Working with the funny, fresh and innocent

January 19, 2018

Under the careful supervision of Jackie Leckwee, all of UW-Madison’s brightest young minds converge in a small building between the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and the School of Human Ecology. Like the 40,000 other students on campus, members of the group occasionally have relationship problems, trouble following directions and difficulty staying awake during the day.

Unlike the rest of the student body, this group also plays with blocks, sings and dances with abandon, and gobbles gallons of juice.

Leckwee, site manager at the School of Human Ecology’s Linden Drive Preschool Laboratory, has made a career out of the development of these children, who range in age from 1 to 3.5 years old.

“They’re so funny, fresh and innocent,” says Leckwee, an academic staff member who has worked in a variety of capacities at the school since 1978. “They think about things that make me laugh. They have a truly unique way of viewing the world—that’s what keeps the job from becoming stale.”

The preschool has multiple roles, providing high-quality services, assisting in educating early childhood specialists and providing research subjects for early-childhood studies. The program is geared toward parents of faculty and staff, but it is also open to the public.

While Leckwee’s Linden site works with older children, a slightly larger satellite lab based at Bethany United Methodist Church takes children from 6 weeks to 5 years old. Both UW-Madison sites are licensed by the state of Wisconsin and accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs and the city of Madison.

With a daughter who attended preschool at the Linden lab, Leckwee can appreciate the challenges of balancing family and work. “I told my priest I’ll pray a small part in making people feel more comfortable about their children while they’re working,” she says.

A Madison native, Leckwee attended UW-Madison as an undergraduate and stayed on campus as a research assistant after graduation, eventually taking a position as a teacher at the lab. By the mid-1980s, she moved from a teacher-director of the program to full-time director, responsible for budgeting, accreditation and administration of the lab.

She is known for her ability to balance her many roles, ranging from paperwork to cleaning up a juice spill, says Jill Riley, site manager at the Bethany lab.

“Jackie fills in around the classroom, grocery shops for the program, tills the gravel on the playground, supports staff and makes time for hugs as children are passing her office,” Riley says. “She has a strong commitment to young children and has impacted many lives.”

Leckwee recalls serving as the lab’s animal control officer, chasing escaped aquarium frogs and even removing a dead rodent from the lab’s playground.

“They’re like little sponges, absorbing everything,” says Leckwee, a member who has worked in a variety of capacities at the school since 1978.

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“Basically, it’s never the same thing two days in a row,” she says.

Although the children provide the program’s variety and scope, its evolution has been spurred by changes in working patterns in American society. Preschool enrollment of UW-Madison dates back to 1926, when it was established with roughly 10 children, in response to a request from neighborhood mothers.

Through the years, the program has had several sites and goals, but its focus began to crystallize after settling into the Linden location in 1957. It was then that the program assumed its research and training component.

As more women returned to the work force after having children, demand increased, creating the need for increased capacity and the second lab site, Bethany.

A typical day at the lab for children involves a combination of activities to improve social, language and other skills, “free choice” time, reading time, snack and short naps.

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