

One year and \$1 million later, a foundation grant has transformed the programs. Besides the tangible resources, 'it's made it possible for us to wish and dream and stretch our imaginations.'



Visitation Valley Family School teacher's assistant Joe Harris plays with Patrick Hua, 4, as Nicole Carpenter, 3½, looks on.

## CARING FOR KIDS

This occasional series tracks the impact of a grant from the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund to develop models for child care in San Francisco.

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OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

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PHOTO BY CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ

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The year 1996 was very young when Eileen O'Donnell got an early Christmas. Nearly 12 months ago, the Tenderloin Childcare Center that O'Donnell heads became one of four San Francisco child care centers "adopted" by the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund.

The fund's goal: to infuse these centers over the next five years with help — financial and technical — to develop models of high-quality child care for youngsters from low-income families.

In the first year, the fund has spent just over \$1 million and allocated hours of expertise to the Tenderloin center, the Audrey L. Smith Developmental Center in the Haight, Good Samaritan Family Resource Center in the Mission and the Visitation Valley Family School.

In a society where quality, affordable child care is rare, the focused attention on these centers has been nothing short of extraordinary — at least for those whose lives have been affected.

"It's made it possible for us to wish and dream and stretch our imaginations," said O'Donnell, director of the Tenderloin center, which started the first child care program for homeless kids in The City.

While a year-end evaluation of the project has not yet been completed, change can be seen in every center — from the new headsets for the teaching of phonics to the far less tangible impacts.

"We've seen the influx of their resources, and it's amazing what that does to the morale of both the children and the staff," said Eric McDonnell, director of the Audrey L. Smith center. "Children walk

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**Grant transforms child care centers**

to the classroom, and they're excited about being in the space. You can see that in both their engagement and their activities."

For the fund, it's been a year of collecting data and getting to know the centers," said Executive Director Susan Hirsch-Simmons.

"A lot of what's taken place this year has been 'process,'" said Hirsch-Simmons. "Beginning something new takes a long time. It's not something in which you wave a wand, and a new facility is there in six months."

But the centers, says evaluator Anne Mitchell, have undeniably changed.

"Each of these programs has made a lot of fairly dramatic progress in the areas they set out to change," said Mitchell, a nationally recognized expert in early childhood programs.

**Visitation Valley**

There are new multicultural dolls in the refurbished play areas at Visitation Valley Family School, but that's just one of the far-reaching changes at this day care center.

The staff — from teaching assistants to teachers — got a 36 percent raise. That's a big deal in an industry where the average annual wage is \$11,725.

A new assistant director was hired, along with a part-time clerk

and three part-time teaching assistants.

A new renovation plan, drawn up by renowned Berkeley design firm, Spaces for Children, also is being reviewed.

Parent involvement has increased. Haas money allowed the school to invite parents on field trips and to workshops. Through the fund, the school also has hooked up with the nonprofit Parent Services Project, which promotes parent participation.

The school also hired experts on classroom management, cultural diversity, curriculum development and foster care issues.

"We actually have the freedom to shop around and bring experts in so it can be done on-site within our work schedule," said Director Brenda Lopez. "There's an attitude of the staff that they feel appreciated. They say, 'Wow, you have quality people who are assisting us.'"

And it's not just money that's making them happy, said teacher Robin Lee: "When you have the materials and can be creative with kids, they'll flourish."

**Audrey L. Smith**

Curriculum development and teacher training also are top priorities at the Audrey L. Smith center.

In the world of early childhood education, curriculum doesn't mean a list of subjects as in high school.

Rather, it reflects a program that is both age-appropriate and child-directed, taught by teachers



Teacher Robin Lee leads her class at Visitation Valley Family School in group singing.

who share a common philosophy.

"Part of the training of staff hinges on a change in perspective of how they manage a classroom," said Director McDonnell. "What most staff have been trained for is 'teacher-directed.'"

There are plenty of tangibles, too — from new "bikes, trikes and balls" to more cubby space, and a paint job and new electrical system for the classrooms, McDonnell said.

Last week, contractors put in a new floor in a dance-movement room that's been shuttered for a year because of a leaky roof. The roof's fixed, and the room should be ready for use soon.

McDonnell also hired a new assistant director, which has let him "step back" and look at long-range goals, like establishing more funding sources to sustain the changes.

Some things haven't changed. McDonnell hasn't been able to give raises because if he does, he must do so for teachers at Smith's other two centers, which do not receive Haas support.

Another unsolved problem is a custom-designed playground built by the California Conservation Corps but rendered useless because it sits below a seedy apartment building — from which residents toss bottles, needles and other debris every night.

But those are problems for next year.

"Ideally, when you think of a windfall, you think I'll be able to change the world," he said. "Yes, there has been that excitement that the resources from this windfall has been all that we hoped it would be. And yet, even with this influx, there are still needs that go beyond that those resources can address. So we changed part of the world."

**Tenderloin Childcare Center**

For Eileen O'Donnell of the Tenderloin Childcare Center, the impact of the fund is all around.

"The feeling that we were chosen was a tremendous morale booster," she said. "It made us all feel that someone's noticed we're

working very hard."

Cramped in the former ballroom of the Turk Street YMCA, severe space problems were alleviated after the center revamped the use of the long, high-ceilinged room, with the fund's help.

Lead abatement and quake-proofing was done, along with the construction of a badly needed toddler bathroom.

The center also has a new play area for jumping, climbing and swinging.

There are now two part-time therapists — the center has many children with special emotional needs — and an administrative assistant who now comes in four times a week, instead of three, to free up O'Donnell.

The center has also collaborated with the California Health Care Project, which has trained staff on airborne viruses, chronic conditions such as asthma and other health issues.

One unsolved problem is the center's continuing search for a new site in the Tenderloin. O'Don-

nell hopes to hire a consultant to take over that effort, but she's pessimistic that any site can be found.

"The Tenderloin is very tightly packed," she said.

**Good Samaritan**

On the red sign in front of the new Good Samaritan Family Resource Center on Potrero Avenue, the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund is listed among the benefactors.

Standing outside the attractive four-story building last week, director Betty Canton-Self expressed enormous relief.

"We are so happy to be close to opening," she said. "At times, I didn't think it would happen."

It's the culmination of more than two years of hair-raising but successful struggle to rebuild the family services center, which was damaged by the Loma Prieta quake in 1989.

The child care program, only one of many services the center offers to immigrant families, is set to open in February.

While construction was largely financed by the Episcopal Diocese and other donors, the Haas fund contributed \$150,000 toward capital costs, as well as technical advice to guide the center through the complicated licensing process for its new day care program.

The center had run a pilot half-day child care program for the past year in its makeshift quarters on 24th Street. But it offered very limited services to an area bursting at the seams with preschool youngsters who lack child care.

Now, after years of planning, a director and two teachers have been hired for the new child care.

Unlike most child care centers, which have had to conform to the space of existing buildings, Good Sam's new center will move into specially designed quarters on the first floor of a new building.

"It's very exciting for me to start from scratch," said Director Teresa Jacobo.

The Haas fund also helped provide experts on curriculum design and teacher training.

For Canton-Self, the fund's help was invaluable.

"Eventually, we would have come to this, but it would have taken a lot longer and been a lot harder," she said. "The Haas fund allowed us to speed up our learning process."