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Mary Crane Center Continues Century of Care for Children

TRAVLES R. LANE

Anchored by more than a century of tradition and continually striving to grow and improve, the Mary Crane Center at 316 N. Pulaski Road in Garfield Park recently celebrated its first year of operations as it looks forward to offering the highest in quality childcare and family services to the West Side for many more years to come.

The Center, which took over the location that housed the Bethel New Life childcare program July 1, 2008, is currently in the midst of a drive to double its enrollment and expand its staff there while adding to a legacy of service to low income families that began when Teddy Roosevelt resided in the White House. State-accredited pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs are also offered by Mary Crane, which has six locations serving communities in Austin, the Near Northwest and Rogers Park as well as Garfield Park.

"We are a very large agency, and we are hiring even in this climate of recession because the demand is always there," said Melisa Larson, the Garfield Park Site Manager. "We've been sorting through the takeover (from Bethel) during our first year here. But we are finally settling in and starting to see some growth.

"We are working extremely hard to let families in the community know that we are here, we have a very large organization and support network and we are committed to continue providing them the best services in the industry."

Mary Crane Center teacher Jennifer Franklin prepares breakfast for her pre-school class. Photo by Travles R. Lane

Specializing in a Creeative Curriculum, the Center tailors its programs to suit each child's individual likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses and focuses on involving the whole family in the learning process. Mary Crane emphasizes its 6:30 a.m.- 6:30 p.m. operating hours, a bilingual staff, assisting children with special needs, literacy activities and daily playtime that "inspires child-to-child interaction."

Students also enjoy daily structured outdoor play as well as instruction on healthy living, exposure to language tools and a culturally rich and diverse classroom, according to the Center's Website at www.marycrane.org.

The Garfield Park location, which enrolls 35 mostly African American kids between 16 months and five years old, employs a full-time staff of 12 people, including three bilingual instructors. Larson, who brings more than 20 years of experience and a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education to her post, said she and Mary Crane Executive Director Laevetter Terry share a goal of further enhancing the Center's services and outreach through increased diversity and program expansion.

"We're about halfway where we want to be (in terms of enrollment) at this site," said Larson. "We have funding to expand to serve more toddlers and two-year olds, and we are exploring the option of providing school-age care in the near future.

"We currently are pushing a strong outreach to the Latino community and we are heavily recruiting in the Humbolt Park area. Because as gentrification forces many minority communities to move, we are finding that combining services (to accommodate diversity) is the model to build on for the future."

Established in 1907 as the Mary Crane Day Nursery by Jane Addams, the Mary Crane Center was originally formed to assist the children of poor immigrants on Chicago's near West Side before moving to the Lathrop Homes location in 1963. The organization pioneered a new way of thinking about early childhood education during its inception as one of the first experiments in nursery school education in the U.S. and has since served more than 14,000 children and families. Today, Mary

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Crane continues to pursue a mission dedicated "to the comprehensive early development of urban dwelling children and their families" and a goal "a quality education in a safe and diverse environment to strengthen the bonds between children and their families."

The Center began pre-kindergarten services in association with Chicago Public Schools in 1990, and added its Head Start program a year later. In 2000, toddler admissions began. The Lathrop Homes site is current the only center that serves infants.

In addition to the supporting resources of education coordinators, nutritional and health and mental health consultants employed to enhance and improve the quality of its services, the Mary Crane Center also relies heavily on parent volunteers and their classroom participation to facilitate a program that reaches out to families to provide them "the full range of family services." Parents also conduct thematic monthly meetings focusing on topics ranging from health, dental and fire safety as well as workshops in budget training disciplining and stress management.

The Bethel Education and Family Services organization also occupies the building and complements Mary Crane's efforts with its own.

Spearheading the Center's enrollment/recruitment efforts since joining the staff in May, Traci Medina, who has two daughters attending Center, said the pace has picked up with the addition of about 10 families since June. She added she has been prospecting block parties, carnivals, fairs and other public family events all over the West Side this summer in the effort to build up the Mary Crane rolls.

Medina, a nine-year veteran of the childcare field, said many families were wary of enrollment because "they hear about all the budget cuts (in social services and child care) these days with the recession and all."

The Center's fees are subsidized on a sliding scale according to family income. however, Larson stressed that Mary Crane enjoys varied funding sources through the United Way, corporations and foundations in addition to its government subsidies. The Center also participates in partnership agreements with CPS and other agencies to assist each other in recruiting.

"We are eager to offer Mary Crane Center's quality services to the families of Garfield Park and the surrounding neighborhoods, and we look forward to becoming a vital part of the community for years to come," she said.

More information about the Center and its services can be obtained by calling (773) 265-5954 or by accessing the Website.