

Parish using old school for day care

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

GENEVA — Three-year-old Nora and 2-year-old Stephanie were busy painting leaves in a hallway of the former St. Francis DeSales School, 110 Exchange St., the morning of Sept. 10.

The two girls — wearing smocks and wielding large brushes — were preparing leaves to adorn a tree they had painted with sponges the day before.

Meanwhile, Nora was certain they would add something else to the tree once the leaves were done.

"A kitty," Nora declared. "We went for a walk (yesterday) and saw a kitty in a tree."

Nora and Stephanie attend the new St. Francis Day Care Center, which opened on Tuesday, Sept. 7. Bishop Matthew H. Clark was scheduled to preside at the center's official dedication on Tuesday, Sept. 14.

The center offers an array of programs for infants (six weeks to 18 months); toddlers (18 months to three years); pre-schoolers (three-five years); and a latchkey program before and after school (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.)

According to Karen Robideau, the Geneva parish's business director, the idea for the center evolved from discussions among parish council members in April, 1992. The council was trying to decide how to use available space in the former school after an agency using the building moved out.

The council subsequently decided a day care center would be the best way to go. That decision was echoed during parish synod discussions in the fall of 1992 and again in the spring of this year.

"We knew there was a great need for day care in Geneva," Robideau said. Once the decision was made to use the space for day care, she added, the parish committed itself to raising money for the necessary renovations. But the money suddenly appeared at the parish in the form of a bequest — one large enough not only for renova-



Parker Foster (left) holds the comforting finger of Nancy Henschel.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

tions, but also to help subsidize the day care center's operation during its first year.

The parish then hired Julie Vanderwall as the center's executive director in August. Vanderwall, who has 10 years of experience in day care programs, subsequently assembled her staff.

The need for such a facility in Geneva became immediately obvious to Vanderwall, a resident of Manchester. "People were signing up before the building was even ready," she reported.

One of those people showing an early interest in the center was Bonnie Foster, director of the Center for Dispute Settlement, an agency that rents space in the building.

Foster was looking for a place to bring her two-month old son, Parker. A resident of Penn Yan, Foster said she could have placed him at a center located in her Yates County village, but she decided that the St. Francis center would be far more convenient when she learned of its imminent opening.

Foster added, however, that conven-



Nora peaks through a playhouse window outside the St. Francis Day Care Center in Geneva.

ience was not her only criteria. She liked the ratio of staff members to children at the center. In addition, "I think it is more a teaching day care center than a watching center," Foster said.

Vanderwall noted that teaching does take place at the center, but it occurs through play activities. The children in the preschool program, for example, work on number and name recognition, when they are often encouraged to write their own names.

A number of Geneva-area people had been using home day care situations, but were looking for a more structured situation, Vanderwall said.

"They have to know we're going to be here, even when staff gets sick or during vacations," she explained.

"It's definitely needed," Vanderwall added. "You can't work these days and not have a place to put your children — one that's safe."

As of Sept. 10, 17 children were placed at the center, Vanderwall reported. Several more parents have shown interest in the program — even though it has not yet even advertised.

Vanderwall said the center's capacity is 96 children, but that the program would need to have only 45 enrolled children to break even. She hoped to have that many enrolled by the end of the school year.

Foster, for one, said she has been pleased with the quality of care her son has received at the center. She has no doubt that it will quickly fill up.

"I'm sure they'll have full capacity by the end of the year, once the word gets out," Foster predicted.

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