

SUBURBAN LIFE

C

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 1994



DICK CARVELL

Lions take on new challenge

The International Association of Lions Clubs began in 1917 when a Chicago businessman named Melvin Jones convinced a group of his compatriots to join him in a club that would be devoted to community service rather than a typical fraternal organization.

The idea of helping others grew and the concept became international when a group of Lions in Detroit convinced a number of businessmen in Windsor to join. The Lions' membership of 1.4 million are located in 180 countries and geographic areas.

Early on, the Lions, at a national convention, were challenged by Helen Keller to become a champion of the blind and deaf.

The Lions accepted as part of the challenge and from that time have been known for helping the blind. Lions pay for eye exams and glasses for school children, provide financial assistance to many programs devoted to assisting the visually handicapped and provide Braille transcriptions.

A new challenge is the prevention of blindness. International health organizations have told the Lions there are 40 million blind people in the world of whom 80 percent or 32 million need not have lost their eyesight.

Around the world the Lions are striving to provide the funds to establish an endowment fund of \$200 million that will provide the ongoing programs that will prevent a future 32 million people from losing their eyesight.

The programs will establish education and clinics to fight river blindness in Africa, which is caused by infection resulting from bathing in unclear rivers; glaucoma in India; and juvenile diabetes, a leading cause of blindness in the United States.

Other programs are designed to convince people that substance abuse also creates blindness. The effort will not happen overnight, but the Lions are determined to be successful in this worldwide community service.

Locally, there are two programs that are meant to aid the blind in becoming mobile and in coping with everyday life. The white cane has been accepted nationwide as a symbol for the visually handicapped.

Many years ago three Lions from the Detroit area recognized the need of many blind people to be able to move about, hold a job and be somewhat independent. Leader Dogs for the Blind was organized and has grown to such an extent that more than 9,000 dogs have been trained and placed. Leader Dogs are now known around the world and people from all countries come to Rochester for their training and pairing with a Leader Dog.

Currently, Leader Dogs for the Blind is providing 360 dogs per year and is the largest such facility in the world. The dogs are provided at no cost except for the individual's transportation to Rochester and in many cases a hometown Lions club will even help with that cost.

In another case, a local Lions member learned of a blind Farmington Hills resident who was having a problem with his job. It turned out that there were two blind men assembling items at Farmington Hills business. The assignment was in a "clean room" that would not tolerate dogs. The dogs, however, were necessary for the gentlemen to get to the work position.

A representative from Leader Dog intervened and it was soon evident there was room for the placement of two cubs to accommodate the dogs. The Farmington Area Lions picked up the cost of the two cubs and now two handicapped people can remain in the work force, make their way in the business world and maintain their sense of accomplishment.

The Lions have always operated on the creed that all money raised through public donation must be returned to the public. No public funds are used in the operation of the club. The Lions pride themselves that people trust that donations will be used in a meaningful manner.

The Farmington Area Lions donated to 30 different causes and or groups in past year. The donations ran the gamut from the Lions Club International Foundation, for the worldwide prevention project, through Leader Dog and other state and district projects to eye exams and glasses for school children.

The least donation - from a financial aspect - was the donation of white canes to local residents but very important to the individuals who want to retain a sense of independence and a quality of life.

Another example of the public generosity is giving the Lions their used eye glasses for processing and reuse where needed. In the Farmington area, 3,000 pairs of glasses were collected and shipped to Muncie, Ind., where the Lions have established a processing center.

I have spoken of the many accomplishments of the Lions but it comes right down to the fact that the generous support of the general public is what enables the Lions to help the many groups. Dick Carvell is a Farmington resident, 37-year member of various Lions Club chapters and active with the Farmington Historic Museum.



SHARON LEMIEUX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Solving problems: Teacher Colleen Cavanaugh talks with Sarah Fisher residents as they tackle a math problem on a computer.

Last resort

Sarah Fisher offers hope in dismal lives



Children sent to the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center have been dealt a life full of abuse and neglect. The center provides intensive treatment to try and undo the trauma youngsters endure. A new adoption program gives some of these children a chance.

BY DIANE GALE
STAFF WRITER

One look at their faces says they've endured a lot of pain.

Inside the children at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center are the scars of people severely abused and neglected by their parents. They were yanked from the only homes they knew and lived with one foster care family after another. No one could provide the control they needed. And after everything else failed they were sent to the Inkster and 12 Mile complex in Farmington Hills.

First chance

A bright light in this dismal story is an adoption program that began about 3 years ago. Since then, the Sarah Fisher Center has arranged 20 adoptions including one that involved a 15-year-old girl, according to Betty Speyer, St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center director of agency relations.

The teen's nightmare began when she was abandoned at 2 months old and left with a woman who abused her. She was sent to a shelter and was finally taken to Sarah Fisher where she lived for four years.

The angry, uncooperative child who first came to the center was transformed by the time she left with her new mother, Speyer said.

Finally a happy chapter in an otherwise dismal life.

