

The Building Block

An e-newsletter of the J. D. McCarty Center for children with developmental disabilities

Center Celebrates Christmas Season with Parties, Presents and Performances

Hundreds turned out for this year's holiday happenings at the McCarty Center.

The annual Christmas lighting party and golf cart parade drew nearly 300 people, while the 40 et 8 party saw close to 500 participants.

The variety of visitors to the parties included volunteers at the center, band members from Noble Public Schools, athletes from the University of Oklahoma and a local church group.

The holiday season started with the annual lighting party and golf cart parade December 1 at the center.

The crowd --which included patients, center employees and volunteers-- clapped and cheered for the creative golf carts in the parade. There were also "Oohs" and "Ahhs" during the lighting of the center's 30-foot Christmas tree.

The event was a flurry of fun that also featured music performances by band members from Noble Public Schools, members of Christ the King

Presbyterian Church in Norman and center employees. Children at the event also got to pose for photos with Santa and the OU women's gymnastics team.

Santa showed up again at the center during the annual party hosted by the Oklahoma Muni-

cipal Contractors Association.

Santa, with help from Mrs. Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, gave out gifts to the center's kids and got grins in return.

OMCA members brought the gifts for the inpatients and also presented \$32,000 to Vicki Kuestersteffen, director and CEO of the McCarty Center.

The money goes toward purchasing the gifts and to assist with the construction of a summer camp for children with special needs. Members raise the money during an annual charity golf tournament in September.

Plentiful Presents

The Christmas celebration continued at the center with the annual party hosted by the 40 et 8 of Oklahoma, a veteran's organization that founded the center.

Those invited to the December 19 party included inpatients and outpatients and their families, center employees and

[See Plentiful Presents continued on page 2](#)



The lighting of a 30-foot Christmas tree is one of the highlights of the annual lighting party and golf cart parade at the center.

Plentiful Presents Continued

their families and guests from the community.

Kuestersteffen took time at the event to honor the individuals and groups who have contributed to the center, such as through donations and volunteer efforts. Noble band members were among those recognized. The members have performed at the center and also raised \$2,100 to buy toys for the kids at the center.

At the end of the party, children 12 and younger were invited to pick out a toy from "Santa's Workshop," which was a room at the center packed with donated presents from area residents, businesses and groups.

The holiday season wrapped up at the center with the annual Outpatient Family

Christmas Program, which offers donations of food, toys and other gifts to families who are selected by center employees.

Families eligible for the program are those whose children use the center's outpatient services.



Speech-Language Pathologist Tiffany Sullivan is shown with some of the baskets of items gathered for this year's selected outpatient families.

Staff members nominate families for the program and a selection committee then reviews the nominations and chooses the recipients. Committee members look at the needs of each nominated family, the number of family members and whether they receive support or are eligible for support from other programs.

For some families, the McCarty Center may be their primary support system, said Tiffany Sullivan, a speech-language pathologist at the center who also works with the Christmas program.

Five families were selected this year and they received a

basket containing a Christmas meal, fruit drinks, toys, books, toiletries, mittens, hats and socks.

Center employees, community members and local businesses provided the donations.

Sullivan said the program is another way to show that center employees care about and support the families who come to the center for services.

"It really holds a special place in my heart and I plan to be involved every year," she said.

Autism Support Group Gives Parents Chance to Meet and Share Experiences

Raegan Reimer has created a group where parents can find camaraderie and common ground.

Reimer, a special education teacher, started a class for children with autism at Winding Creek Elementary School in Moore. She soon became interested in finding a way for parents of the students to meet and talk about topics that relate to the disorder.

"I wanted them to have that network."

So, during the 2009-10 school year, she organized an autism parent support group that meets once a month. Reimer, a former McCarty Center employee, believes the group has been helpful to parents.

[See Autism Support Group on page 3](#)

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Autism Support Group

Continued from page 2

“They get the support of other people who understand what they’re going through,” she said, adding that they also “learn more information about what parents are trying and what is working.”

Reimer also found support from others when she started working to form the group. She discussed her idea with David Higdon, an occupational therapist with the McCarty Center who also works in Reimer’s school and others in the Moore school district.

“He was a good sounding board for me” and supported her initiative, said Reimer, who worked at the McCarty Center for two years as a direct care specialist.

Higdon also volunteered to share information with the group that he learns through workshops about autism, such as about treatment strategies.

