



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

# Constance Care Child Care Center

Plentywood, Montana

interview by Bonnie Neugebauer

The sun isn't even thinking about Montana when Connie Nelson begins her daily commute through the vast grainfields of this rural community. The early hour does enable her to enjoy spectacular sunrises, compensating for the sunsets she misses as she returns after dark. Maximizing both ends of a long day, Connie has a routine that enables her to spend at least some of her evenings on the farm with her husband, Arnie, and to attend ballgames and play with her grandchildren. But Connie's life and work are clearly focused on making quality child care available in this remote northeast corner of Montana.

She thaws bread balls overnight and pops them in the oven upon arrival so the aroma of baking bread greets the children and their families early in the morning. No sign marks the building or designates the center van — "We hardly need to advertise as we are the only licensed center in the Plentywood area, along with the registered group home, Dilly Dally. And, besides, it's easy for anyone to find us as everyone in town knows where we are." Constance Care offers flexible hours for child care in addition to a preschool program offered twice a week and a nursery school program offered four times a month. Parents choose hours of care monthly and a staff schedule is created based on demand.

Constance Care Child Care Center is located on a quiet residential street. The

house was originally built by Connie's husband's uncle, the first white settler in Sheridan County. The house was sold to a carpenter in the 1980s and moved to its present location. When Constance Care grew beyond the capacity of two group homes, Connie was able to buy the extensively remodeled house, bringing it back into her family.

Plentywood, a community of about 2000 where the population is aging and jobs are scarce, is a place where everyone knows everyone. "Whenever something is needed, we know the person who can help." Both in an employment capacity and as an employment support service, Constance Care has a huge impact on the economic stability of the community, and it serves as the reference point for child advocacy and family support services. Teachers in the local school system, town merchants, the chief of police all need quality care for their children — and Connie is doing everything she can to provide it. "We serve the community, the community doesn't serve us."

Constance Care collaborates with several community agencies: The Plentywood School district to provide services for children with special needs; Sheridan County Public Health Nurse and WIC officials to make certain all immunizations are current; Community Incentive Program to offer Second Step, a conflict resolution and problem solving program to community children; and the resource

and referral agency Hi-Line Home Programs, Inc., Glasgow, MT, to receive training and support.

"After 14 years, we have second generation children; so they must feel good about their experience here. In a small town we continue to follow our children and feel a part of their lives. Rhonda, employed since 1989, was asked to be the godmother of a child in her group. One three-year old boy really didn't want to be here. He was so full of aggression. But it wasn't long before he would call me on the phone, 'Can I come to school today?'"

"We have a wonderful staff that includes: Rhonda Fellon, Heather Shoal, Brenda Nickisch, Cindy Budd, Tammy Hill, and Kathy Albertson. Support staff includes bookkeeper Cindy Sorenson; Lisa Nelson, schedules and calendars; Wayne Keith, Jr., maintenance and grounds; Joel Petersen, CPA, and Nelson Accounting; and Tammy Wood and Susan Hackmann, cleaning technicians.

"I've never had anyone quit because they weren't happy working here. But a lot have left for better pay and benefits."

Connie refers to the difficulties of financing her program in a rural community where job opportunities are limited as is the labor pool. When she can, she offers financial bonuses and builds in job benefits. Connie applied for a grant to create a retirement fund for her staff — the endorsing letters she compiled tell a

compelling story, but the grant was denied. She'll figure out why and try again.

She encourages her staff to participate in on-going education; however, training offers unique challenges to early childhood professionals from remote areas. The commute alone may be formidable (often several hundred miles) and require overnight stays and longer job coverage — all of these impacting the costs enormously.

“Montana is trying to raise the quality of child care. One of the ways is through Merit Pay Levels 1, 2, and 3. Through Best Beginnings staff can apply for approved training. The Early Childhood Project Montana offers scholarships towards classes. ChildCare Plus, a rural institute, offers training on serving children with special needs.”

Connie is a vocal lifelong learner. She received her Graduate Equivalency Diploma at age of 56 and has since enrolled in college courses in Early Childhood Education through Dawson Community College over interactive television. Connie has been named to the new Montana Early Care and Education Practitioner Registry by the Montana Early Childhood Project at Montana State University, Bozeman, in recognition of her training, education, experience, and volunteer contributions to the early childhood profession. To remain active, Connie must document ongoing training, which shouldn't be a problem as she annually participates in over 60 hours of training in early care and education. In two years she will have earned her associate degree — no doubt about that!

Early care and education is, as Connie says, “an awesome job that provides plenty of challenges and adventures! And always, the first concern has to be: *How are the children?*” Well, to write this story I visited Montana and spent time with Connie's family and other members of the community. I played with children, listened to staff, met parents, took a lot of pictures and observed and I want to tell you that in Plentywood, the children seem to be doing just fine!