

Corpus Christi outreach program bridges generational gap

By Emily Morrison

Delia Carlisle wheels out of her sixth-floor room at Rochester United Methodist Home's Goodman Gardens one mid-June morning to find the corridor teeming with unusually short visitors in brilliant red T-shirts. "Hi, Grandma!" choruses the group of five year olds from Corpus Christi Day Care's monthly delegation of preschoolers.

While Brian presents "Grandma" with a construction-paper sailboat to decorate her door, Michele clamors for a song. Carlisle, whose vision is failing, squints gamely at the unexpected gift. The children, meanwhile, break into a lively rendition of "Peter, James and John."

"Master, look, we caught a lot of fishes out on the deep, blue sea," they concluded, looking up expectantly for Carlisle's reaction.

"What did you do with the fishes?" she readily obliges.

"We caught 'em and ate 'em!" sings out one unwitting young evangelist.

"Give Grandma a hug," advises Corpus Christi Day Care director Nancy Griswold, who adds, for Carlisle's benefit, "It's the last time we'll be coming until September."

For five year olds, who live unselfconsciously in the moment, the occasion is joyous. The only Catholic day care center in the diocese, this outreach program of Corpus Christi parish places special emphasis on reaching out to others. The touching intergenerational scenario at Goodman Gardens plays itself out in countless variations for an hour or so once a month during a period that coincides with the school year, when Griswold's young charges visit nursing home residents old enough to be their great-grandparents.

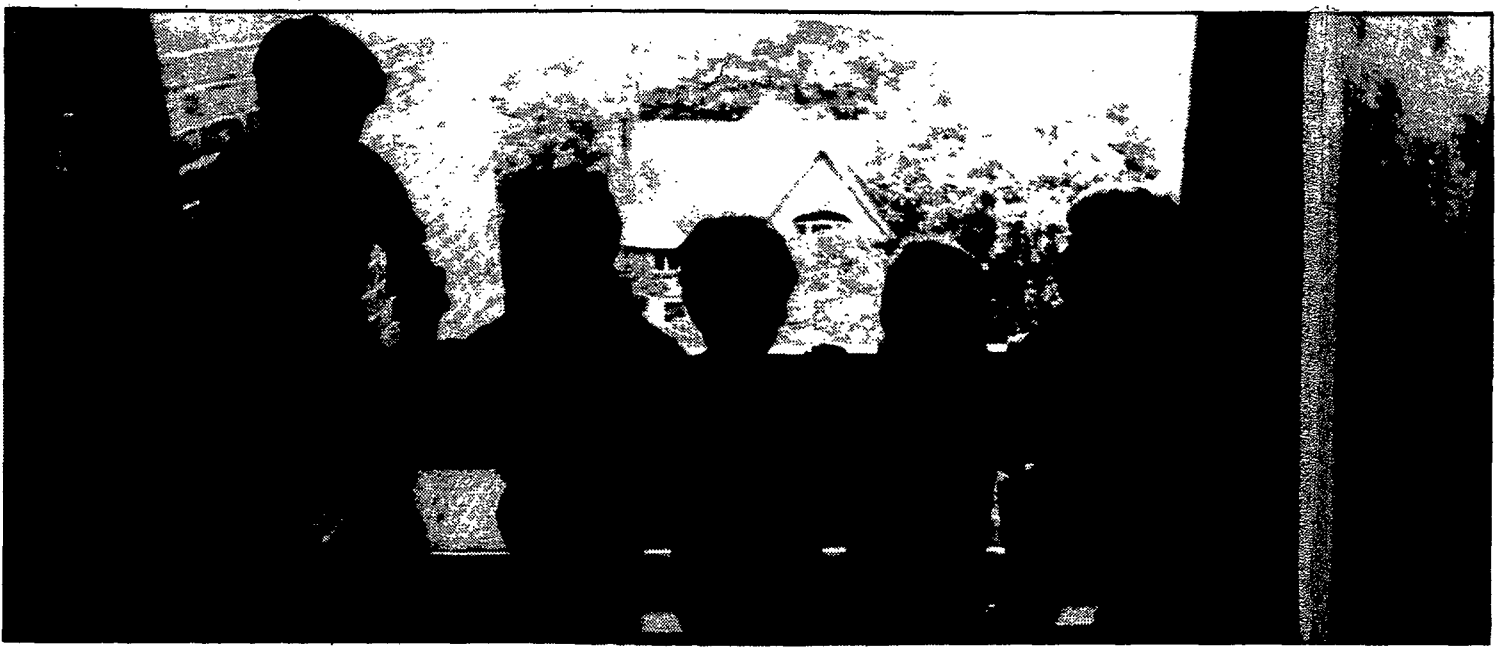
Even such a formidable gap is easily bridged by the infectious charm of the children, who clearly delight in their errand of good will. The favor, moreover, appears to be returned in an open exchange of hugs, music and laughter that undoubtedly enriches the lives of everyone involved.

"We try to put a lot of emphasis on teaching the children self-respect (and) respect for others," explains Griswold, who estimates the center's current enrollment at 35 preschoolers, aged three to five. "Our curriculum is based on peace and justice, peace education — treating everything in God's kingdom fairly," she adds.

