

Views & Vision

The Newsletter of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association



We Had A Dream . . .

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Marcia T. Renner, Director St. Andrew's Lutheran Nursery School Audubon, Pennsylvania

It began in the winter of 1972 with a call from my Pastor, asking if I would be interested in helping to start a Nursery School at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, in Audubon, PA. The program was to be an evangelical outreach to the children and families within our small community. I was interested. Prior to the birth of my children I had taught First and Second Grade and was eager to stay involved in the field of education. Little did I know, though, that I would continue to be "interested" for the next 36 years -- straight through to retirement!

The original "St. Andrew's Nursery School Committee" was comprised of seven members of the church, several of whom had a degree in education. These school founders were all mothers of preschool age children.

The Founders met frequently between January and September, sometimes several times a week, and often with children in tow. At these meetings, decisions were made to: prepare the first budget, develop a brochure, construct and print the first application form, determine class size, select age cut-off dates, set staff requirements, discuss personnel issues, develop curriculum, make and purchase supplies and equipment, and select a mascot and logo (Amos - a giraffe!). Furniture, equipment, and toys were collected from many sources, but most items came from

our own homes. We cleaned, painted, and sewed. We visited other schools, observed, and met with teachers and administrators. We dreamed; we discussed; we dreamed some more. Then we worked and worked and worked, both collectively and independently.

In January 1972, the Church Council, with strong Pastoral support, loaned the Nursery School Committee \$500 to get started. We appreciated the commitment and the funding. It was with great pride that just months later the initial \$500 loan was re-paid. We are equally proud that the school has remained in the black ever since.

Two teachers were hired and three classes were offered, one for Three Year Olds and two for Four Year Olds. Finally, after putting 11th hour "finishing touches" on curtains for the classroom *as the parents were arriving*, St. Andrew's Nursery School opened its doors for the first time.

Interest in the program was strong. We soon realized that we could not accommodate all who wished to register and a fourth class was added. This enabled us to maximize use of our single classroom.

Over the years, our one-classroom school grew – first as the community grew, then as our



reputation grew and finally as St. Andrew's Church grew and expanded. In 1996, we were able to offer nine classes for children three, four, and five years of age as a result of the church expansion project.

Although community interest in our fledging program was substantial, the Founders and first staff members encountered countless hurdles! There was a general lack of understanding and respect for the program by everyone except mothers of young children who were looking for a place for their children to play, socialize, and learn. Few people understood: the program's educational value and purpose; the staff members' abilities and/or functions; and the dedication, seriousness, and professionalism with which all of those involved tackled their responsibilities.

For these reasons, it has been especially heartwarming to watch the program develop and grow throughout the years, and to see the respect for, and interest in our

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Early Childhood Education program increase year after year. Strong pastoral support has been invaluable throughout.

Working with a preschool program thirty to forty years ago was difficult, demanding, frustrating, and, often very lonely work. There was little support and there were numerous attempts to de-rail programs. In the early 1970's, it was still, in many ways, a male chauvinist world. Women in general, and women involved in the education of young children in particular, were not truly respected and were frequently given a "difficult time". Church Finance Committees were not convinced that females were capable of handling school finances. Church Property Committees seldom saw anything but "the hand-prints on the wall"... and the "extra work" the school's existence caused them. Unfortunately, many people were unable to see beyond their prejudices to understand and appreciate the exceptional growth that was taking place in these children - their physical growth, emotional growth, social growth, and intellectual growth. Even Church Council Presidents tended to see the school's existence as a burden. At that time in our school's history, as well as in the history of the Lutheran Church, men commonly dominated these committees. Women who attempted to participate, other than on Hospitality or Social Ministry Committees, were often viewed as "aggressive" and there were many attempts to stifle them.

In communications with preschool directors over the years, I learned that others in churches throughout the United States shared the same or similar difficulties and frustrations. It was helpful to know that we were not alone and that our situation was not unique. There were many times... when we were tired, frustrated, exasperated, and worn down and we were tempted to "throw in the towel" and walk away. Yet, in our hearts, we knew that this was exactly what those who provided opposition wanted, and that the future of our children was too important to surrender.

We knew that if those of us who truly believed in the value of Early Childhood Education gave in to this kind of pressure then the individuals who were giving us the grief would have won. Not only would they have won, BUT... and it was a very big BUT, the preschool children of our community would have lost. Not wanting this to happen, we dug in our heels and continued.

Eventually, views and opinions throughout the country began to change. Early Childhood Education became better recognized and valued. Even opponents began to understand the benefit of teaching children socialization skills, conflict resolution, and peacemaking skills. And places of worship were deemed appropriate facilities in which to house and encourage such activities.

