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Kids Without A Home Have Place To Call Their Own

By Ashleigh Oldland, Staff Writer

A group of children play outside in a playground filled with bright colors and bubbly plastic toys. A little girl swings back and forth on a rocking horse. They are ordinary kids at play until they leave their friends and teachers at Children Today, often returning to the streets of Long Beach with their parents.

The nonprofit organization Children Today gives homeless children a safe, nurturing place to spend their days while their parents take steps toward stability.

Dora Jacildo, executive director of Children Today, oversees the organization's two Long Beach facilities, Play House West, 1301 W 12th St., and Play House North, 1900 E. South St. She describes the nonprofit's service as "day care meets therapeutic preschool."

It really is a therapeutic approach to helping children who have suffered loss, who have had a disruption in care or who are perhaps having issues attaching or feeling safe as a result of homelessness," Jacildo says. "What we try to do is to provide consistency and predictability."

And while the kids keep busy at Children Today, their parents can move toward finding a permanent home. Services are available for children ages 6 years and younger.

"The families that come here are really looking to move into housing stability and economic self-sufficiency," Jacildo says. "We are really in the business of family preservation. Our goal is to give parents the space to be able to take on activities that will lead them on that path while we work with the children."

Children Today was founded by Theresa Bixby and Jennifer Fitzgerald in 1997. The two working mothers were inspired to create the organization after they saw a young child alone on the street wearing only a diaper.

"I think that we provide the one stable, safe place that these children have in their lives," Bixby says. "The families tell us how profoundly the centers have helped them and helped their children and changed their lives, so that is really rewarding."

Though each of the two facilities can only accommodate 32 children at a time, Jacildo estimates that, altogether, 900 children have been helped at the two facilities since Play House West was constructed in 2000 and Play House North was opened in 2008.

Though there are many misconceptions about the homeless, Jacildo says, the community should realize that the homeless are still people – just people without a home. Many of the parents who seek help at Children Today are victims. Most are single moms between 18 and 35 who have fled domestic violence. Many parents were themselves homeless as young children.

“If you knew the stories that these moms bring with them, . . . to demonize someone who has the courage to walk through our door and say, ‘I need help,’ is not accurate,” Jacildo says. “I look at the parent and I think, ‘What happened to you as a child?’ And I look at their child and I think, ‘How can I design a community around this child so that they will have a better chance than their parent did to not repeat the cycle of abuse and of injustice?’”

Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Children Today is one of three programs worldwide serving homeless children.

There is a growing need for a third Children Today facility because the national recession is putting more people on the streets for longer periods of time, Jacildo says.

“Because of the economic downturn, it is taking a lot longer for families to transition,” she explains. “They are homeless for a . . . longer period, and we are not able to serve as many because the children. . . stay longer. “

The Children Today board, which consists of 14 volunteer members who handle the community outreach, fiscal administrative responsibilities for the organization, is currently working on the development of the third facility, which will be called Eco House.

Josh Lowenthal, board president, says Eco House will be a signature project for Long Beach to show that the city is truly compassionate.

“the Eco House is going to be a fully sustainable, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified child care facility and headquarters for the organization,” Lowenthal explains. “We have identified a lead donor, and we are working closely with Councilmember Dee Andrews to find site within the 6th District.”

For those interested in supporting Children Today, Jacildo says the children need underwear, socks, shoes, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrushes, sunscreen and gently used clothing. The organization also welcomes monetary donations.

Additionally, Children Today holds fundraising events throughout the year, including the First Annual Children Today Golf Tournament on June 29 at the Old Ranch Country Club, 3901 Lampson Ave. in Seal Beach. For more information, e-mail Masy Bunnell at masy@totalnetsol.com or visit www.childrentoday.org.