

Love and quality education - ingredients of success

Center bears St. Madeleine Sophie's name



A day at St. Madeleine Sophie's Center for Developmentally Disabled Adults in El Cajon, California, can be viewed through many windows.

One window might overlook the acre-plus organic garden, where students learn to nurture the fruits, vegetables and herbs that are used in the center's kitchen or sold for income. The garden includes a citrus orchard, a greenhouse and a worm farm. Worm castings are packaged for fertilizer, and worm kits are assembled for sale nationally to schools.

Another window might overlook the professional kitchen itself, renovated with financial help from area organizations. Eleven center participants recently passed the center's food handling program, qualifying them to prepare and serve daily meals.

Another might afford a view over the contract work area, where participants are matched with requests from companies willing to outsource projects involving routine tasks. Projects have included

preparing bulk mailings, distributing flyers, painting curbs and clearing litter. When necessary, students are transported to job sites by the center's fleet of vans, as well as to area businesses for shopping and banking. Community integration is a priority for a population that is often rejected or misunderstood.

A Self-Advocacy program, funded in part by The Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, Inc., prepares qualified students to develop a resume, which gives them a perspective on their own accomplishments, and to hold jobs outside the center. For example, one student, Chelsea Voisard, practiced her interviewing skills and was hired by a McDonald's restaurant, where she received on-the-job coaching by a member of the center's staff.

There is the computer room, where students produce a monthly newsletter while upgrading skills; the Junior Olympic-sized outdoor pool, where students can learn to swim or train to compete in Special Olympics; the Senior Center, where programs engage people of retirement age in volunteer work and help them develop leisure and recreational skills.

The painted bowl, above, was on display last spring during the annual exhibit of works by St. Madeleine Sophie Center students at Bread & Cie. At right, Herb Hillson, participant in the center's programs, works in the organic garden.





Perhaps the most engaging window looks into a storefront in downtown El Cajon, home to Sophie's Art Gallery. It is a place for showcasing student wares: paintings and quilts that sell for hundreds of dollars to a wide assortment of gift items, including wire mobiles, painted bowls, and brightly colored cards sporting students' designs. Behind the gallery are work areas for artists and guest instructors.

A creative population

Each year, the center's artists lend their vision and talent to preparing an exhibition at Bread & Cie, a popular bakery and lunch spot in the Hillcrest area of San Diego. For this year's show, brightly painted wooden bowls lined the walls.

One of the best known of the center's artists is Mark Rimland. A handsome man in his late 40s who has autism, he served as prototype for the character of Raymond Babbitt in the 1988 Academy Award-winning movie *Rain Man*. Rimland took his first art class at the center many years ago and went on to gain national recognition and financial success. He is also a savant. Give him

Ray Felix, top left, displays a quilt decorated with an angel. The quilt is one of his art works for sale at Sophie's Art Gallery. At right, Sister Maxine Kraemer looks through The Secret Night World of Cats, a children's book illustrated by Mark Rimland and written by Helen Landalf, his sister.

the day and year you were born, and he will accurately shoot back the day of the week.

In fact, from the best of all perspectives, the center can be seen in terms of each of its 240 participants, the people who come daily to learn or upgrade marketable skills, develop creative outlets, earn some money, make new friends, and gain a sense of independence and self esteem. They range from recent high school graduates to seniors in their 70s.

"This is a very creative population," said Debra Turner-Emerson, executive director. "They have goals and dreams just like you and I do. They are able to do a lot if people just give them a chance. We try to create a place that is friendly, safe and secure and that gives people an opportunity to grow."



Sister Kraemer's reinventions

When viewed through the window of history, the center is an amazing story of success.

St. Madeleine Sophie's Center got its start in 1966 when parents of children attending Convent of the Sacred Heart in El Cajon asked the sisters to provide religious education for the students' developmentally disabled siblings. Sister Mary Mardel opened a school for students 3 to 9 and appointed Sister Sara Ann Rude as its first director. She was succeeded in 1968 by Sister Maxine Kraemer, who became the school's driving force.

A native Californian, Sister Kraemer had spent thirteen years teaching at Sacred Heart schools in San Francisco and Menlo Park, California. She had come to El Cajon to teach in 1961. She had a master's degree in music from Stanford University, but no experience to draw on for teaching students with special needs; only a philosophy that has seen her through many a difficult day: "When God asks you to do something, he shows you the way."