Finally, people began to work with us to support and enhance our program. Many long-time adversaries



eventually became supporters and those who at one time had little respect for anyone who worked with children, especially young children, began to see things in a new light. What a joyous moment that was!

Helping St. Andrew's Nursery School's program grow from inception into adulthood, has been one of the most exciting, rewarding, extraordinary, and satisfying experiences that I have had. Knowing what we started with, I find joy each day in seeing how far we have come. Not only has the program grown in size, but in family involvement, as well. I have thoroughly enjoyed witnessing the change in family involvement from mostly mothers, to include actively involved fathers, grandparents, and caregivers as well.

Today our family configurations have changed and extended families have become accepted. Our school demographics reflect a diversity of races and cultures. The make-up of church committees has changed dramatically too, and the respect that people have for one another has finally reached equal ground. The teamwork, involvement, and the strong support of the school from parents, co-workers, and church members has now reached an all-time high.

No one thing made St. Andrew's Nursery School a success... and certainly no one person, but... it IS a success. The children of this ever-growing community have been the benefactors, and no doubt that will continue to be true for many years to come because so many people gave so much time, energy, and support when it was needed most.

Over the past 36 years, I often recalled Martin Luther King's famous words, "I have a dream." And the strength of his determination in encouraging all to believe that, "We shall overcome." While in a different context from civil rights, I have quietly said these words to myself, with regard to the early childhood profession.

Today, thankfully, attitudes have changed; people have become more understanding of the importance of early childhood education, and outstanding

support services are available through ELEA (Evangelical Lutheran Education Association), NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), and other education and government agencies. Society, too, is more accepting, more appreciative and more supportive.

I feel fortunate to have been part of one of the most dynamic eras of change in the field of Early Childhood education. I feel proud to have been associated with so



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many dedicated school committee members, staff members, and members of the church leadership and congregation who joined the effort to make St. Andrew's Nursery School such a solid and respected program in the community. We are delighted, too, that many families, whose first experience at St. Andrew's was through its Nursery School, have become members of the church.

I urge all new school administrators: to strive to achieve all of the dreams that they have for their schools, to set high goals and standards, to be positive, to take the time to communicate effectively to

the congregation and the community regarding the true purpose of the program (by providing examples of the rich rewards that both the church and the community will reap when the program is successful), to maintain a sense of humor, and to have fun along the way. I also encourage administrators to engage people of all ages in the program - as countless opportunities for meaningful and rewarding participation

await them.

In 1972, we started with little more than a dream. The church supplied a wonderful idea, pastoral

support, space, and basic furniture. What we have now, 36 years later, is a vibrant Nursery School with three classrooms, a fourth room that is used as a school library with over 2200 early childhood books, a school kitchen, a staff lounge, an indoor play area, school offices, beautiful furnishings and extensive supplies, toys, and early childhood equipment. And all of this space used by the Nursery School is shared in a most congenial way with the Church.

Most important however, is that we have over four thousand graduates from five to forty years old who approach their lives with more confidence, more caring, and more capacity to contribute constructively to their families and communities than would have been possible if they had not attended St. Andrew's Nursery School.

We have climbed a mountain. It was well worth the effort. The view is extraordinary - we have been truly blessed.

Marcia Renner can be reached at admin@standrewsnurseryschool.com.



Director Marcia Renner Sharing Information With Student and Mom

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Suggestions For New Directors From A 36-Year Veteran!

Marcia Renner, St. Andrews Lutheran Nursery School Audubon, Pennsylvania

What have I learned in 36 Years?
A Few Things:

