

High-fives all around

How perfectly fitting that Just Kids Early Care and Education Centers in Milan chose to celebrate its 35th anniversary tonight in much the same way as it did its 30th — with a children's birthday party.

The center was started on Big Island in 1976 by executive director Vera Hinrichsen to give career women like herself a safe and nurturing place to bring their young children during working hours, but the focus has always been on the organization's young charges.

Since then, the number of children served has grown dramatically — from six children at a single location to 251 at four separate campuses — but her approach has remained the same: putting kids first.

► The Issue

► What's behind the amazing growth of Just Kids Early Care and Education Centers in the past 35 years?

Early-childhood education has changed dramatically in the 35 years that Ms. Hinrichsen's organization has delivered it, and her non-profit, United Way-supported centers have not only kept up, but many times have raced ahead of the curve.

The agency fills a critical need for folks who might otherwise never be able to afford the gold standard in quality care that Just Kids provides.

The continued good health of such a community resources is even more challenging these days because of continued threats of cutbacks from a cash-strapped state. That makes community support of Just Kids all the more important.

Not that such support has ever been a problem. The 5:30-7:30 p.m. carnival-like celebration at the Milan Community Center tonight, for example, will feature Mo Mallard and Monkey Joe mascots courtesy of Blackhawk Bank and Trust, a longtime supporter of Just Kids. The bank and other local businesses helped the center become a nonprofit in 1989, and soon after, the Doris and Victor Day Foundation and then the United Way came on board. Just Kids continues to grow, last year opening the latest of its four buildings.

Though the community and grant support has been critical, it couldn't have happened without a dedicated staff and, of course, Ms. Hinrichsen's leadership and dedication.

Prekindergarten teacher Sue Gordon, a second-generation staffer at Just Kids, says the key to the child-development service's success is "because Vera has made Just Kids the best center around."

Thanks to a host of local child-care leaders, including Ms. Hinrichsen, there are plenty of contenders for that title. About a decade ago, those providers formed the Early Childhood Coalition. One of the organization's goals was to focus on improving all child care in the Quad-Cities area. Evidence of their success is everywhere.

One of Ms. Hinrichsen's partners in that endeavor has been Skip-A-Long Child Development Service's CEO, Laurel Walker, whose own exceptional centers recently celebrated 40 years.

"Vera and I have worked together as colleagues and friends for our 35 years together, and each year presents new opportunities for even more collaboration, friendship, support and pursuit of high-quality care for our children and families in this community," Ms. Walker said.

The two have worked and volunteered together for years, she said. "We seek one another out in times of happiness and in times of sadness, as we both understand how our families and our work families become a big part of our lives. I'm delighted to congratulate all the fine personnel and dedicated volunteers of Just Kids and to share a public high-five with Vera."

We'll gladly join in offering Just Kids high-fives for 35 and in celebrating the knowledge that there is still more ahead for this excellent local resources for families and children. "I know I'll hit our 40th for sure," Ms. Hinrichsen told us.

Good. We'll look forward to watching Just Kids thrive and grow. But in the meantime, happy birthday, and high-fives all around!

EDITORIAL

The Dispatch

Jean Alice Small, Chairman 1980-2002

Gerald J. Taylor, Editor/Publisher
Scott Aswege, General Manager
Roger A. Ruthhart, Managing Editor
Kenda Burrows, Editorial Page Editor

Len R. Small, President
Thomas P. Small, Vice President
Cordell J. Overgaard, Vice President
Len H. Small, Chairman 1969-1980

A member of the Small Newspaper Group