"The way" involved reinventing first herself, and then the school.

She recalls facing the first class. Some students were barely able to talk. She asked a group of rowdy boys to be seated. Only one complied. Finally, in desperation, she said, "If you want to become an altar boy someday, please sit down."

It was at that moment, when all sat, that she recognized a strong desire for learning and for recognition in these students.

Gradually the age range at the school expanded to include children both younger and older, up to 18 years, a change that turned Sister Kraemer into a fund raiser. She asked for another building; she

In photo at left, center participant Sandy Jimenez, embraces a longtime friend, Sister Kraemer. Above, student Nicole Griffin carefully paints designs on a brightly decorated chair.

got another challenge. She was told she would have to raise \$100,000 for construction costs.

Her efforts to provide quality education for young people with special needs, students who by now had captured her heart, required that she broaden her own resume. She learned to oversee construction, to speak to community groups, to ask for money. She even learned to drive a bus.

Along the way, she earned a second master's degree – a master's in special education from the University of San Diego.

Two events in 1972 were foundational to the next phase. The Society decided to close the Sacred Heart School in El Cajon, and new legislation required California's public schools to educate children with special developmental needs.

Sister Kraemer saw, though, that for the developmentally disabled, just as for the rest of the student population, education didn't end with a diploma. The program for developmentally disabled children was reinvented as a center to serve developmentally disabled adults.

Sister Kraemer served as director until she retired in 1992. She then turned her attention to helping fund the center's quality programs. She established the Kraemer Endowment Foundation, reinventing herself yet again to become its overseer until 1995, the year she turned 71.

Educating "the whole person"

St. Madeleine Sophie's Center is situated on five acres adjacent to the former Sacred Heart School, now home to a private elementary school. It has a staff of more than eighty and an annual budget of \$4.3 million, funded mostly by the state. In addition, the Kraemer Endowment Foundation provides about \$115,000 annually. Other forms of fund raising include an annual appeal, garden and fashion shows, art events and grants, including grants for special projects from the Society's U.S. Province.

St. Madeleine Sophie's vision of educating the whole person is alive and well at the center that bears her name. "One of the things the center excels at is looking at the whole person," Merri Robison, program manager, said. "We have a wide range of educational opportunities for people; we are able to take into account many types of vocational goals and aspirations." That contrasts with many other good programs that operate within a narrower framework, she said.

For example, Herb Hillson, one of the center participants, loves to work in the garden. He also serves as the campus safety monitor and writes a monthly report on safety tips for the center's student newsletter, *Heart to Heart*.

Ray Felix, a participant for more than twenty years, is making a serious pursuit of art these days, though Robison said he has enjoyed a variety of activities, such as kitchen and contract work. But recently, she said, he has focused on expanding his artistic abilities by exploring different techniques. Last spring, he proudly displayed to a group of

visitors a charming quilt he had decorated with a life-sized angel.

Nicole Griffin, in the program for about three years, was skilled at painting when she arrived, but is now experimenting with other media, such as sculpture and mosaics.

Sandy Jimenez, a student since 1987, has taken classes in cooking, art and swimming, but eventually realized that her first love is the contract room.

Some of her recent tasks have included sterilizing medical trays for sorting medications and preparing mailings. "She loves to earn a paycheck and this gives her a sense of independence," her parents wrote in a recent fund raising appeal. "She looks forward to attending class and doesn't understand why she can't work seven days a week."

The center's programs are structured so that students earn income as they perform their chosen tasks. For example, the center's artists receive forty percent of the price of their creations when they are sold, according to Wendy Morris, manager of Sophie's Gallery. In other areas, participants are paid according their skill level and work, whether they work for area businesses on contract projects or for the center in food service or garden maintenance.

"More than seventy percent of our students earn a paycheck here," Debra Turner-Emerson said. "Our goal is to see that everybody gets a paycheck of some kind."

What Turner-Emerson likes best about the center, what has kept her there for nearly a decade, is its spirit, particularly "the spirit of the people, who have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams."

"These people are fun," she said. "They are happy. They greet and hug you. There is a real sense here of everybody helping one another to grow." ❖

Debra Turner-Emerson, above right, is the center's executive director. At left, Wendy Morris, manager of Sophie's Art Gallery, holds a coiled wire hanging made by one of the students and for sale at the gallery.