1. Communicate often with everyone who will be affected by the existence of the school program... the church staff, the church council, the congregation, the school staff, the parents;
2. Always consider the needs of the children first when making program decisions, but make every attempt to offer a program that is child-based and parent-based;
3. Do whatever is possible to work cooperatively with all who will be involved with the program, or affected by the program
4. Listen to parents concerns and attempt to address these concerns by:
 - ★ Educating parents as to the *reason* that the school takes a particular point of view;
 - ★ Expressing interest in their opinion;
 - ★ Showing compassion;
 - ★ Reassuring them that you and the staff are well-versed in the field of early childhood education;
 - ★ Listening carefully to what they are actually saying;
 - ★ Showing, when possible, that you have or will address their concerns;
 - ★ Asking for their input often
 - ★ And highlight in future communications how their input helped institute a change within the program.
5. Resist the temptation to “give in” to outside pressures if YOU do not believe that what is being suggested is in the best interest of the children;
6. Find others who are also committed to early childhood education and solicit their help. This must be an on-going process
7. Hire the most qualified candidates for the positions available, always. Keep in mind that qualified does not necessarily mean the individual with the highest degree, but rather someone who, in addition to having the appropriate academic background, is also flexible, open to new ideas, willing to cooperate, patient, an excellent communicator, and so on;
8. Find, and then delegate authority and tasks to, the most capable individuals;
9. Get as many people involved in the program, as possible:
 - Committee members
 - Staff members
 - Church members
 - Parent volunteers
 - Retired members of the church, school, and community
10. Keep lines of communication OPEN at all times and keep the school name as visible to as many people, as possible;
11. Communicate frequently with church congregation through the use of Sunday Church Bulletins, Monthly Church Newsletters, flyers, bulletin Boards, displays
12. Communicate frequently with parents through Monthly Newsletters, Memos from the Director, in person, by telephone; or by organizing family events, open houses, and activities
13. Communicate frequently with the community - publicize school activities in local newspapers, place ads and announcements on community kiosks or at the local library, stores, etc. Participate in “Mom’s Club Meetings” to share information about your program. Invite representatives from the local school district to serve as speakers on topics of interest to school families.
14. Participate in opportunities offered by nearby city news agencies (NBC 10 news Helicopter “Fly By” of our school playground- The children were all outside waving to the pilot and then the event made the nightly news where a brief description of the school was given.
15. Purchase signs for posting on the church/school grounds; at local Little League Fields
16. Participate in and adapt as needed, such programs as the Philadelphia Zoo Adopt-An - Animal Program - Revised by St. Andrew’s to Adopt-A-Spot – A caring and sharing experience for the children
17. Avoid the temptation to act defensive when facing roadblocks ; rather try to understand that you may just need to work harder at communicating, or find a better way to communicate
18. Find a support group of other Directors with whom you can share concerns and commiserate - no one else, not even well-meaning staff members, can fully understand what it is that you, as Director, encounter. For me, personally, this special group consists of other ELEA Directors. They are people that I feel that I

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can call at any time to bounce ideas off, to help me find a solution, or who will just listen, and care. We do not, necessarily, have the opportunity to meet regularly, though we once did... and we all loved those meetings, but we all know that we can just pick up at any time, and nothing is ever lost in the time lag. If you are not already associated with such a group, I would encourage you to find, or begin, one. The ELEA e-mail system is a wonderful way to throw ideas, or questions, out and get a quick response. In addition to this, I highly recommend a local group with whom you can connect.

During an ELEA Preschool Conference hosted by St. Andrew's several years ago, teachers and administrators from other ELEA programs commented that their situation was different... that they did not have anything so big, so elaborate, and so beautiful at their schools/churches, I tried to quickly explain that we did not always have so much, either. It simply took time, patience, a lot of hard work, and a

vision. Our program and facilities of today look NOTHING like the program of the 1970's. What IS the same, however, is the commitment to providing the best in early childhood education. That is really all it takes... a commitment. From there, find others who share your dream, remain united, and then begin to move forward. Whenever you are feeling down, or overwhelmed, gather with others who share your vision. Everyone needs these battery re-charging moments as they fight the uphill battle. This will provide you with a comfort zone where you will receive reassurance and encouragement to carry on. And, then do just that... carry on! Remember... young children need you to be an advocate for them.

Recruit committee members who share your vision. Hire the best, most qualified, and most committed staff members and your job will be made much easier. Work together, believe in your mission, continually try to educate others about the benefits of early childhood education, get as many people involved in the program, as possible; communicate freely and often with the parents, the

congregation, and the community; remain positive even during the difficult times; reach for the stars... don't ever give up and ALWAYS continue to reach.

For schools to continue to grow and continue to improve the committee and staff must constantly reassess the program - looking at what they are offering, and questioning whether or not they are continuing to meet the needs of the children and the parents. Successful schools never sit back and rest on their laurels, but rather constantly re-evaluate their programs. I am a believer in the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" theory, BUT that does not mean that things, in order to stay current, may not need some fine-tuning along the way

Early Childhood Education, especially in faith-based programs, can be one of the most rewarding, interesting, important, and challenging careers available.

Marcia Renner is soon to retire from 36 years as director of St. Andrews Lutheran Nursery School in Audubon, Pennsylvania, and can be reached at admin@standrewsnurseryschool.com.

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Notes from National ...

Gayle Denny, ELEA Executive Director

As of this writing, the ELEA National Board is preparing for its Spring meeting with, as always, a full agenda. As we prepare to vote on a budget for the July 2008 - June 2009 fiscal year, we once again wish to thank those who have contributed to our Annual Fund and/or the School Extension Fund of ELEA. Donations to our Annual Fund go directly into ELEA's operating budget, and donations to the School Extension Fund go to provide up to three grants per year to schools and centers who are expanding their programs. Thank you to:

- ★ Trinity Lutheran School, Marysville, Ohio
- ★ Solomon Lutheran Church & School, Woodville, Ohio
- ★ ELCA's Vocation & Education unit, Chicago, Illinois

For more information on the School Extension Fund, visit our website at www.eleanational.org.