A considerate and compassionate attitude toward living as well as inanimate things ranks high in the Corpus Christi center's ethos. "We teach a lot of respect for God's creation — taking care of it, not destroying things, being really careful about how we treat each other," says Griswold.

The lesson is a valuable one, particularly for children who may not have been blessed from birth with the material advantages bestowed by more affluent parents. Founded in 1980, the center was established to care for children whose parents not only need a break, but are working hard to earn one.

"We really want to address a working-poor clientele, so we keep our rates low," says Griswold. A significant number of these children's parents are enrolled in career training programs at such area institutions as Bryant and Stratton and SUNY Brockport's Educational Opportunity Center. Welfare payments



A group of children takes advantage of the sixth-floor view at Goodman Gardens, before moving on to visit other residents of the nursing home.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

cover the costs of day care, according to Griswold, as long as the parents remain in their respective training programs. Many keep their children in the Corpus Christi program even after graduating from school and finding employment in their chosen fields, she adds.

Although both morale and job stability are traditionally poor among day care workers, Griswold has found the center's employees to be remarkably loyal. "We don't have much turnover," she observes. "I think we have a really good camaraderie with each other. It feels like a family. We really go out of our way to help each other. It's small; it's comfortable."

Barb Goonan, in her fourth year as a teacher at the center, leads the five year olds as they serenade Phyllis Zimmerman with several verses of "B-I-N-G-O," a song selected by Angelo. Goonan holds up the appropriate number of fingers to indicate missing syllables, and the kids clap in response.

"Each group always visits the same floor," Griswold points out. "These kids are all leaving to go on to kindergarten next fall, so this is their last time here."

Griswold speculates that such activities as the Goodman Gardens sojourns provide additional job satisfaction for teachers who appear unusually dedicated. "It's more than just babysitting," she notes. "It's a really structured type of program." The center's activities focus on one theme per week, around which arts and crafts, stories and field trips are organized. Past themes include "I Am Special," "Community Helpers," "Families" and "Transportation."

Center employees Doreen Wade and Kim Hamilton work with the four- and five-year-old youngsters, while Anne Leone, who teaches the class of three year olds, is also responsible for making contact with the recreation director of Goodman Gardens to arrange for monthly visits to the skilled nursing and health-related facility.

During this final visit before the Corpus Christi center's summer session brings on a less structured curriculum, the children make a special side trip to Room 606. Jennie Neufeglise, whose door is decorated with fabric and

pipe cleaner butterflies, peeks around the corner, then throws her door — as well as her arms — open wide.

"Butterfly Grandma!" cry David and Angelo.

Neufeglise holds up a picture of a monkey on a postcard from her grandson, who works with the Peace Corps in South Africa. For her trouble, she gets a noisy chorus of "Three Little Monkeys" from her grateful visitors.

"I have 14 great-grandchildren, at my last count," Neufeglise says after the kids have moved on down the hall. "I have two grandchildren — I think. I only started with four, and look what we branched out with!" she jokes. Neufeglise has lived at Goodman Gardens for the past decade, and most of her relatives still live in Rochester.

"Your family travels a lot, don't they?" asks Amy Thomas, the facility's music therapist.

"Yes, they do," Neufeglise replies. "Except me — staying in here, wearing out my chair." She moves off laboriously but cheerfully into the hallway in her walker. "After 10 years here, I guess I'd have to wear out something."

In the main corridor, the Corpus Christi kids are singing "Rise and Shine," the preschool version of the Noah's Ark story. "Rise and shine and give God your glory, glory, children of the Lord," rings out the refrain.

"All my boys and girls," says Neufeglise sadly. "I enjoy the children."

Down again on the elevator, crowded as usual with wheelchairs, the children assemble in the arts and crafts room for a snack before embarking on their return trip. Some will walk, while others go with Nancy Griswold in the van.

The teachers help them on with their sweaters and jackets on this unseasonably cool day. They come obediently, for the most part, as they are summoned, children with names out of Greek mythology and drama — Jason, Cassandra and Medea, a striking child who wears her cornrowed hair festooned with delicate white beads. Others — Jasmine, Sergio,



Phyllis Zimmerman accepts a paper sailboat from a group of children in the day care program at Corpus Christi Church.

Letitia, Ebony, Anwar, Monday — file into line behind their teachers and troop out into a gentle drizzle.

High above on the sixth floor, Butterfly Grandma may well be looking wistfully after them from her open window. You can almost imagine the cloth butterflies taking flight from their post on the door of Room 606, filling the space of her room briefly before swarming to follow the children into the early afternoon.

Filling the spaces in our culture between the very young and the very old is almost as appealing a vision to those of us caught in the middle of the spectrum. Given innovative exchanges like the one between Corpus Christi Day Care and Goodman Gardens, the hourglass that measures time for the rest of us is either half empty or half full, depending on which end you choose to look in from.

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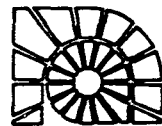


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