

# Education

## School marks 50 years of special ministry

By Lee Strong  
Associate editor

Pat Marshall-Cowden didn't mince words about the School of the Holy Childhood.

"They basically saved our daughter," she declared.

Her daughter, Jessie Marshall, entered the school at age five, after bad experiences at several other facilities, Marshall-Cowden explained. The staffs of those facilities told the family that Jessie, who is developmentally disabled, was very slow and probably would never speak.

But after Jessie started at School of the Holy Childhood, the staff there quickly discerned that she had problems in addition to her developmental disability, Marshall-Cowden said.

Subsequent testing revealed that Jessie also was autistic. With that knowledge, School of the Holy Childhood staff developed an individualized program to meet Jessie's needs.

Now 17, she is just like a regular teenager, her mother said. She is concerned with clothes and makeup, and looking forward to the day when she can enter the adult program at the Holy Childhood.

And a few years ago, Jessie, who supposedly would never talk, even won an award for most improved speech.

"No one else until Holy Childhood looked past the Down Syndrome to see Jessie as a whole person," Marshall-Cowden said. "I think because of the environment and the people there, the whole package, it's done wonders for Jessie."

Such personal attention is the hallmark of School of the Holy Childhood, noted Sister Seraphine Herbst, SSJ, the executive director.

"We value each of our children and adults, and attempt to help them achieve their highest potential," Sister Herbst said, pointing out the school's caring atmosphere.

In an age when public schools emphasize mainstreaming children with special needs, "A lot of parents like the specialized attention here," noted Molly Flaherty, Holy Childhood's development and public relations coordinator.

Some 110 children in the school program and 75 adults en-



Michelle Green (left) and Sarah Frazier (right) take part in a class project at School of the Holy Childhood. The school's curriculum fosters both mental and physical development.

rolled in the sheltered workshops and adult programs are beneficiaries of that emphasis — and many more have gained from it in the past 50 years.

Indeed, the school this year is marking its 50th anniversary with a series of events that will culminate in a dinner dance Oct. 18.

Holy Childhood was begun in 1946 by Sister M. St. Mark, SSJ, who saw a need for a program for children with special needs.

The school opened with 30 students in a portion of the former Immaculate Conception School. After several moves over the years, Holy Childhood officials finally purchased the former public school building at 100 Groton Parkway in 1984.

The building houses the school program, sheltered workshops, the Special Touch Bakery and a clinic treatment program. Holy Childhood also offers woodworking, ceramics and sewing programs, which produce some items for sale. For the past two years, the school has also conducted a summer program, helping students retain what they have learned during the school year, and providing opportunities for excursions and such recreational



Tony Matone (above) works in the school's sheltered workshop where adults can learn work skills and earn a paycheck.

activities as camping trips.

In addition, Holy Childhood operates the Bridges Program, designed to help young adults prepare for the workplace or sheltered workshops.

The current staff includes six Sisters of St. Joseph and one School Sister of Notre Dame. Flaherty explained that while women religious still create a Catholic presence at the school, it became nondenominational in 1974 because of the population it

serves.

"We needed to be nondenominational to appeal to all of the families that need us," Flaherty said.

"We have children and adults of all denominations in the school population and the adult population, on the staff and the board," Sister Herbst noted.

The school combines one-on-one attention and a structured environment to meet each child's needs, Flaherty observed. The program includes a mix of regular instruction and work on such basic life and work skills as cooking, cleaning and using telephones. Staff members also work on clients' self-esteem to help prepare them for adult life.

"We've had a number of our clients move on," Flaherty said. "They can go as far as they are able."

"For a lot of them," she added, "their ultimate goal is getting into the sheltered workshop, to get

a paycheck."

And even for the adults, time is reserved during the work schedule for individual programs and physical education, Flaherty noted.

Kathy Campanella, for one, enjoys being part of the adult program at Holy Childhood. A graduate of the school program, she is now working in a sheltered workshop.

"I'm happy about doing different things in the workshop," Campanella said. "I'm happy I came here."

Dave Galunke, too, enjoys being part of the adult program.

"I'm proud of myself," Galunke declared. "I do a very good job."

But keeping an operation like school of the Holy Childhood going can be expensive, Flaherty acknowledged. The school receives tuition and some funding from area school districts that send students to the program. But the school has to keep working to meet all its financial needs.

"Our money mainly comes from our own fundraising efforts," Flaherty said.

Among those efforts are golf tournaments, candy sales, an ice cream social, a scholarship appeal and an annual craft sale.

As a member of the Holy Childhood Parent Group, Marshall-Cowden is active in many of the fundraising efforts. The organization's involvement is a sign of how welcome parents are at the School of the Holy Childhood, she noted.

"They definitely want the family involved in the learning process," she remarked. "In other cases, I felt we weren't welcome."

The parents' organization and other activities at Holy Childhood help provide parents with mutual support, Marshall-Cowden explained. And in her case, it gives her a chance to show gratitude for what has been done there for her daughter.

"She's happy and successful in her own way — which is all that a parent can ask for their kids," Marshall-Cowden declared.

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