Membership dues have remained constant for the past few years. Increased postage, travel, and utility costs are necessitating a nominal increase in dues for the 2008-2009 year. The National Board and staff want you to know that we make every effort to be good stewards of your membership dollars. Administration costs are kept to a minimum and decisions on programming costs are made carefully. We know you will understand and hope that the value you find in ELEA membership is worth a small increase of which you will be notified after budget approval.

The Summer edition of Views & Vision will contain a copy of the approved budget and a list of ELEA National Board members, along with

more information on how ELEA's new structure (remember, we now operate in 9 geographic Regions, rather than 14 Networks) is shaping up. We are very excited about the positive changes being made at both the national and Regional levels.

ELEA's website is soon taking on a new look! We are always interested in receiving photos of children in your school or center, engaged in activities in small groups and/or with teachers. Please forward photos, along with copies of parental permission approving use on ELEA's website to eleanational@cs.com.

As always, we welcome your input on how we can better serve your needs.



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Until Further Notice, Celebrate Everything!

**Dr. Richard Bimler, Past President/
Senior Staff Associate
Wheat Ridge Ministries**



One of the many joys of the Easter season is to find signs of hope in our everyday living ... even in the midst of our worries, woes and wars. We celebrate life each day and live it “to the fullest” (John 10:10) because we know through faith that the Lord has risen ... He has risen, in deed! Our faith allows us to sing and shout, “Until Further Notice, Celebrate Everything!” That’s right, even in the midst of our own Good Fridays and struggles we can celebrate our hope in the Lord ... because we know how it all turns out! The Lord has risen ... for you and for me!

Many years ago, when our first grandson was about four years old, I thought it would be appropriate for old Gramps to teach him about the Resurrection. Starting around Ash Wednesday, I would rehearse with Matt the joyful Easter words: “He is risen, He is risen indeed!” No problem, I thought. After all, he has six weeks to memorize this powerful theme. When Easter arrived, I proudly brought Matt to worship and waved for the pastor to come over and listen to this intelligent kid share his faith. I said to Matt, “He is risen,” waiting for him to respond, “He is risen, indeed!” But not a word was uttered! I asked again, and again, no response. Matt just stood there silent, while his once-proud grandpa shrugged with embarrassment. The pastor, patient up until now, moved on to visit with some of the more talkative folks. And just as the pastor walked away, Matt shouted out, “In Deed!”

Why had I failed to teach him correctly? Where had I gone wrong? But after awhile, Matt’s two words, “In Deed!” began to make sense. Hey, he is theological after all! On that Easter morning, Matt taught me that the Lord has risen ... He has risen ... IN DEED! Christ did not only talk about dying and rising for us, He did it.

The deed is done. It is finished! The Lord has risen from the grave ... and until further notice, celebrate everything!

Resurrection is REALLY here ... and now ... because Christ has risen ... IN DEED!

When we forgive others, feed the hungry, speak out about injustices, comfort the hurting, we are living the Resurrection ... in deed! When we share a joy-filled word of hope to a friend in need, we are living out the Resurrection ... in deed! When we laugh with others, because we know Who has the last laugh, we are living the Resurrection, in deed! When we take good care of our bodies, so that we are better able to serve others, we are living the Resurrection, in deed! When we “Easterize” others by telling and doing our faith, we are living the Resurrection, in deed!

As we celebrate Easter with family and students and parents and friends, and loudly proclaim “Christ is Risen! He is Risen In Deed,” remember and take note of the many resurrections in our everyday life. Resurrection, in deed!

So “Until Further Notice, Celebrate Everything” ... in deed.

Thanks, Matt, for teaching me to celebrate life, in deed. In all of our lives, let us help each other watch for all of those other Matts and Rachels and Hannahs and Sarahs and Aarons and Emmas and Abbays who are also proclaiming in what they say and do and how they say and do things, that the Lord is risen, in deed! We need each other, young and old, to take seriously the joy of Easterizing in all of life, even in and through our own Good Fridays. We know in faith, that after every Good Friday in our lives, there’s always an Easter!

So, “Until Further Notice, Celebrate Everything” ... in deed!

That’s good enough for me! Happy Easterizing!

Richard Bimler can be reached at rich@wheatridge.org.

ELEA’s Purpose Statement

*The Evangelical Lutheran Education Association
promotes and supports quality,
Christ-centered schools and
early childhood programs of the ELCA.*

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