

Special Children

Get more than just special care at the Hoke County Children's Center

By Sherry Matthews

A child is a special gift, not just to parents and grandparents, but to those who come in contact with the little tykes day after day.

A handicapped child is no different. They are just as special and just as human.

The Hoke County Children's Center under the direction of Anne Johnson, serves those special children with mental handicaps.

"We try to equip these children with the coping abilities needed to survive in a society which generally rejects the handicapped individual," Johnson said.

Society apparently does reject or deny handicapped individuals.

People tend to believe handicapped individuals are "pitiful", "sad" and "not quite normal".

Not true, says Johnson. "These children are normal in very real ways."

"They require the same amount of love, care and teaching that any youngster would need," Johnson added.

The center provides a "family atmosphere" for the 15 children they house Monday through Friday, and gives them a chance to receive "every possible advantage".

"Our ultimate goal at the center is to see as many children as possible mainstreamed into the schools and into society," Johnson said.

The center, which was started in 1974, is a day care facility for preschool children with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, blindness, deafness and other developmental disabilities.

Although the center receives government funding, the community involvement is a big asset that cannot be replaced, Johnson said.

"Community support, whether through donations or volunteer work, means a great deal to the center's survival," Johnson said.

"The money helps but the fact that these people care is the greatest thrill," Johnson added.

Community support overflows in this area, according to Johnson.

The Kiwanis Club, which is sponsoring the Franzen Brothers Circus, is one of the many organizations that helps out, Johnson said.

"The proceeds from the advance ticket sales of the circus are all being donated to the center," Johnson said.

Area restaurants also help the children's center by providing lunches for the kids on days when McLaughlin Elementary School is closed," Johnson said.

Donations and support also come from local churches and industries.

"They all care, and that is important," Johnson said.

Caring seems to be what the center is all about.

The regular staff and the volunteers work patiently and lovingly with each child, catering to their needs and helping them to build a self-confidence that they will need.

"These children are striving just like the rest of us to be happy and at peace with themselves," Johnson said.

The center's staff is also trying very hard to educate the public on the handicapped.

"We are going to have the Youth Council come in this summer and work with the children for a few hours each day," Johnson said.

Johnson is hoping that this exposure to the handicapped children will help chop away at the stigma that has been attached to the disabled for years.

"If people would just realize that handicapped people are human too, the stigma would eventually disappear," Johnson said.

Even though in the outside world they may have a stigma, inside the center there is a feeling that everyone is the same.

"We are a family here. The children feel it and grow here," Johnson said.

According to Johnson, growth does occur in these children with the help of the staff and the parents.

"Parents have to help us by enforcing what we have taught during the day," Johnson said.

"They are a vital part of our team," she added.

The "team effort" seems to be paying off because the children appear happy and willing to learn.

"No matter how small the progress may seem, it is a big step for these children," Johnson said.

"When a child realizes that his hands are dirty, and then gets up to wash them, that is a major accomplishment," Johnson added.

"Not one small deed goes unnoticed at the center. Everything is important.

"We base our program on a positive approach and fulfill it with a lot of love," Johnson said.



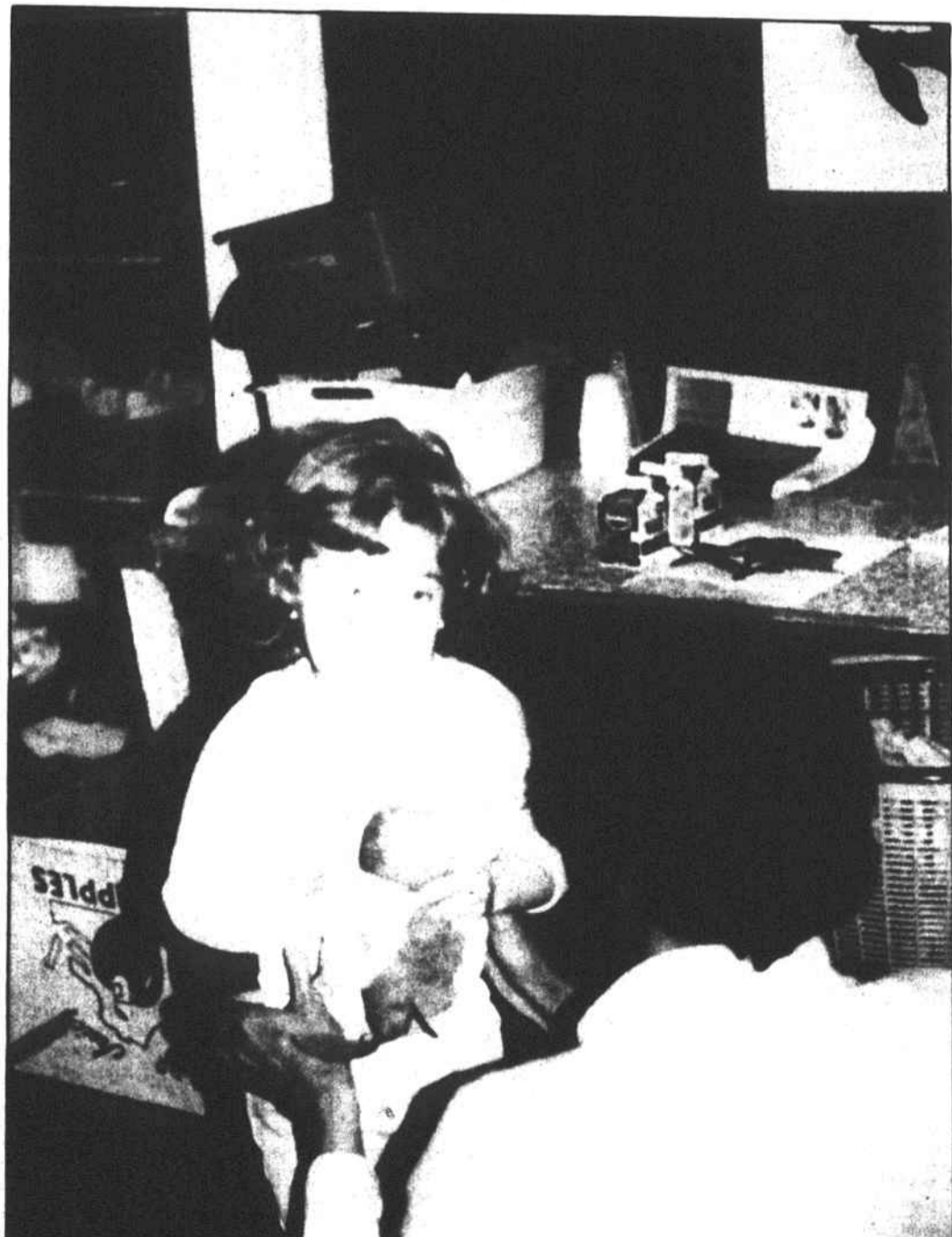
Lunch time
Cindy enjoys a little lunch before nap time begins.



Rest time
Kim Evans, lead teacher at the Children's Center, gives Jessica a playful hug before putting her to bed.



Smile of accomplishment
Marissa shows a contented smile after her physical therapy work is completed for the day.



Exercise prep
K.C. Desai gets Marissa ready for her physical therapy exercises.