

They Are Weak, He is Strong

At a unique Christian children's hospital in Oklahoma, the most fragile kids find a love that only God can provide.

The sound of clapping and cheering floats out into the sunshine-washed hallway.

"Come on, Kevin. You can do it!"

The encouragement and laughter are coming from a spacious therapy room. Several therapists are working with children on padded mats on the floor and in wheelchairs.

Kevin sits propped against one of the therapists, a dark-haired young woman with a patient expression.

"Kevin," she repeats. "Roll the ball."

Kevin's face wears the intense look others his age might have when playing a challenging video game. He grasps a black plastic bowling ball and rolls it down a ramp. The ball misses the bowling pins he's aiming for, but everyone cheers anyway.

"We do a lot of celebrating here," says Carol Gray, chief operating officer of The Children's Center. "We cheer every success."

Success is measured differently at The Children's Center.

It happens when a child recognizes and responds to her own name. It happens when a child takes his first steps—often when other children his age are driving their first cars.

The goal of the 300 employees of the center is to help the

children reach their full potential. Every bit of progress toward that goal counts as a success to the people who serve in this unique medical facility.

The Children's Center is a private, nonprofit pediatric medical facility dedicated to the care of children with multiple disabilities. It's a place where the weakest and most vulnerable are seen as God sees them—as people of infinite worth.

That attitude had its roots in the founding of this ministry more than 100 years ago by Mattie Mallory, an early pioneer of Pentecostal ministry.

An Unexpected Stop

The train rattled to a stop in the bustling frontier town of Oklahoma City on a summer day in 1898. Mallory looked out the window of the train and saw, not the hastily constructed wood and brick buildings or the crowds of people, but a vision for a ministry.

Ministry wasn't a new idea for young Mallory. She had spent the previous two years teaching at the Dawes Mission in Indian Territory. Oklahoma City was just a stopover on her journey to Canada to help in mission work there.

During that brief stop, God gave her a message. Her ministry would be to the orphan children in the heart of this former Indian land opened for settlement nine years earlier.

"Relying on Him alone, no money of my own," Mallory wrote

later, "a stranger in a strange land, no financial board behind me, only God and the faith He had implanted in my heart and a little band of three whose hearts God had touched."

They found a suitable house in Oklahoma City—but the owner required the \$20-a-month rent in advance. Mallory had only five cents.

The owner agreed to take Mallory's watch as security and let them move in. That night the four workers and 12 children went to bed in their new home—with no money, no food and almost no furniture.

"We had a little camp-meeting and retired with the assurance of faith that all would be met the next day," Mallory wrote.

And it was. Friends sent money—\$30 in all. Others gave dishes, tables, chairs and wood for the fire. "By Saturday night all were comfortably fixed; four new children had been taken in, and Sunday two of them were saved."

After several moves, the Oklahoma Orphanage came to rest in its permanent home in blackjack-covered land northwest of Oklahoma City. C.B. Jernigan and the Bible school that evolved into present-day Southern Nazarene University made the move with Mallory and the orphanage. The city built around these two ministries is now Bethany, Oklahoma—named for the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the Bible.

Mallory served the Lord and the children for many years in the substantial cement-block building she built in the blackjack grove. After her marriage, she turned over the direction of the home to a five-woman committee, but her influence on the

home and the new town continued.

Although she bore no children of her own, the headstone on her grave reads, "Mother." Around the grave are smaller stones bearing the names "Mary," "John," "Joel," "Rosemary"—motherless children who found in her a mother's heart.

An Ever-Increasing Vision

A polio epidemic swept the area in 1939, leaving children crippled and suffering. The epidemic initiated a major change in the direction of the orphanage. The state-run Sunbeam Home in Oklahoma City took over the care of the healthy orphans, and the building in the blackjack grove became The Children's Convalescent Center, dedicated to helping the children afflicted by the disease.