Reimer received approval from her school administrators to organize the group and the first meeting was in February 2010.

Attendance has ranged from seven to 12 people at the

evening meetings and some of the topics discussed have included behavioral strategies and the use of gluten-free and casein-free diets in the treatment of autism spectrum disorders.

Reimer said the meetings focus on subjects that are relevant to the parents.

“I want to meet the needs of my parents. I really kind of let them tell me what we need to talk about.”

Higdon said he believes the group is beneficial because it helps parents feel less isolated when they are faced with different issues concerning their children.

Adaptive Ballet Class Allows Girls to be Stars of the Stage

Hailey Southerland is all smiles during the class.

The 10-year-old laughs and lets out an excited little scream as teacher Candace Looper works with the group on arm movements.

In this moment each Monday, Hailey and others in the room become ballerinas. The 10 girls come to class dressed in leotards, tights and ballet slippers and move to music for their upcoming Christmas recital.

This is more than a ballet class, though. It’s an opportunity for these students with disabilities to become stars on a stage.



Hailey Southerland, left, is assisted by student helper Alejandra Alvarado; Beth Wann, a McCarty Center physical therapist and student helper Jessica Pool. Hailey participates in Special Dreams Ballet, which is an adaptive ballet and movement program for children with disabilities at Southgate-Rippetoe Elementary School in Moore.

[See Ballet Stars on page 4](#)

Ballet Stars

continued from page 3

The program is known as “Special Dreams Ballet,” which is an adaptive ballet and movement program that Looper started three years ago at Southgate-Rippetoe Elementary School in Moore.

Looper is the director of the ballet group -whose motto is “Our time to shine”- and teaches a multiple disabilities class. Beth Wann, a physical therapist at the McCarty Center, also works with the program.

Wann, who contracts with Moore public schools to provide therapy services, makes sure that the ballerinas and their student helpers have the proper physical support during rehearsals and recitals.

The girls in the program include those who have cerebral palsy, spina bifida, autism, deafness, blindness and genetic disorders.

Some girls are physically able to stand and can perform certain moves, such as turning in a circle, while others nestle between the knees of their student helpers and work on arm movements. Others use adaptive equipment that helps them to sit and stand.

The ballerinas practice once a week for 30 minutes and perform in two recitals, one in December and another in the spring.

Looper credits Hailey for serving as her inspiration for the program.

She remembers reading a book to Hailey that featured a ballerina. A tear streamed down Hailey’s face as they read and Looper took that as a sign that her student, who has cerebral palsy, also wanted to be a ballerina.

Looper had read about an adaptive ballet class in New York and decided to give it a try at her school. Her ballet experience comes from taking her daughter to ballet classes for nine years.

Looper received approval from school administrators to start the program and also met with parents of the girls she wanted to include.

The parents have embraced the program, and it gives them the chance to see their children in a different light, Looper said. Some parents “never thought they would see their kids in ballet outfits and dancing or see them on stage performing.”

Wann said the program also offers the girls additional opportunities to work on movement and using different muscles. Plus, they are developing their social skills by interacting with the student helpers.

Wann also notices enthusiasm from the ballerinas. “They are bright-eyed and smiling and loving it.”

The ballerinas are also assisted by some sixth-graders. Looper selects the student helpers each year, and the girls have to keep their grades up and have the physical ability to support the ballerinas.

The sixth-graders say they love seeing the energy and excitement from the ballerinas.

“I just love helping out with them,” said Alexis Waggoner, 12. “It’s just all kinds of fun.”

Mackenzey McInroe, 12, said she wanted to get involved in the program “because whenever I grow up I want to be a special education teacher.”

Looper believes the program is an enriching experience for those involved. For the ballerinas, it gives them the opportunity to enhance their ability to follow directions and pay attention. For the student helpers, the program can motivate them to maintain good grades so they can stay involved and show them some of the talents and skills that children with disabilities have, she said.

Looper’s goal is to expand the program into a districtwide after-school program. Her hope is that “Special Dreams Ballet” helps to show parents, students and teachers that “these kids are capable of doing things if you just look outside the box and find a way to modify it for them.”

“It just brings me a lot of joy,” Looper said about the program. “It’s just something really special for me.”

And it all started with Hailey.

Oklahoma Municipal Contractors Association Delivers Gifts and Donation to the McCarty Center

The McCarty Center recently looked a little like the North Pole.

