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Blair thrives after 20 years

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By Courtney Greve
Staff writer

In 1984, Mary Beth Usher agreed to be principal of a new special education school in Chicago's Clearing community.

"Luck brought me here," said the 56-year-old Evergreen Park resident.

Today, the street in front of the Blair Early Childhood Center will be named in Usher's honor to mark her two decades of service and the school's 20th anniversary.

"Isn't that a riot?" she said, downplaying her impact on the award-winning school.

"I was supposed to be here," she continued. "I've enjoyed every day. It's always something new. The kids are fabulous, the parents are amazing, and I have the best staff in the city."

About 100 children, between the ages of 3 and 7, attend preschool, kindergarten and first grade at

Blair, 6751 W. 63rd Place.

It is one of three Chicago Public Schools early education centers for students with a range of physical, developmental and emotional disabilities.

Some children require oxygen tanks and feeding tubes, while others need head gear or wheelchairs.

First-grader Evelyn Arauso has severe cerebral palsy and uses a computer to communicate with her peers and their teacher, Nancy McDermott.

On Thursday, Evelyn counted by tens by pressing her right ear against a pad to make a computer say the corresponding number.

"She's a smart kid locked up in her body," said Usher, who knows every child by name.

Jeffrey Alsot, 6, also has cerebral palsy, but he is able to walk and talk independently. In fact, he often shouts out answers without raising his hand.

One of Jeffrey's favorite things at Blair is the garden, which Usher developed in 1998. It has since won five awards from Mayor Richard Daley's office.

"We get to bring flowers home," said Jeffrey. "It makes me happy."

For a school where most of the students have yet to master potty training, Blair smells surprisingly like the inside of a candle store.

"We work hard so it doesn't smell like a hospital," Usher said. "We want it to be an inviting environment."

Colorful paintings, handmade tile murals and student-decorated dolls adorn the walls, windows and doors. A miniature carousel sits in the front lobby.

The sound of water trickling down a fountain echoes through the halls. Laughter and music can be heard from nearly every room.

Usher is a regular classroom visitor. She doesn't take over the lessons, but chimes in with encouraging words when a student gives a correct answer.

After finishing first grade at Blair, about 60 percent of Blair students begin second grade at their neighborhood schools.

"Here, they gain a lot of confidence in themselves," Usher said. "They can be successful here without being afraid and it gives them a good feeling about (going to) school."

Usher credits her two disabled cousins for making her aware of the disparity between regular and special education.

"I had opportunities in school they didn't and I never thought that was fair," she said.

After graduating from Mother McAuley High School in 1966, Usher attended St. Mary of the Woods College in Terre Haute, Ind.

While teaching special education at Christopher Elementary School, Usher earned a master's in education. She later became a CPS program director for children with physical disabilities and finished her doctorate.

Usher never set out to be a school principal, but she believes she was given the opportunity for a reason.

"I was here (at Blair) on loan for a few months, but I liked it so much, I applied for the job," she said.

During her tenure, Usher appealed to CPS for an addition that would double the size of the school and provide better services. She got her wish in 1995 when the new wing was built, complete with diaper-changing stations, wider hallways, accessible bathrooms and a washer and dryer.

As the number of Hispanic students grew at Blair, Usher started a second parent support group for Spanish-speaking families.

"It's a place parents can talk about the issues of raising a disabled kid and it lets them know they're not alone," she said.

And thanks to the work of Usher, Blair also offers the only program in Chicago for children with profound cognitive challenges. These students are 3 to 6 years old, but have the cognitive ability of infants.

Usher has received a Principal of Excellence Award and been named the Outstanding Principal of the Year, in 1992 and 1997 respectively.

Veteran teacher Judy O'Hare said Usher deserves those honors and much more.

O'Hare wrote to Ald. Michael Zalewski (23rd) to request that 63rd Place be named Honorary Dr. Mary Beth Usher Place.

"She's devoted her entire life to children with special needs," said O'Hare, of Frankfort, as she fought back tears. "Everything she does is for the kids."

Today, a time capsule will be buried at Blair. It will be filled with trinkets selected by the students, teachers and administrators.

"It's not about me," Usher said. "This school is about the people in it. We're so proud of our school."

Courtney Greve may be reached at cgreve@dailysouthtown.com or (708) 633-5983.