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The Respite Center

Love and care create a viable alternative for special children

By J. Dana Haynes
Of The Print

"It takes a lot of energy to be here, and you get a great deal of energy back from the kids. They've got a lot to offer and I just soak it up."

That is the way one employee described the Clackamas Respite Center, a new and innovative program being offered on campus. The Center is a bi-weekly recreational/educational facility that "provides care for mentally and physically handicapped children from ages 1 to 18," explained Debbie Bennett, handicapped specialist.

Every other Saturday at 10 a.m., parents from all over the area bring their children to the Orchard Center. Some families come from as far away as Mt. Hood. The children are, for the most part, seriously disabled. Their handicaps include learning disabilities, cerebral palsy (mild cases and severe), general retardation and behavioral problems. Some are blind, some autistic.

Four instructors run the Respite Center. The guiding force behind the operation is Deborah Williams. She is a nursing student at the College, and studied educational disabilities at CCC. Williams worked with the Handicapped Resource Center before there was a Respite Center.

On top of her background in medicine and education, Williams' forte is strength. While answering questions, she

helped a half dozen of the more severely handicapped children bake cookies. "I like this type of work," said Williams, "and fortunately, I've been working in this field for so long, I know most of these kids pretty well."

Williams has a good, if small, staff working with her. Pat Riggs, Bob Ebberle and Susan Paull attend the kids' needs. As good with the youngsters as these four are, the need for more help is obvious. "We've got a great need for volunteers. We can't grow here, and can't afford anymore staff people," explained Williams. "This is a great program for nursing students."

Bob Ebberle and Susan Paull are both past-employees of the Kerr Center for Handicapped Children. Ebberle has worked for two years in this business. Why?

"I enjoy all kids. The daycares I've worked in were with normal, so to speak, kids. So I've been in contact with all sorts of kids most of my life."

Ebberle is a tall man, with a full beard and indomitable patience. Speaking of the college-provided facility, he said, "This is a great deal better than the place I did work. I feel the kids, all kids, should be exposed to as much as possible, and these kids are. I like the opportunities this place gives the kids. We let them choose what they're doing, pretty much."

Paull also has worked in other child care centers. When asked how she came to work in

such a demanding profession, Paull answered, "I'm from Colorado. When I was there, I didn't have much awareness of 'problem children.' When I moved out here, I became aware of it and...well, here I am."

Paull admitted that respite care is hard work but, "...I find more frustration dealing with the parents than with the kids!"

Paull, like Pat Riggs, is a student of the College. Both are taking "signing" (sign language for the deaf) classes, as well as general credit courses.

Pat has been a babysitter and worked with children at the Milwaukie Y.M.C.A. Said Riggs, "I like kids. They're different from adults, even the 'normal' kids are. I get along with them."

As talented and loving as the staff is, it's the children who make the Clackamas Respite Center such a remarkable place. Maximum attendance at

the alternating Saturday program is 10.

One young man, Moses, said he likes the Center. Moses is 13 years, talkative, and bright. He will never walk. "I like it here. I'm usually in the recreational program, and it's fun," said Moses, "I have some friends from school here. Jason and I go to school together in Portland. But I like it here best."

The overall image the Respite Center gives is that of love. Williams and the others rarely have a moment free without one of the children coming over for a hug or kiss. The kids get along with each other, too. "I think the greatest thing about this place," said Ebberle, "is the social aspect. They get to work things out between themselves, which they don't get at school or other 'centers.'"

Williams is obviously very fond of the Respite Center. "I

don't know any other programs in the U.S. that's a group-respite program. And I've done some research on the subject," said Williams.

"This is an extension of the 'In-house,' Tri-County Respite Care project, but it's different. We felt a group setting was economical. Also, in a rural area, we can reach more people. It's not babysitting. We've got activities, we feed them, etc."

The College's Handicapped Resource Center funds the project, along with a \$5 per session fee for the parents. The Resource Center also provides the Orchard Center, food, films and play things, as well as advertisements.

"Our one real need is VOLUNTEERS!" said Williams, "The job takes so little time, and is so important. I've been doing this since I was 16, and I enjoy it a lot. I learn so much from the kids."

Clackamas Community College