Santa showed up at the center with Mrs. Claus by his side. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer frolicked around the room, and elves were on hand to give gifts to boys and girls.

The merry moment was courtesy of the Oklahoma Municipal Contractors Association.

The association hosted its annual party for the kids at the center December 14.



Santa and Mrs. Claus open a bag of presents for McCarty Center inpatient Kenden Snook. Each inpatient was called by name to come see what Santa had brought especially for him or her.



Rick Moore, OMCA executive director, gives Vicki Kuestersteffen, McCarty Center director and CEO, a celebratory hug as he announces OMCA's \$32,000 donation toward the construction of Camp ClapHans, the McCarty Center's summer camp project.

OMCA members brought gifts to inpatients and also presented \$32,000 to Vicki Kuestersteffen, director and CEO of the McCarty Center.

The money goes toward purchasing the gifts and to assist with the construction of Camp ClapHans, a summer camp project of the McCarty Center. OMCA raises the money during an annual charity golf tournament in September.

OMCA is the state's trade organization that represents contractors who work on local, state and federal municipal projects.

Rick Moore, OMCA's executive director, said members are thrilled to be able to help the center and to celebrate Christmas with the children.

"These kids make it all worthwhile," Moore said.

Kuestersteffen thanked the members for their generosity and for hosting the annual party. "It definitely is the highlight of our Christmas season," she said.

During the party, OMCA members and their families dressed up like elves and handed gifts to Santa and Mrs. Claus to distribute to the center's children.

Each child was called by name to come to the front of the room and collect his or her presents. Some walked shyly up to Santa, while others darted to his lap.

Gifts included a bicycle, plush toys, dolls, clothing, a CD player, keyboards, a skateboard, video games and footballs, basketballs and soccer balls.

Jennifer King, who dressed up as Rudolph, walked around the party room to give kids a high-five, handshake or hug.

King, whose husband is an OMCA member, said she enjoys portraying the reindeer and getting the chance to attend the party. "It's one of our favorite things during the Christmas holiday," King said, "adding that the experience helps capture the 'magic of Christmas.'"

Program Proves ‘Paws’itive for the Center

All eyes are on Emma when she walks in the room.

She draws stares from the group, along with hands reaching out to rub her back, pet her belly or shake her paw.

Emma is a 140-pound English Mastiff and a certified therapy dog. She and owner Don Davis make regular visits to the McCarty Center.

Emma’s appearances are through the center’s animal therapy program that began a year ago. The program gives children at the center the opportunity to interact with animals and learn some life skills.

Davis is excited about the positive impact that Emma is having on the kids, such as the dog’s interaction with a boy who is autistic.

At first, the boy avoided the gentle dog and wouldn’t touch her. But, after a few visits, he began to recognize and respond to Emma and now puts her paw in his hand and pets her belly when she lies on the floor.

The child has also displayed a longer attention span when he is around the animal and has improved his ability to wait his turn, such as to pet or walk the dog. He has developed a connection to Emma when he is usually drawn to inanimate objects.

That type of positive interaction with an animal is one of the benefits of the program, said Maria Greenfield, the center’s occupational therapy director.

Greenfield and Stacy Angermeier, an occupational therapist, worked together to start the program that offers small

Greenfield said one of the reasons she wanted to start the program is because she believes animals have therapeutic value, such as the unconditional love they offer and the ability “to bring kids out of their shells.” There are also the life skills that can be learned from animals, like the responsibility and financial costs of caring for them.

In addition, animal-assisted therapy can promote improvement in a person’s physical, social, emotional or cognitive function, according to information from the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Greenfield and Angermeier say the interaction between the children and the animals can help enhance physical movement, such as when the children reach out to pet the dog, and their verbal skills, such as saying the dog’s name, asking the handler if they can walk the dog or giving the animal commands.

There’s also the sensory sensation of being around a dog, such as the smell and feel of the fur.

Angermeier, a dog owner herself, said the program also gives children the chance to learn how to approach a dog safely.

Davis said Emma’s easy-going temperament, patience and desire to please others is what makes her suited for therapy work.



Emma is a 2-year-old, 140-pound English Mastiff and certified therapy dog who makes regular visits to the McCarty Center.

groups of children at the center the chance to spend 45 minutes to an hour with an animal each Friday.

Dogs are the most frequent visitors but the program has also featured animals from the Little River Zoo in Norman, including a turtle, gecko and snake.