E. Clay Venable provided the leadership the new ministry needed after he became executive director in 1947. "Pops," as the kids called him, was as willing to fix the furnace or work on the plumbing as he was to make executive decisions. Under his leadership, the center became a children's hospital with two new wings, completely funded by donations.

After Venable's retirement in 1968, the hospital fell on hard times. By 1975, it teetered on the brink of closure.

The Pentecostal Holiness Church stepped in to play a major role in the ministry. The denomination took over the leadership and financial responsibility.

Although they kept the ship from sinking, major changes were needed to keep the hospital afloat. For a while that task seemed hopeless.

But God had a plan. When young Carol Gray started work as the volunteer coordinator in 1977, things began to change. She saw what needed to be done—and did it. Within a few months she was promoted to assistant administrator.

“I’ve never been an assertive type of person,” Gray says. “But perhaps working here has made me more so.”

Certainly the shy young woman wasn’t the type to furtively yank down sagging, dusty old drapes and toss them out the back door when no one was looking. But Gray preferred sparkling, bare windows to the former look.

“We may be poor,” Gray says she told guests during tours of the facility, “but we can be clean.”

Soon donations from visitors provided attractive, new drapes for the facility. The drab hallways and cheerless rooms took on a brighter aspect as she found the courage to ask for donations.

“God showed me that ‘you have not because you ask not,’” Carol says. “We did lots of asking. Over and over again God would provide. It started out with what some people might have thought were small and insignificant things, but God was showing Himself strong.”

The financial struggles continued, though, and in 1978 the

hospital hired Carol's brother, Albert Gray, to close down the facility. Instead, he turned the situation around, in part by narrowing the focus of the services. The Children's Convalescent Center became The Children's Center, a skilled pediatric nursing facility designed to meet specialized medical needs.

Gradually, the Pentecostal Holiness Church was able to give financial direction of the facility back to a community-based volunteer board while still helping to support the ministry.

"The unselfishness of the Pentecostal Church to return the governance of The Children's Center to the community allowed a multitude of contributors to support our capital needs," says Albert Gray, now chief executive officer of the Center. "Support from our friends is what makes us able to better serve children in need."

Though private insurance and Medicaid take care of day-to-day operating expenses such as electric bills and salaries, physical items such as beds and therapy equipment are purchased through donations. Denominations as well as individuals support the center financially, making the services possible.

The community of Bethany also takes pride in supporting the center. Spin Your Wheels, a noncompetitive bicycle race held every August, provides some of the income needed, as does a celebrity baseball game.

Perhaps the most well-known fund-raising effort is the annual drive-through Christmas light display. Local companies, clubs and church groups take turns dressing in costumes and hosting

the Christmas Wonderland. Others paint displays and string lights. Last year thousands of visitors came and gave, contributing about \$38,000 to help the medically fragile children at the center.

Others in the community volunteer their time, doing everything from rocking babies and tutoring to mending clothes for the children.

“Having the center in our community has given us a much greater awareness of our blessings,” says Gloria Quaid, editor of the Bethany Tribune newspaper. “It keeps all of us thankful for what we have. It gives us an opportunity to appreciate the dedication of all kinds of people—the people who work there, the volunteers and the children.

“So many of the children have such a happy attitude. These kids overcome amazing problems and keep such a positive upbeat spirit. It’s a joy to see them.”

Today the center is financially stable and housed in a new, state-of-the-art facility, recently built with a \$9.7 million grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation on the land Mattie Mallory purchased long ago. Large windows in the bright, cheerful wards look out onto manicured courtyards. Therapy rooms house the latest in equipment, and classrooms are bright with colorful teaching tools. The most fragile, needy children now have the very best.

A Ministry of Hope

Nearly 100 children live at The Children’s Center. Some have challenges as a result of birth defects or complications at

birth. Others suffered from accidents, debilitating illnesses, or physical abuse and neglect. All are precious to the people who work at the center.

“We believe that all life has value,” Carol Gray says. “Our goal is to maximize their potential, to help them achieve the highest level they are capable of reaching.”

