

Welcoming the stranger

Life and work 'a package' wrapped in vision



Ask Susan Maxwell, RSCJ, what attracted her to Schools of the Sacred Heart in Chicago and she will tell you her enthusiasm derived not only from the school's unique educational plan – single-sex schools for boys and girls on a single campus – but also from the school's ethnically diverse surroundings near Lake Michigan on Chicago's north side. Eight years ago, when she became director of Sheridan Road, as the school is known, she was determined to find a way to connect the school with the neighborhoods around it.

Today a program known as Children of the Heart, under the direction of Sacred Heart Associate Mary Burke-Peterson, is a haven for immigrant and low-income parents and their preschool children, ranging in age from newborn to three. Participants come from the neighborhoods surrounding Sheridan Road, the area they call home after arriving from countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Central America and Africa. They are the products of vastly different histories, speak different native languages and,

from some perspectives, have little in common. Some may have been forced to leave their countries as refugees or war or political change; others may have been drawn to the United States for its educational or economic opportunities.

But from another perspective, according to Peterson, participants share a lot. Many feel isolated, cut off from familiar surroundings and resources, and unsure where to turn. Regardless of their economic status, they may have limited skills in English and be uncomfortable and unfamiliar with various aspects of American culture. They often need help with navigating the daily realities of American life, its schools, libraries, hospitals, government offices and social service agencies.

For all who come, Children of the Heart, beginning its fifth year this fall, strives to be an oasis, a place where mothers new to this country can find information, friendship and support.

When Sister Maxwell arrived, though, it wasn't obvious what sort of program would benefit the neighborhood most. She gathered together a group to help her assess needs. Participants included Elise Packard from the Institute of Cultural Affairs, Barbara Becker from Uptown Headstart, and Maria Paz Salas, a faculty member at Sheridan Road. Peterson brought years of experience working with parents and children as an audiologist at Children's Memorial Hospital and a newfound love for Sacred Heart education and values.

"I remember walking into the school, standing in the hallway and being deeply aware that something was happening inside me," Peterson said, recalling her first visit to Sheridan Road. "I had a deep spiritual sense of feeling very much at home. This was where I wanted to be as much as where I knew I wanted my son to be." A few

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Sofia Elam, second-grader at Sacred Heart Schools, stands ready to assist Nikki Garagay.





Meg Kayama, alumna of Children of the Heart, mother of two children at Sheridan Road, and program volunteer, works on a craft project with Penelope Alegria.

years later, she would respond to an invitation to join Sacred Heart Associates and begin meeting monthly with RSCJ in the area and a group of women committed to studying the history, mission and spirituality of the Society of the Sacred Heart and making its spirituality and mission their own. “At the time, I was asking a whole lot of questions” as Children of the Heart was starting up, she recalled – “questions about spirituality, about work, about life in general.”

Learning to play

On Tuesday and Thursday mornings during the school year, the days Children of the Heart is in session, mothers and sometimes fathers climb the stairs to the second floor of a large house on the campus of Sheridan Road known today as “the 6200 House.” Some parents follow children who have skipped ahead; others carry babies or hold their more timid little ones by the hand. At the top of the stairs is a warren of rooms filled with toys and books, paraphernalia for group games and creative activities, and friendly volunteers.

After a short period of unstructured play for the children and informal conversation among parents and volunteers – who regularly include two second-graders at Sheridan Road – participants come together in a “gathering room” for songs

and games. “We always start with the welcoming song,” said Peterson. As parents and children sing it together, they make motions that correspond to the words.

“Everybody smile and wave, smile and wave, smile and wave ... where is *Maximo*,” or Isabel, or Sean, until every child present has had a chance to take his or her name card from the song leader and place it on a board. After songs come bubbles, blown out in profusion by the leader, filling the center of room, as children watch them rise and fall, some gleefully reaching for them, giggling as they disappear.

Next come snacks; then, as if on cue, mothers move into a large room where, on Thursdays, they take part in “Learning Basket” activities. One day last spring, for instance, tables held materials for creating scrapbooks, all donated by a volunteer. Sorting through photographs, the women chose those they wanted to keep, then cut and pasted them decoratively on pages they would later take home.

Peterson said “Learning Basket” activities offer mothers a chance to interact with each other as they explore ways of being involved with their children without spending much money. Most often, Peterson said, the activities are based on simple materials that might be found around the house – measuring cups and spoons for water play, garden gloves that can be turned into finger puppets, spools of yarn for making crocheted animals or balls, scraps of fabric for making clothes for animals or dolls. “Crocheting and sewing are skills many of the women grew up with,” Peterson said.

“Many of these women don’t find it easy to play with children,” she noted. “One of the fundamental focuses of these activities is to learn to play. We model it over and over as we play with the children, and sometimes we explain the benefits to the mothers directly.”

Sean O'Brien reaches for floating bubbles.





At other times, parents and children come together as adult volunteers read and talk about a simple book, asking mothers and children to examine the pictures and explain how they think people in the pictures might be feeling.

