search for retarded students. By December of 1952, she was teaching five children in her home. By April of the following year, The Pearl Buck School (as it was first named) opened its doors to 17 children.

"I became so fascinated with the children that that was what I wanted to do all my life," Waechter says, recalling her first introduction to retarded children at the University of Munich almost 40 years ago. Now she is director and teacher for 40 children and adults, and responsible for an outreach program that serves another 500 clients. The staff now numbers more than 100, with two facilities and another in the planning stage.

The first facility in 1953 was in a church building at 11th Avenue and Ferry Street. But Waechter's energy and lobbying efforts paid off and in 1954 the Emerald Empire Kiwanis Club began a project to raise money for the school. In 1959 the club's effort had netted the first facility, an Early Education

Pearl Buck owes success to founder's devotion, hard work

By RUSSELL LINEBARGER
Of the Emerald

wing and the main lobby of the current complex.

The number one problem through the years has been money.

But in 1966 the center received a grant from the Mental Retardation Facilities Construction Act, which quadrupled the size of the facility. Waechter is especially proud of the expanded building because her husband was the designing architect.

In 1974, after including the vocational workshop which was previously housed in the center, the program was moved to a rented facility and adopted the name Diversified Production Systems.

That program serves 30 clients, ages 18 to 35. It is designed to provide training and jobs in a sheltered workshop. The students learn skills of gaining good relationships with co-workers and staff, good work habits, skill development and productivity and appropriate adult behavior.

Margaret Drivas, administrative assistant at the center, points out that students learned a number of different tasks: re-labeling boxes for

local fast food operations, assembling electronic components and doing custodial work. It's a short step to convert discrimination skill (selecting a blue round peg to fit a blue round hole) "in an academic setting, over to a vocational experience (like) preparing electronic printed circuits," Drivas said.

The activity center at Pearl Buck is the place students receive their training before entering the sheltered workshop center. Here, clients are under the age of 35 and moderately retarded, and usually with other handicaps such as blindness or epilepsy. About a third of the students are "severely retarded".

They learn skills which improve their academic experience, practical living skills (cooking, personal grooming, etc.), work production (labeling, electronics assembling, art production) and intensive training (individual instruction for clients with particular difficulties).

Behavior management is the key to the learning process at Pearl Buck. Drivas stresses that different methods are

used, according to the task to be learned by the individual. The key is a "consistent, continuing method" which enables the student to learn by discipline and positive reinforcement.

The student, in effect, practices the particular skill with the teacher standing behind the pupil, guiding the movements at first. Later as the student becomes reinforced to the objective, the instructor allows the student independent performance. The level of production generally decreases during this transition phase, but many students soon experience increased production within a few days. Eventually some pass production levels of many 'normal' adults.

Preparing students to enter the normal adult world is an intensive process. Waechter gives that process support by having her 'normal' children serve as normal behavior models to the retarded students she was instructing.

The practice was an innovative one, and one that Waechter still feels is beneficial to her students. But, ironically, that practice is one of the reasons cited for phasing Trainable

Mental Retards (TMR) into the public school system.

Because legislation has provided for the child's right to an education, some officials take that to mean all children must attend a public school.

Waechter feels parents should have the right to choose whether to send their children to public or community school. She knows there are "benefits from (being around) other children," but stresses that in instances where children are more profoundly retarded, the public system is unable to provide proper training. In such cases the director suggests the children, must be considered on a "case-by-case basis."

But, the Lane Intermediate Education District reimburses Pearl Buck for each student the center serves, and with the "mainstreaming" of TMRs into the public schools, the district saves money, while Pearl Buck loses students and the funding that goes with them.

But, Waechter's energy and spirit have infected the community. So when she needs funds, she usually gets them.

As the "first community school of its kind in Oregon," the center would have not weathered those early financial storms without the help of the United Way, local civic groups and private donations, Waechter says.

Twenty-five years ago she asked for a different kind of donation. She had asked the writer Pearl Buck for permission to name the school after her. (The author had written a book about her own retarded child.) Buck gave her consent and the school opened in her honor.

Thanks to Waechter and her staff, there's a place in Eugene (borrowing from the Pearl Buck book title) where "The Child That Never Grew"...does.

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Summer language session set in Italy

Applications are being accepted at the University for its seventh special summer session of study at the Italian University for Foreigners, Perugia, Italy, July 3 through Aug. 25.

The program offers between 12 and 15 quarter credits for study of Italian language and Italian history and culture. All but one course will be taught in Italian. Credit will be granted through the University, but may be transferred to another institution.

Perugia is an Etruscan city of about 180,000, located two hours

from Florence and three hours from Rome by rail. The Italian University will arrange day trips to such places as Assisi, Spoleto and Siena.

Undergraduate fees for the eight-week session are about \$270. Housing and meals are estimated at \$350 and the cost of air transportation on a charter flight or at student rates at \$600.

Further information and application forms may be obtained from Perry Powers, 686-4028, or from Sylvia Giustina, 686-4040.

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