

United Services marks 35th anniversary Agency filled a void in serving children with special needs

By **Raymond Castile**

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Babies cry, but Linda Hoppe's son cried a lot. So much that no day care would accept him.

Hoppe's son, Jack, had developmental delays. The Lake Saint Louis mother tried several day care centers, but his constant crying would always wear out his welcome. Finally, she took Jack to United Services, an early childhood center with locations in St. Peters and Dardenne Prairie.



Raymond Castile photo - Daniel Stetson, 3, and Amelia "Mia" Freed, 4, play with a water basin outside the United Services early childhood center in St. Peters.



"They said he would not be kicked out for crying," Hoppe said. "They said if he could not go anywhere else, he would be welcome there."

United Services enrolls special needs children and typically developing children, placing them side-by-side in the same classrooms.

"It was good that the other kids could be around him and not be uncomfortable," Hoppe said. "And by being around them, Jack could explore new things. He could learn from watching them."

Jack spent four years at United Services, graduating preschool in 2008.

United Services is celebrating its 35th anniversary this summer. Starting with fewer than 30 children in 1975, it has grown to serve more than 1,000 kids annually.

In 1991, Vivienne Johnson enrolled her 3-year-old son Jacob. Her brother-in-law, "Uncle Tim," has autism.

"I wanted Jacob to realize there are other people out there like Uncle Tim," Johnson said. "I wanted him to gain an acceptance of children with special needs."

Jacob's first year at United Services was "phenomenal," Johnson said. She was so impressed, she enrolled her daughter, Rachel, in 1992.

"She was shy and a little bit withdrawn," Johnson said. "I wanted her to gain some social skills."

Rachel Johnson, now 22, said she knows many of her classmates had disabilities, but she does not remember them as 'special needs' kids.

"By being exposed to it at such a young age, they were not people with disabilities to me, they were just people," she said.

Rachel grew up to become an early childhood special education teacher for United Services' west facility in Dardenne Prairie.

"I love children, especially difficult kids with special needs," Rachel said. "Some people are afraid of people with special needs. I never have been, perhaps because of my exposure to them at a young age."

Rachel's class includes 17 students, a second teacher and a teaching assistant. She uses play-based activities to expose kids to math, science and writing. She designs the activities to meet all of her students' needs, modifying them as necessary for individual students.

Ann Neuner, site director for United Services in St. Peters, taught Rachel and Jacob 18 years ago. When she started, many of the teachers were mothers working part-time jobs. Now almost all the agency's 218 teachers have education degrees, and the few who do not are working toward their degrees, she said.

"The quality of education at the school has improved because of the education the teachers have received," Neuner said. "The agency has spent a lot of money training teachers in new trends in early childhood, sending teachers to workshops, trying to stay on the leading edge."

Karen Stepson, the agency's quality improvement and curriculum director, started with United Services in 1978 as a special education teacher. Before that, she worked in a state school for the 'severely handicapped.'

"We took kids with special needs and put them in a state school, away from their parents, because we didn't know what else to do with them," Stepson said. "The attitude at the time was that special needs kids couldn't do anything. You wanted to

identify them and pull them out, so they could be educated separately from everyone else. No one knew what else to do."

Since then, attitudes and practices in special education have swung completely around, she said.

"Now we look at children as children first," Stepson said. "They are capable and competent. There is a uniqueness about every child. Instead of labeling them, we need to know what support they need to do the things that all children love to do, which is discover and play."

Besides basic child care and preschool services, the agency provides physical, occupational and speech therapy. It enrolls children as young as 6 weeks, keeping them until they are eligible to begin kindergarten.

Jeanne Palombo, United Services development manager, said a group of St. Charles County parents of special needs kids started the push that created the organization in 1975. The parents had to drive their children to St. Louis County for early childhood services, as none were available locally. They asked the United Cerebral Palsy Association and St. Louis Hearing and Speech to apply for a United Way grant to start a special needs day-care program west of the Missouri River. The United Way provided a start-up grant and has continued to support the agency ever since.

In 1986, St. Charles County enacted a tax increase for handicapped services, allowing United Services to expand its program. Another dramatic expansion came after 1990, when the federal government mandated that local school districts provide services to preschool-age children with developmental disabilities.

Palombo said United Services' largest funding source is local school districts that contract with the agency to provide services for preschool students with special needs.

The agency quickly outgrew its original 6,000-square-foot leased space. It now has two facilities, totaling nearly 100,000 square feet combined. In August, it will begin serving Warren County children in a leased building in Warrenton.

United Services is inviting the public to help celebrate its 35th anniversary during an open house from 1-3 p.m. July 17 in its facility at 4140 Old Mill Parkway in St. Peters. RSVP to Palombo by July 8 at 636-926-2700, ext. 101.