

School is helping moms keep PACE

The PACE program provides daycare while young moms attend class

BY ELLEN SPITALERI

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There is a place where babies sleep peacefully, watched over by a whimsical, smiling moon. There is a place with a blue room and a golden cityscape, where mothers can nurse their babies and dream of the future.

This place is inside the building that houses the PACE program, located on the north campus of the Sabin Skills Center in Milwaukie. PACE was started in 1995, with the goal to support teen parents and their babies, provide free day care for the children and allow the young parents to finish their high school educations; the acronym stands for parenting, academics, careers and employment.

But when it first began, and even as the program expanded, the building was not very inviting for its inhabitants.

In 1995, classes were held in what amounted to a hallway, and the breast-feeding room “used to be a storage room,” said Ellie Ellis, a member of the Cascade Artisans Guild, the group that decided to adopt the PACE program space and turn it into something worth looking at.

“There was hardly anything here and the walls were all gray,” she added.

But when Ellis and her colleagues took over the building during spring break, gray was not in the color palette; instead, cool blue skies create a tranquil atmosphere in the sleeping area, and lively yellows, reds and oranges spice up the playroom.

“Being an artist, I want to create beauty around me, and it is important for these moms and children to have beauty around them,” Ellis said.

The mural project

Ellis has a personal connection with the PACE program; her daughter Talitha, 17, attends the school, along with her baby, Troy, who is 13-weeks old.

When she found out her daughter was pregnant, she was scared, Ellis said, adding, “I work full time, so I can’t stay home with the baby.”

She and her daughter found out about PACE, and they were impressed with the program when they first came on a tour.

“Talitha gets on a school bus and brings the baby here, then she walks over to the campus for her classes and at the end of the day she and the baby get back on the bus and come home,” Ellis said, noting that day care is free on campus, and her daughter can breastfeed the baby during her breaks.

Ellis added, “I can’t imagine how we’d get by without the school.”

But the effect of the surroundings was a different matter.

“When we walked through the building, I thought the walls needed some colors and beauty. That is how



Talitha vanDijken, 17, holds her son, Troy, in the newly painted breast-feeding room at the PACE program site in Milwaukie. The room started life as a storage area, but has now been transformed into a tranquil, dreamlike cityscape. photo by Ellen Spitaleri

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it all started,” Ellis said.

She went to her guild, and proposed the idea of decorating the drab walls with murals, and members were enthusiastic in their support of the project.

“We do a philanthropic project every year; it is a way for us artisans to come together and work together,” Ellis said.

The artists all donated their time, she said, adding, “People want something beautiful to do, and the little touches” can change any environment, and make it more home-like.

Ellis also noted that local businesses supported the project by donating paint, equipment and inside décor items.

The artists

Now, when visitors enter the building, they will see a cheerful, plaid wall, the work of guild member Melissa Barrett.

“My vision was to create a bright, happy entry spot with a feel of texture,” Barrett said, as she put the finishing touches on a glowing sun, set against a plaid background of blue and yellow.

Once past the entrance, moms and babies will see a tree with curly branches, based on a work by Gustav Klimt.

“I was inspired by his tree of life, and I am using blue and yellow, the school colors,” noted Terry Hansen Leibenguth. The plan for the tree is that each young mother will put her name and her baby’s name on a paper flower to hang from the branches, giving the young women a sense of belonging, she said.

In the interior of the building, the toddler room sports a school bus, painted by Kathryn Owen, while the play area is watched over by a hungry caterpillar, brought to life by Kathryn Whitlock, using the children’s book “The Hungry Caterpillar” as her inspiration.

Over in the sleeping room, Kasey Shantz is brushing on light blue paint, because he wanted “a cool color that would emulate evening, without being too dark.”

He hit upon the imagery of a benevolent moon, so that the children can feel comfortable and relaxed.

Meanwhile, Carolyn Lehl is putting her touch on the walls.

“I wanted the kids to be able to look out of their cribs and see soft, fluffy, calm clouds,” she said, explaining that she is doing lots of blending with brushes on wet-on-wet paint to get the effect she wants.

Ellis took on the task of creating a comfortable, living room-like feel in the former storage closet that is now the breastfeeding room.

“The walls are ocean blue, the color of the sky just before the sun goes down – it is at its most beautiful then,” she said.

With metallic paint, Ellis is using the walls as a canvas to highlight the silhouettes of cities, like New York, Paris and Portland, with Mt. Hood in the background.

“There are stars in the sky, so they can dream of far-off places,” she added.

The reaction

On the Monday after spring break, when much of the mural work was done, and students and staff returned, “there were tears and people’s jaws were down to their knees. Some of the staff members have been here 15 years, and remember how it all started with meager beginnings, when there was just one toy and the only space was a hallway,” Ellis said.

She added that people told her that she and her guild members expressed the beauty of the mothers and babies on the walls.

Karen Phillips, principal of the Sabin Skills Technical Center, said that when students saw the murals, “they felt very special and valued. They could not believe how beautiful they were and how someone would do this for them. We were all awestruck by the amount of work and the quality of the work. That

people who did not even know us would do this for us.”

Ellis said she and her colleagues hope that more people find out about PACE and what the school is doing for the moms and babies.

She added, “A lot of these girls, if they were not in school here, they’d be condemned to a life of poverty. But we wanted to show them that people care about them, and if they open up their hearts and minds, anything is possible.”

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