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Nurturing moms

Posted on 01-05-2006

Mothers' Club has been helping mothers and children since 1961 with its educational programs and community center in Pasadena.

By Leigh Kennicott
Photos courtesy of Mothers' Club



A play group at Mothers' Club's community center

In 2003, when I first walked into Mothers' Club at their cheerful location at the Friends Meeting House on Orange Grove Boulevard in Northwest Pasadena, I entered a world where miracles happen. I had taken a position teaching English as a second language (ESL) to mothers who participated in the two-generational learning program that Mothers' Club pioneered. Susan Kujawa, a slight, energetic woman who is the current executive director, greeted me and enthusiastically showed me around.

I saw groups of children being led in a series of learning activities that were appropriate to their ages, from toddler to 5 years. I found a bright nursery for the babies, tended by one of the mothers and an early-childhood specialist. I learned that many of the teachers had started as participants at Mothers' Club. Each mother spends time helping in various classes while taking ESL, GED tutoring, computer classes, parenting workshops and leadership training. A number of Pasadena agencies contribute workshops in career and educational planning.

But nothing prepared me for meeting the amazing mothers — and a few fathers — I taught. They came from many countries: India, Pakistan, Mexico, Russia and Egypt. They shared a strong desire to learn English, to obtain driver's licenses and to learn how to navigate the complexities of American society. They all wanted their children to succeed, and they saw Mothers' Club as the perfect environment for their children to transition from one culture to another.

Mothers' Club began modestly in 1961 as an outreach project of the Orange Grove Meeting Society of Friends. One of the members, Mara Moser, invited a few mothers in the community to meet in a cooperative play group a few days a week. Interest grew rapidly, and the group hired Taka Nomura as program director in 1962. By 1973, Mothers' Club incorporated as a nonprofit organization. At that time, 60 families were being served five days a week.

One of the mothers who walked through the door with her two young sons was Kujawa. From the beginning, she realized the worth of the two-tiered approach to child development at Mothers' Club. While the children were growing and learning, mothers were developing their parenting skills and building self-esteem. She became Mothers' Club's part-time administrator in 1985.



Since then, the organization has worked hard to develop support and funding for its programs. In 2001 and 2002, Mothers' Club won a grant from First Five of Los Angeles. Later, Kujawa and her development team also received a federally funded Even Start Family Literacy grant, among other grants from private foundations.

Although their funding had solidified, their location became more precarious. The Friends had long since relinquished responsibility for the group. When the Friends inaugurated their own elementary school in 2002, it became clear that Mothers' Club would need to find its own space. In 2007, the organization that now serves 70 families each year will move into a newly renovated building at 980 N. Fair Oaks Blvd.

The transition will allow Mothers' Club to expand its services for families in need and increase its hours from half-day to all-day. It will enable Mothers' Club to become a center for learning in the community. None of this could have happened without an enthusiastic, pro-active board, headed by Judy Wilson, who has steered the group to its present financial strength.

Kujawa continues to be the dynamo behind the engine that powers Mothers' Club. At a reunion in 2005, she conducted a survey of families that had graduated from the program. She found that 73 percent of the children were doing above average in school, 25 percent of them were in programs for the gifted or talented, and only 12 percent had repeated a grade. Of the adults, more than 50 percent volunteered at their children's school at least once a week, while another 25 percent did so at least once a month.



Proud moms, dads and kids at "graduation"

Kujawa said, "So many of these families faced, and still face, significant obstacles and hardships in their lives. It is clear that the positive effects of Mothers' Club on these families have been substantial and long-lasting."

María Juárez and her son, Philip, are a Mothers' Club success story. Though he endured two surgeries on his right eye and suffers from asthma, Philip blossomed with the support of Mothers' Club teachers and staff. Without that support in public school, his teachers recommended he stay in a preschool rather than advance to kindergarten. Juárez consulted with her mentors at Mothers' Club and, with their help, negotiated a team-work plan with Philip's teacher that would enable him to progress.

“Philip’s smile is back,” Juárez wrote in the English-language newsletter compiled in the ESL classes, “but it wasn’t easy. ... He is a brave boy who was raised at Mothers’ Club. ... We remember this every time we look at his sticker that says: ‘Student of the Month.’”

For more information about Mothers’ Club, call (626) 792-2687, or visit www.mothersclub.org.

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