

# Nursery program offers children love and support

By **Tonnie Dakin**

Of the Emerald

For many children, simply growing up can be a harrowing experience. Child abuse — physical, mental or emotional — often can take away the simplistic joys of youth and scar an individual for life.

University students and others have an opportunity to help such abused children by volunteering their time, effort and love at the Lane County Relief Nursery.

The children who attend the nursery range in age from six weeks to six years. Most of them are referred by the Children's Services Division of the State Agency on Child Welfare, says Maria Rodriguez, program director.

If child abuse is suspected in the home, the CSD is called to investigate and the family is assigned a case worker, she says. The children are usually sent to the relief nursery, she says.

The children are enrolled two days a week for three hours a day. There are 72 children currently involved with the program, Rodriguez says.

"All the kids in the program are currently living at home, although they may have been in foster care before," Rodriguez says. "The purpose of the program is to try to keep families together."

One way this is achieved is through the nursery's Intensive Parent Training Program, implemented for parents whose children are at imminent risk of removal from the home, she says.

Because the state is required to try to help as much as possible before separating a child from his parents, the program attempts to teach parents to establish emotional bonds with their children and practice non-physical forms of discipline, Rodriguez says.

The nursery operates out of completely donated facilities in two different locations. Although both are funded by the United Way, much of the program's income comes from donations from the church and private fundings, says Rodriguez.

Volunteers are an important part of the nursery because they reduce the need for a paid staff, she says.

The nursery's volunteer coordinator is Judy Brown-King, Olympic silver medalist in the 400-meter hurdles.

"Judy was literally running by one day and she saw the nursery," says Rodriguez. "She loves kids but she can't have any until the Olympics are over, so she volunteers to fill the gap."

"Volunteers are interviewed, screened and trained before entering the program," says administrator Jean Phelps. "They don't necessarily need to have had any experience working with children, but it is very important that volunteers have good self-esteem. They must also be patient, flexible and loving."

Volunteers are also screened to make sure that they have positive self-images in order to be able to focus on the children, says Rodriguez.

Alex Kolodkin, a 28-year-old graduate student in molecular biology,

has been volunteering for the program since last fall.

Kolodkin is involved in the transportation aspect of the program. Because parents don't often have the time, money or mobility to drive their children to the nursery, the state provides a vehicle to transport them, Rodriguez says.

Kolodkin volunteers his time one morning a week and transports about 12 children each trip.

"Although I interact somewhat with the children, I would like to be able to spend time with them at the nursery," he says.

"I'm interested in the program as a social service," he says. "I think child

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The nursery also receives volunteers through the University's ESCAPE program, which offers a practicum for students volunteering a minimum number of hours.

Crystal Thomas, a 22-year-old human services major, is a practicum worker

who usually puts in six hours a week at the nursery.

"The ESCAPE program really ties in with my major," she says. "because I plan to work with abused and neglected kids as a career."

Thomas recommends the program as a way to get involved in volunteer programs such as the nursery.

"At first I wasn't sure what sort of kids I wanted to work with," she says. "After doing my practicum work through the ESCAPE program, I've decided what I want to do. The nursery is a wonderful, incredible place to work."

Practicum members often continue to work as volunteers after the term is over, Rodriguez says.

The program also involves graduate students from the Clinical Services Special Education program, who also do practicum work at the nursery, Rodriguez says. Graduate students often do full developmental screening on each child to see if they need further help in the program, she says.

Both Rodriguez and Phelps stress the importance of volunteers at the nursery.

"Because of the large number of volunteers, the kids get the individual attention that they need," Phelps says. "In being a volunteer, you almost always gain more than you give. Without our volunteers, the program couldn't go on."

Students interested in volunteering at the relief nursery can contact Judy Brown-King at 484-0702.

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