

Meet Josie Disterhoft, *Director Lutheran General Children's Day Care Des Plaines, Illinois*

An interview with Bonnie Neugebauer

It's really a simple premise. You do two things in life: you love and you work. For you to both love and work successfully, you have to know yourself. We are our best with children, the best teachers and the best parents, when we know children very well, by observing, making hypotheses about them, by listening to what they are telling us about themselves. But there's a lot of self-forgetting in this field. Really, you can't love another or be of service if you don't stop to know yourself first. *In the programs of Lutheran General Children's Day Care, Director Josie Disterhoft inspires actions to support teachers and administrative staff in building this self-knowledge.*

Self Knowledge

It is this sense of empowerment that I like to encourage among our staff, particularly teacher leaders and administrative staff — a sense of power over their lives. The notion of personal power has become more and more important to us in recent years. It is part of our definition of becoming better early childhood professionals. We have noticed over the years that early childhood teachers and administrators are so taken up by the habit, compulsion, and immediate rewards of giving that we forget about the job of knowing and taking care of ourselves. It becomes disastrous at times for our health, our relationships, and our creativity. So, we include as part of our professional development expectations that we continue to learn about



ourselves. We use some tools that we use in getting to know children, like temperament scales, Enneagram questionnaires and typologies; we use opportunities for writing our histories as teachers, Weight-Watchers type meetings, and now the discipline of Iyengar yoga. We like to think that self knowledge leads to conscious choices about actions and relationships and that conscious choices that we actually make give us a sense of power. We like to think this kind of approach makes us better professionals.

Culture and Identity

You have to pay attention to all parts of your life, and who you are. We encourage staff to take roles in the community and professional organizations. People are happier and more giving this way. In the Philippines we were trained to be leaders from a very young age. Cultural

identity is found in the group. I am now part of a Cultural Identity Formation Study Group. It's an early childhood group that asks the questions about how culture and identity develop and intertwine. To talk about culture, you need to know yourself, your aspirations, your body; it is holistic. In our profession, we often try to do our jobs without the experience of being whole. Extraordinary leadership comes from knowing why and how to live. It is not an external reward system alone that sustains us; it is our internal one. And at the same time we need to think of ourselves as part of teams at all times and act within the context of community. With these principles in action, staff stay longer and are more effective. Our program site managers and classroom teachers at all levels are happy people and they are happy here. The degree to which this transfers to parents depends on individual teachers and administrative staff.

Engagement outside early childhood activities

We also encourage engagement in non-early childhood activities amongst those who wish. Again, it is part of trying to support our leading whole lives by embracing various roles. Many of our multinational staff are involved in care-giving roles in their homes. But in addition, they are engaged in professional and civic or faith based organizations: for example one of them is running for park commissioner in his city; another volunteers in a shelter for abused women. To also increase the visibility of early childhood leaders in other circles, I have been involved in other kinds of organizations, for example, chairing the board of an environment/community development organization.

As part of our professionalism and our recruitment as well, we demonstrate that we love our jobs. We make early childhood attractive to others. We befriend people. We identify people with potential and we recruit them individually. We mentor those who show promise. We share why we are here, why we have made the conscious choice to be here. And then they must make their own personal choice. If you're not connected with your administrative staff and teachers, your spirit is not transferred.

LGCDC's development and history

Lutheran General Children's Day Care (LGCDC) was established in 1979 as a way to recruit nurses and as a demonstration of the hospital's commitment at that time to serve the whole person from

birth to death. LGCDC is now under the sponsorship of Advocate Lutheran General Hospital, a member of Advocate Healthcare, the largest provider of health care in Illinois, which is faith based. LGCDC served 1,004 children last year, from infants through school-age, on full time and part time schedules.

The Des Plaines site is the oldest. One of the ways it celebrated its 25th anniversary last year was in the creation of a gorgeous mural (see photo page 84) through a partnership with Shanti Foundation for Peace, an arts organization based in Evanston, Illinois, that promotes non-violence in schools through creating art together. All children and their parents, teachers, and the older adults in the building, called Family Care Center, were invited to participate in making clay tiles that were glazed and baked by our artists; the infants have tiles of their footprints. "Celebrate Growth with Love," the title of the mural will be translated into many of the 69 languages spoken in the neighborhood.

Association with the hospital has had great merits as well as constant challenges. We have been at home with the spirit of compassion that health care professionals embody and we share their values of excellence, resilience, adopting innovation, leading teams through change, and leading through collaboration and relationships.

The challenges have stemmed from the great uncertainty of health care funding in the U.S. today, which translates to our having had to define and rearticu-

late the child care mission often and to prove that this family support remains part of the critical operations strategy of the hospital. I have enjoyed the intellectual challenge of defining the purposes of what we do to audiences who have had the power over our existence and who have had the awesome task of stewardship over the directions, strategies, and resources of the hospital. It was this sense of empowerment that we shared in the early days of Child Care in Health Care, then known as the National Association of Hospital Affiliated Child Care Programs, a group I led for what seemed like half my adult life.

Currently, I have joined the international non-governmental community that is assisting in rebuilding the Philippines as a nation through housing, education, livelihood, and self-governance. The first step of the project is to raise funds to build 700,000 homes in 100,000 communities in seven years. Gawad Kalinga (to Give Care in Pilipino), USA, is the name of the group. Because I am 60 years old, I have invited friends to build a village of 60 homes and child care/older adult/basketball/yoga center in the Philippines. We hope to join the Philippine national build day scheduled for the last week in November, 2006.

As part of being whole and knowing herself, Josie practices yoga, sharing the importance of this language of expression with staff and children. Connectedness, community, self-knowledge, conscious choices all leading to inspired leadership.