

# Sizing things up

## Family life class gets dwarf's view of world

By Richard Leach  
staff writer

FOR A classroom of Madonna College students, it was a chance to discover what it's like to be small.

The students took turns kneeling while trying to conduct a conversation with a standing classmate. The results were revealing.

The "normal-size" student didn't know how to make the short person feel comfortable during their awkward conversation.

One "small" student complained that her neck hurt from looking up so much. Another said she couldn't be sure her classmate was listening to her.

All agreed they got a different, decidedly unpleasant perspective on things from down below.

"It's interesting to me that the things they were sharing are the same things that people with growth disorders share with you," said the class instructor Teresa Chase of Westland.

THE EXERCISE was part of Chase's "Growing Up Small: Is There a Place for Me?" seminar. Sponsored by the

Livonia college's Home Economics and Family Life Department, the two-month seminar is the first of its kind offered in the state in the educational field, Chase said.

The seminar, which will end Thursday, June 21, deals with shortness in general, but particularly focuses on the people who "struggle for every inch of growth" — dwarfs and midgets, or short-statured individuals as they sometimes are called today.

Sensitizing students to the problems short people face is the seminar's main emphasis, Chase said.

"A goal is that it will help them to be more open to people who have all types of handicaps," she said. "To see them as people, after you get past that first initial impression, that observation of a physical defect."

For most little people, there is no chance of attaining a "normal" height. Of the three major forms of growth disorder, only one — hormonal disorder — can be treated, Chase said.

Included in that category are hypopituitary disorders, which lead to proportionate short stature — in which the arms and legs are in their "normal" proportion to the body.

Children with this disorder can be given regular shots of human growth hormone (HGH), much as a diabetic gets insulin shots, and eventually may reach 5 feet or more in height.

But the supplies of the hormone, which is extracted from human pituitary glands, are limited, Chase said.

THERE IS no treatment, however, for either skeletal or genetic shortness.

Dwarfs, people with regular-size bodies but short arms and legs, suffer from bone cartilage abnormalities, a disorder called achondroplasia.

Genetic shortness takes in people who are not extremely small but have inherited a height below 5 foot.

Discovering that their baby has a growth disorder such as achondroplasia can be a traumatic experience for parents, Chase said. In earning her master's degree at Eastern Michigan University, she studied the effects having such a child can have on "regular-size" parents.

Her study was written in conjunction with Robert DeCampo, associate professor of family and child development at EMU.

Two years ago, Chase and DeCampo interviewed 30 families of both hypopituitary and achondroplasia children in Michigan and northern Ohio. The researchers found that family pediatricians were not always able to diagnose the growth disorder properly.

"Better than 90 percent said to stop

worrying, when they get to adolescence they'll have a spurt," DeCampo said.

But if a child does not grow 2 inches or more per year, it is reason for concern, DeCampo said.

UPON LEARNING that a child did indeed have a growth disorder, particularly achondroplasia, the parents' first response was denial, DeCampo said.

"They say, 'Maybe the child will grow if we feed it right,'" DeCampo said. "Grandma and grandpa say just give it vitamins, and it will grow."

"They paraded the child around to three, four or five different physicians in hopes of having a better diagnosis."

After that initial denial, parents must reach the stage where they can accept the disorder for what it is so they can help the child adapt to a large-size world, the researchers found.

"That to me was the real key to a well-adjusted family," DeCampo said.

A FAMILY should not treat its small-statured child differently than a normal-sized child, he said.

"I think the biggest thing, and it's been said time and again, once they (the parents) accept the condition they can treat the child based on chronological and mental age, not on size," he said.

DeCampo said the most surprising finding of the study was that small-statured children prefer to be among children their own age, not their own size.

**"On first impression, we deal with people based on how they look. Once you get to know somebody our physical differences disappear."**

— Brian Morris  
Little People of America

Creating artificial barriers — that the child can't do this or that because of size — can be detrimental, DeCampo said. One small-statured girl in the study, for instance, wanted to ride a horse. Her parents, reluctant at first, allowed her to do it, and she was successful.

"It's important to let the child experience things and do things the normal child would do," he said.

COPIING WITH ridicule and the stares of strangers can be difficult for both the child and family. Much of this antipathy from strangers stems from a misunderstanding of the problem.

One parent surveyed, for instance, recalled how one elderly woman angrily accused her in a supermarket and accused her of not feeding her child properly.

The families found that having an open attitude about the growth disorder can help the child become accepted by classmates — and ultimately by society as a whole.

"It's important that a child feel free to talk about dwarfism and talk about what his or her experiences are, within the class. It shouldn't be a hush-hush thing," said Marge Carlisle, district director of the LPA organization and a special education teacher.

Other students are interested in finding out about a short-statured person, she said, about why they are so small and how they deal with the world at large. Then the size difference ceases to be a problem, and the dwarfs can be treated as individual human beings.

"That's so important, to treat me as Brian Morris and not as a dwarf," said Brian Morris, a CPA and former Plymouth resident who now lives in Northville. "That's only part of me as a person."

son. I have my intellect, emotions and sensitivity."

"On first impression, we deal with people based on how they look. Once you get to know somebody our physical differences disappear."

"They forget, and tell us to get something off the top shelf," said Morris' wife, Linda, a dietitian and homemaker.

CHASE SAID the status of short people is improving. For example, their prospect for employment is much better.

In a documentary shown in the seminar, one man recalled studying accounting in college in the 1930s, only to be told by corporate recruiters that he belonged in the circus, not on campus.

Today, small-statured people are doing all sorts of jobs — teaching, computer programming, accounting, running their own businesses.

"Things are getting better," Chase said. "The Little People of America stresses that you really need a good education, you have really got to be positive and determined. People with growth disorders, like people with any handicap, really have to work harder to prove themselves."

In an era in which handicaps are looked at with increased understanding, the problems of short people are being considered more. And changes that benefit one handicapped group can help others, as demonstrated by one classroom experiment in Chase's seminar that didn't work.

Chase had her students, on their knees, try to use the restroom sink, get a drink of water from a fountain and turn on light switches.

"It backfired because Madonna," is programmed for the handicapped individual, so they didn't have much of a problem," Chase said.

## School for the gifted expands summer program

Gibson School for the Gifted in Redford Township is expanding its annual summer enrichment program. This will include a week of classes hosted by Dearborn Public Schools Adult and Community Education.

July 30 to Aug. 3 will be the dates for the Dearborn classes, to be held in Howard School, 1611 N. York, Dearborn, near Ford and Telegraph Roads. August 6-17, will be the regular two one-week sessions at Gibson School,

12925 Fenton, Redford, near I-96 and Telegraph.

Computers, science, magic, pottery, music, campcraft, humanities, drawing, rocketry, dramatics, pre-school classes and more are among the topics open to all children in the metro area, ages 4-13.

Tuition is \$22 which covers classes meeting Monday-Friday. Call 543-3037 to be placed on the mailing list.

## Early Childhood Center expands tots' program

Both Fairview and Alameda Early Childhood Centers are expanding their former programs for 4-year-olds beginning with full classes to begin the week of Sept. 10.

The regular two- and three-day programs formerly offered will continue with an option of a five-day-a-week program to be offered in the fall.

Learning and play activities, along with appropriate motor-development exercises, hands-on science projects and sessions with live animals are on the agenda.

Registrations are being taken and will continue until the first week of class. Inquiries concerning the Alameda center, in the Power Road and 11 Mile area, are taken by calling 476-1470. Inquiries concerning the Fairview center, in the 13 Mile and Middlebelt area, are taken by calling 628-8336.

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