Most of them won’t be rocket scientists, but often children make strides that can only be considered miraculous.

Like little Ashley.

Ashley came to the center, as many of the children do, straight from the hospital. She had no family. The center offered her the only alternative to life in the intensive care unit.

“Her doctor said there was no hope for her,” Gray says. “She couldn’t progress, wouldn’t live long.”

But at the center she thrived and slowly but steadily improved in health and ability. After a few years she went home with a foster family who later adopted her. Now she attends a regular public school and has a full, happy life.

“She made an impact on that doctor,” Gray says. “He said he would never again say that there was no hope for a child.”

She pauses and adds: “That’s what we have here. Hope. We know that these children are valuable and that God doesn’t make

mistakes. We can offer hope to the children, to their families.”

Hope springs naturally from the faith displayed by the Grays and the workers at the center. From the Scripture verses on the walls to the hymns the workers hum as they tend to the children, it’s evident this work is not a job but a ministry.

“If they took away the ministry aspect of our work, we might as well shut down,” Carol Gray says. “Serving the Lord is what this is all about.”

Serving takes the form of prayers and of showing love. It also involves 24-hour nursing care, physical therapy, speech therapy and special-education classes.

“We don’t just baby-sit,” Gray says. She points to the printed list of goals that’s posted on the wall of the classroom. “We have objectives for each child and a plan for reaching those objectives.

“All of the children, even the youngest, are bathed and dressed up every day. None of them just lie in bed.”

Besides caring for the children, the center offers a training program for the nursing assistants who work there. They also provide a leadership-training course for all nurses, department heads and other key leaders.

“It’s obvious that you want good skills when you are talking about hiring someone,” Gray says. “But I would rather hire someone with good character.

“You can train skills. We really do want people who want to be here. It’s got to be more than just a job. It really, truly has to be from the heart.”

From the specialists to the maintenance staff, love for the children is obvious. Perhaps it accounts for the extremely low turnover in workers. More than a third of the workers have five or more years of consecutive service.

“We have a little statement that we have no ‘justas’ here,” Gray says. “Sometimes people say, ‘Oh, I’m just a CNA [certified nursing assistant] or just a volunteer, or I’m just a dishwasher.’ We do not say that. Every single person is important. Every job is important. It takes everyone to make it happen.”

And a lot happens at the center.

More than 3,000 children are treated annually through in-patient care, out-patient therapies and the on-site clinic.

There is even a seating clinic at the center. Wheelchairs don’t come as one-size-fits-all. Specialists use creativity—and sometimes prayer—to solve unique problems and customize the wheelchairs and other special seats to meet the needs of the owners.

The next stage of the ministry will increase yet again the number of children served. Plans are underway to build a 23,600-square-foot, \$4 million Pediatric Medical Rehabilitation Unit at The Children’s Center.

The new building, separate from the existing one but connected by a corridor, will treat children with traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries and other neurological and orthopedic injuries or illnesses.

The number of admissions with this type of condition increased 100 percent during the last two years. The different rehabilitation needs, as well as the space requirements, make building the new unit imperative.

“Currently, there are no facilities in Oklahoma caring for these young patients,” Albert Gray says. “The Children’s Center is very capable of providing this service, allowing families to be close to their child during rehabilitation.”

That ever-expanding vision for the future is a trademark of Albert Gray’s. His way of seeing a need and stepping out in faith to find a way to meet it helped lead the center to success.

Some of the success is in the stable finances, the services offered and the beautiful buildings. But mostly, success takes place bit by bit in the lives of the children.

“Come on, Elizabeth,” the teacher says. “Pick it up.”

Elizabeth looks down at the box on her lap, chooses a toy and smiles.

“Hurray!” The cheers and claps once more fill the room, celebrating a milestone.

Celebrating hope.

Celebrating a life worth the effort.

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For more information or to make a donation, write The Children's Center, Donald W. Reynolds Complex, 6800 N.W. 39th Expressway, Bethany, OK 73008; or call 405-789-6711.