

Decades of Loving Care: Christian Heritage Childcare/Preschool History 1984-2015

A businessman, Dave Jackson, not an educator, had the idea of starting the Christian Heritage Childcare (which has now evolved into a preschool) in response to parents requesting good care for their children while they worked. He also believed it could be a consistent income stream for the school that was struggling financially in the early 1980s. For a year Dave surveyed and gathered information from Nazarene churches around the nation that already offered childcare, and he started to develop a plan. However, he was nervous about the venture because his forte was business, not education.

In 1984 the School Board approved beginning a childcare, and Dave, who was the Christian Heritage Administrator, also took on the childcare operation. It was a challenging time for this businessman turned educator.

“Then the Lord really did something very special,” said Dave. “He provided Bobbi England as my Administrative Assistant and then Marie Winter as the first Childcare Director.”

Marie recalls, “I knew how to love kids, and I assured parents their children would be loved at our childcare.” She is thankful she had a great staff and remembers they felt good about their work and they made the children happy.

In 1985 Martha Legg came onboard as the Curriculum Director for the childcare. “My motto has always been to find others to do the job, and this worked perfectly at Christian Heritage,” Dave recalled.

In August 1985, Martha hired Harriett Moseley to teach 3 & 4 year olds in a preschool class that was then within the school structure. When Dave stepped down in 1986 and Marie left, Martha became the Christian Heritage Administrator for the school and also directed the childcare. In 1987, Harriett was hired as the Childcare Director and the 3-4 year old preschool classes became part of the childcare structure. Martha said of Harriett, “She was a very positive influence on her teachers and everyone in her sphere of influence. I have great love, admiration and respect for one of my greatest hires.”

Harriett also remembers those early years with fondness and said, “It was a job I loved. My daughter, Mandy, was a Christian Heritage student, so she was near me at work, and it was truly a win, win situation.”

The childcare grew under Harriett’s direction from about 50 students to almost 100, and two portables were added during Jill Hoskins’ tenure as Christian Heritage Administrator. (Martha left in 1991) It was always Harriett’s desire “to have more space,” but with the city and Department of Children and Families (DCF) restrictions, only so much could be done to add room. “Because of those portables, we were able to expand from four classrooms to six,” said Harriett, “and by putting two teachers in a classroom, I could add 3 more students to each class.” Besides trying to find more space, Harriett remembers challenges with managing employees, working many hours herself, and meeting DCF’s licensing requirements. “But we were recognized as a quality Christian childcare center in the community,” said Harriett. “My daily goal was to represent my Savior Jesus Christ.” She remembers the joy of praying with parents, working with families to help them pay their weekly fees, and sending food home when a family was in desperate need.

Something extra special happened for Harriett and her husband, Charles, because of their connection to the preschool. They became guardians of three preschool students when the children’s responsible parent was put in jail. The next two years the Moseleys cared for these abandoned children who were eventually adopted by another family. Now young people, they regularly visit Charles and Harriett and are considered their “grandchildren”. This encounter long ago established a bond that has lasted over the years.

Harriett retired in 2004, and Laura Anderson became the Director of what had officially become a preschool with curriculum for the children. During her tenure, the free Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) education program was added to the preschool curriculum in 2005, the same year VPK was signed into Florida law as a way to prepare children 4 years of age for Kindergarten. Florida legislators and educators believed “Children who participate in high-quality early childhood education programs develop better language skills, score higher in school-readiness tests and have better social skills and fewer behavioral problems once they enter school.” (See www.vpkhelp.org)

Christian Heritage preschool had “to meet high standards required by law,” which included offering a curriculum that focused “on reading, writing and social skills” and prepared “children to be ready for Kindergarten.”

Laura recalls, “We were a little fearful about what would be involved with a state paid program like VPK. We did not want the state to tell us how we could run our Christian program.”

Those fears were unfounded, and the preschool staff went through training from the Jacksonville Children’s Commission to make sure adequate academics became part of the 4-year-old curriculum. “All the children are expected to know their letters and sounds as well as have a grasp of beginning math skills,” said Laura.

Basic colored shirts were added to VPK as part of a standard uniform. The preschool watched other VPK facilities to make sure it measured up in this highly competitive educational program. VPK has continued to be a popular offering, and it has promoted the good name of Christian Heritage as well as helped boost its annual budget.

It was during Laura's tenure that the UBNC Family Life and Learning Center was built. When it opened in 2006, the school vacated classrooms, office space and a lunch room it had used in the same educational building where the preschool was located. The preschool stayed in the educational building because it was grandfathered in to so many city codes and DCF regulations. The portables were removed, and new parking lots took that space.

At this same time the school library was moved downstairs to the former lunchroom/roundhouse area. It is the only remaining room used by the school in that building. Some office areas surrounding that area have since become preschool rooms and offices. Over the years renovations have been made to preschool classrooms, hallways, offices and restrooms to upgrade the educational building. A new play area facing the side parking lot was also developed after the Family Life Center was finished.

Laura left the preschool in December 2011 and Heather Mercer became the Childcare Director and remains in that position today. Heather says the preschool has survived for almost 31 years "because of the excellent directors who preceded me."

Heather serves under the direction of Jim Stephens, Christian Heritage Administrator. She appreciates Mr. Stephens and says, "He gave me the trust and freedom to run the preschool. He is always there for advice or to give me a helping hand. I admire the way he directs the school as a ministry." Heather follows his lead and wants the preschool families "to see Christ's love" through the staff.

When Heather became the director, she had to get acquainted with a new staff and curriculum as well as deal with an aging facility. Since then, the staff has responded positively to her leadership with many feeling like they have a "second family" in their co-workers. The preschool has started taking infants as young as 6 weeks old and that class is full. Teaching Spanish has been added to all classes, and full VPK groups enjoy using the school's computer lab as well as going on field trips. The facility has been upgraded with remodeled bathrooms, several classrooms retiled, and playground equipment added for the infant/toddler groups.

In May 2014 the preschool reached a major goal when 100 children were enrolled. Heather hopes in the future to always have 100+ enrollment and to add classrooms if needed. She says, "I want us to always put Christ first and be an example of a preschool that offers a good education and promotes Christian morals." Like the school, the preschool has a chapel service once a week which introduces the children to Jesus.

Heather also wants to keep the preschool attractive and updated so it will be appealing to parents looking for a good place to meet their childcare needs. The preschool is licensed by DCF and is inspected throughout the year to make sure it meets their standards.

On its website, (www.chajax.org/preschool.htm) the preschool's purpose is stated as a place, "to provide the best possible care for each child in a clean, safe, attractive environment. The environment is set up for learning through the 'learning center' approach, always keeping in mind the child's age and stage, maturity, size, needs, and capabilities. This environment also provides the freedom of choice of developmentally appropriate activities which develop the preschool skills and interest through play."

As the Christian Heritage preschool heads into its 31st year, it can look back on the thousands of young lives who took their educational and spiritual first steps in this loving Christian environment. Praise God for Dave Jackson and all those who followed him in leadership at the Christian Heritage childcare, turned preschool. Over more than three decades, all have tried to "Train a child in the way he should go..." (Proverbs 22:6a), and God has blessed.