

BACK TO SCHOOL

Pre-school to help children with AIDS

Parish tackles growing need

By Carol Hazard
Catholic News Service

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Browns wanted their son in preschool for the same reasons most parents cite — the 5-year-old needed to interact with other children and his mom was ready for a few hours' respite each day.

Eighteen preschools turned them away because the boy has AIDS.

Although a church-affiliated center finally accepted him, the Browns' search underscores the difficulty of getting children with AIDS or HIV, the virus that causes it, into the mainstream.

St. Ann Parish in Charlotte has taken up the cause for Bob Brown's son and possibly hundreds of other families in the same predicament. The family did not want the first names of the child or his mother used.

With the coordinating efforts of Sister Judy Monahan, SSJ, a group of parishioners was contacting other churches and forming a volunteer task force to finance and establish a day care center for families affected by AIDS or HIV.

"We will make it happen," said Monsignor Richard Allen, St. Ann's pastor.

The congregation already has spearheaded several AIDS-related projects, including supporting the House of Mercy, a residence in Belmont, N.C., for people with AIDS, and helping with a vicariate program on the disease.

Monsignor Allen sees AIDS as a spiritual problem as well as a social and medical one.

"A lot of people do not have the spiritual support they need to help them deal with the illness," he said. "Our goal is to take care of the very spiritual and human needs of these people."

The need for some kind of day care program for children with AIDS or whose parents have the disease is apparent to Lisa Piazz, coordinator of the program for women and adolescents at the Metrolina AIDS Project.

"We could probably accommodate 20 children tomorrow if the doors were to

open," she said.

Many potential students are children whose mothers are sick themselves and need a break from caring for a terminally ill child. Others need someone to take their children while they go for medical treatment.

In fact, the Browns are atypical of most families with a child suffering from AIDS or HIV. Their son was abandoned at birth by his biological mother who had exposed him to cocaine, methadone and heroin in addition to passing on the AIDS virus. The Browns later became his legal guardians.

The boy has been on AZT, a drug used to slow the development of the disease, since he was 6 months old, but the boy now displays the symptoms of full-blown AIDS.

Unlike most families living with AIDS, the Browns live in an affluent community and can afford to pay the boy's medical bills.

"These children are no different than any other child," except their life spans are expected to be short, Brown said. "We don't look at our child and think of him as terminally ill. We look at him as a child who deserves to play and run."

At St. Ann's, the community seems up to the task of giving children with AIDS that chance.

"It is not the church's place to judge, but to be compassionate," said Monsignor Allen. "The church not only encourages us but tells us from a pastoral point of view to be compassionate and to listen."

While the parishioners are working on starting the day care center, its day-to-day operations will be left up to experts, he said.

Piazz thinks the role is appropriate for the community.

"It's a perfect program for church-based support," she said. "Churches historically reach out to people who are shunned by other people. The Catholic Church in particular has reached out to people with AIDS."

And while plans are laid to open the center, hire teachers and a nurse, the boy whose predicament planted the seed for it will move on to a public elementary school next year.

"He is no threat to other children," said Brown. "But they are to him. Chicken pox can be fatal to my child."

Threshold seeks volunteers for its mentoring program

ROCHESTER — Threshold, 80 St. Paul St., is seeking volunteers to participate in a mentoring program within its Learning Center.

The Learning Center provides equivalency classes for high-school dropouts between the ages of 12 and 25. Volunteers are needed to assist in

areas such as career options, job leads and higher education opportunities. These volunteers must be 21 years of age or older and have to devote an average of two hours per week for at least one year.

For an application and brochure on the mentoring program, call 716/454-7530.

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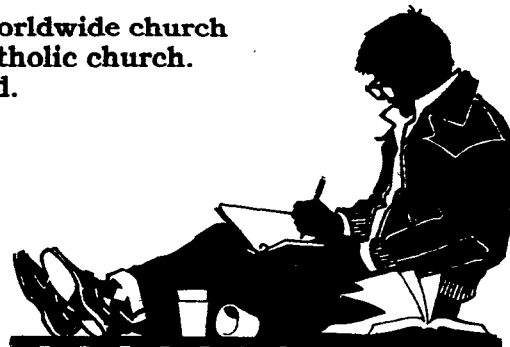
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