 **Empowering parents**

Two of the adult volunteers were originally parents in the program. One is Laura Vargas who brought her son Melvyn to Children of the Heart five years ago, when he was three. The other is Meg Kayama, who came when her youngest child was just one year old and an older daughter was entering kindergarten at Sheridan Road.

“At that time, I couldn’t speak English very well,” Kayama recalled. “Many Americans speak so fast. I was feeling isolated. I was afraid to talk.” Then she discovered Children of the Heart. “It’s like a family here,” she said. Similarly, Vargas, a native of Mexico, said she was thrilled when Peterson, after bumping into her several times around the neighborhood, asked her to come back to the program as a volunteer. “I feel so comfortable here,” said Vargas, who is program coordinator.

Peterson said many people, when they hear about the program, assume it is a day care operation. Then she explains that parents are included in the invitation to come and learn. “Our real purpose is to educate and empower parents, especially mothers,” she said. “We want to strengthen their parenting skills so their kids can flourish.” A side benefit, though, she said, is that once women have been through the program, they often feel more comfortable about sending their children to day care, preschools or Head Start programs when they enter work training programs or find jobs. Their children may feel more confident as well.

Mary Burke-Peterson, second from right, leans over a stool to watch as Mitzi Maloyan puts her name on a board. Also watching are Mary Craven, volunteer, with her twin children, Camille and Kyle, students at Schools of the Sacred Heart.



Jennifer Peña, left, enjoys the company of Brenda Mereida, assistant librarian at Sacred Heart Schools and volunteer at Children of the Heart, and Laura Vargas, volunteer program coordinator.

On Tuesdays, volunteers, some of them parent-professionals with children at Sheridan Road, some of them graduate students in nursing at DePaul University, give talks on nutrition, women’s health, budgeting, and a host of other issues relevant to women with children at home. Rosemary Dewey, RSCJ, who staffs the reading room at Children of the Heart and reads to children on request, gave a presentation on creating a budget, “and many of the women were stunned,” Peterson said. “They had no idea what their financial status was.” At another time, a Sheridan Road parent who is a nurse talked about post-partum depression, and one of the women in the group recognized that she had the symptoms.

“We talk about discipline, and parents learn that it’s okay to set boundaries for themselves,” Peterson said. “We help them to recognize stress and to find ways of coping. We want to help moms understand that taking care of themselves is a very important thing to do. We’d like to explore issues related to marital relationships more; explore the various levels of abuse, emotional, psychological and physical”

Kayama said, “One of the things I like best is that we never set ourselves up as people with all the answers. We are peers. On any day it is hard to tell who is the teacher and who is being taught.” Peterson added, “We’re like a big extended family; we’re all parenting each other. Sometimes I look around the room and I see parents involved with children,
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but not necessarily their own children.” Last fall, Peterson experimented with a “reading night” and wondered whether anyone would come. “They came in droves,” she said. “We had seventy-five people; thirty-two families.” They chose a book that is available in both Spanish and English, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, and sent every family home with a copy.

Deepening ties

Gradually, Sheridan Road’s connections with Children of the Heart have deepened. In addition to donating nearly all the books and toys, Sheridan Road parents volunteer in various capacities. Sister Maxwell donates the services of an assistant librarian, Brenda Merelda, a native of Guatemala who was trained as a physician and brings a wealth of health-related knowledge.

The program’s tie-in with the second grade curriculum is a natural, Sister Maxwell said, giving the young students an opportunity to participate in a service project without leaving the campus, and providing a connection with the second-grade social studies curriculum, which focuses on learning about other cultures.

Begun as a pilot project, Children of the Heart relies heavily on current personnel, so Peterson is working with others to create a solid structure, assuring its future beyond its present leadership. It is possible, too, she said, that the program will add additional days. An annual budget of about \$170,000 includes a substantial gift-in-kind from Sheridan Road in the use and maintenance of its space, as well as an



Mothers and children gather on a window seat to take part in a game led by Sheldon Hardy, former Sacred Heart Schools parent, and program volunteer.

operating budget of \$65,000 that comes mostly from grants, including ministry grants from the U.S. Province.

“Mary brings untiring, really untiring energy and devotion to this project,” Sister Maxwell said. “She is an inspired leader with the families and staff. She tries always to be thinking of new developments in the curriculum, and new connections with resources around the city, such as Loyola University and DePaul. She is really remarkable.”

Both Peterson, the Sacred Heart Associate, and Sister Maxwell, the RSCJ, see Children of the Heart as an extension of the Saint Madeleine Sophie’s vision for the Society of the Sacred Heart.

“I see Children of the Heart as a living incarnation of our foundress’s vision of academy and free school in dialogue with each other,” Sister Maxwell said. She referred to Madeleine Sophie’s dream of educating children from all levels of Society – those who could pay in academies, those who could not in “free schools.”

For Peterson, the program is a way to connect her deepening immersion into the spirituality of the Society with her role as an associate. “I have come to realize that this all fits together. I have a growing sense of this work being a part of the Sacred Heart mission. It’s all part of a package that’s been wonderful for me.” ❖



Getu Kebe, a native of Ethiopia, and sons Kedrus and Abbe play with an old telephone during an unstructured play period.