This young girl's story isn't isolated. Thirty more children at Sarah Fisher need adoptive parents, Speyer said.

Center history

Children sent to the 60-acre facility require a lot of structure and treatment when they arrive. The extensive care pushes up the cost of keeping these children, who live in a residential setting, a concept that began when Sarah and Charles Fisher, one of the brothers who established Fisher Body, built the complex in 1929.

It was to be an orphanage patterned after the lauded European facilities that stressed the need for home-like settings. Cottages at Sarah Fisher housed children. The concept of orphanages was phased out, however, when Michigan opted to deinstitutionalize care for young children. Sarah Fisher became a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children 5 to 18 living in residential settings. Like Sarah Fisher, when everything else fails. The first choice is to keep children in their homes and the next option is foster care.

"We're sort of the last resort," Speyer said. "You can't imagine what these kids have gone through."

Our job is to build their self-esteem and to show the kids they are worthy of love. They've been rejected over and over again from one foster care family to another."

The original idea of a home-like setting is maintained since the children still live in cottages. Even though the facility is owned and sponsored by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul, it is nondenominational. In fact, Speyer said, she couldn't think of one child at Sarah Fisher who is Catholic.

Close to 100 percent of the children have been sexually abused. For more than 40 percent of the children, their situations at home are so terrible they have been named permanent wards of the court and will never return home.

Money falls short

Sarah Fisher is licensed to house 60 children and at one point this year the count was down to 48 children. The decline in money creates a hardship.

"It was devastating for us," Speyer said. "We were operating at full cost with a great deal less income. If it was because there was less of a need that would be wonderful. But we know there are children who are out there who weren't getting the help they needed."

Sarah Fisher hasn't received a rate increase for four years and "our costs have risen," she said. The needs of the children rise with the increasing severity of problems. For instance, a lot of the children today have suicidal thoughts. Sexually abused children also are considered sexually active and need almost constant supervision.

Sarah Fisher Center is paid \$131 daily for each child and runs on a \$6 million annual budget with 80 percent coming from the state and 20 percent from fund-raisers.

Wide ranging programs

Other services include recruiting and arranging foster care, as well as a day-care program for the public.

Pregnant and parenting teens also are offered prenatal instruction, as well as child-care information. Between 500 and 600 teens are helped annually through this program.

Volunteers, in many different capacities, are essential. The most important role they play is to show these youngsters that someone will keep coming back and since the children know they're not getting paid their commitment is even more valued, Speyer said.

Using volunteers is one way to defray costs, but withholding state support is not a good long-term way to save money, Speyer said.

"They're not going to be able to build enough prison to hold the products of these homes if there isn't prevention," she said. "Every single person should call their legislators and let them know that children have to be a priority, all children and especially these children who are the throwaway kids, which are the kids we get. They have to look at more prevention programs and properly fund them." Anyone interested in volunteering at Sarah Fisher should call (313)626-7527. For more information about becoming foster parents or adoptive parents, call Judy Converse at 626-1088.

Marriages that join faiths have a prayer

BY DIANE GALE
STAFF WRITER

Communication and sensitivity are key to inter-faith marriages.

Take Susan and Jim Walker. She's Jewish and he was born and raised a strict Roman Catholic. Before they married, Jim became involved in a Protestant church and then a Messianic church. When they were dating, Susan said, she was thrilled he wanted to understand her culture better and that he wanted to understand the Jewish faith.

"My husband is a unique individual," Susan said.

She took him to the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, and he liked it so much that he joined Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine's classes on the history of the Jewish people.

"He was extremely committed to this," Susan added.

So much so that he became confirmed at the Birmingham Temple.

Dual celebrations

"We celebrate the holidays in the symbolic traditions," Susan said. "During Hanukkah we light candles, and we have a Christmas tree. Jim insists on having only white lights on the tree. Nothing else. We celebrate Christmas with his family and Hanukkah with mine."

Like in every marriage, in-laws play a role. Susan said, however, her parents were accepting of her marriage to Jim and were content that she was happy.

Also the road had been paved somewhat when Susan's brother married a non-Jew and the initial shock toward an inter-faith marriage was gone. "At that time they were thrilled that Jim was confirmed," Susan added.

When they have children, they will be raised Jewish, which Susan's parents will also appreciate. The Walkers don't agree with the idea of letting children decide their religion.

"We think they need guidance," Susan said.

Dilemmas of dating

Dealing with the issues of religion weren't always so easy, especially when Jim and Susan were dating. Susan worried about the problems they could face and even considered ending the relationship.

"But he's made everything very easy," Susan added. "I think that's what was always there, was this communication."

They also attended the inter-cultural marriage workshop at Birmingham Temple and they delved into issues about dealing with families, children, personal relationships, the holidays and reactions from other people.

"Through sharing experiences you kind of learn about how other people are handling different things," Susan said.

Similar concerns are faced by people of other religions.

See MARRIAGE, 9C