

Removing obstacles for the disabled

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Posted: 12/21/2009 07:03:57 PM PST

Updated: 12/21/2009 09:01:37 PM PST



Hizella Martinez, 3, who is blind, sits in a chair and is spun in circles at the Therapeutic Living Centers for the Blind, in Reseda, Thursday, December 17, 2009. In the background is Martinez mother Reina Martinez, left, Estee Anderson, center, and Anne Bell. For nearly 35 years, the block-long centers have proved a special haven for blind residents suffering from disabilities that range from epilepsy to autism to Down syndrome. For blind adults, the living centers have been a doorway to an independent life. (Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer)

Hizella Martinez felt too wobbly to walk, too scared to join her mom at the market and too awkward in her blindness to have any friends.

But it was all smiles after the Van Nuys toddler discovered the Therapeutic Living Centers for the Blind.

"Sing a song, Hizella," urged TLC teacher Anne Bell as the beaming youngster two-stepped to a guitar. "You have a beautiful voice, so beautiful."

For nearly 35 years, the nonprofit centers in Reseda have been a pillar of support for disabled blind residents and their families.

Founded in 1975 by eight families frustrated by a lack of services, the agency known as TLC became the first in California to serve blind clients with a mental disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism and other complex impairments.

To encourage independence, the Therapeutic Learning Centers not only hosts 11 group homes for adults, its two-acre complex offers tender loving care to 180 children and adults in its specially designed classrooms, garden and aquatic center.

This year, the TLC launched an early intervention program to help children like 3-year-old Hizella learn to live with blindness at home.

And the TLC is raising funds to build a \$4.7 million Children's Center where she and other blind-disabled kids can also attend school.

"I feel very lucky to be a part of this," said Executive Director Ford Neal, a TLC veteran of 17 years, who works with 170 teachers, therapists, nurses and support staff. "We can't do more with less.

"If we can help more people when they're younger, the changes throughout their lives can be profound."

Neal walks by a swimming center with wheelchair lifts and ramps, then points out a balance-skills exercise. Passing the cafeteria, where clients learn living skills such as making toast, he hails artists painting snowmen murals.

He looks in as adults fill holiday gift baskets with tangerines from the garden and a group of severely disabled residents listen to a recording of "Little Red Riding Hood."

And then he stops at a computer room for the blind.

"Ford, Merry Christmas! Happy New Year to you!" said Matthew Delacorte, 61, a Brooklyn native who lives in a TLC group home, sporting a dark pair of shades and a cane. "Ford, try not to eat too much candy, OK?"

But it is at a small room nearby where a young mother swells with pride at the glee of a pigtailed Hizella.

Because of early enrichment care from TLC, the once kicking and screaming toddler with Leber syndrome - among the most common of genetic eye disorders causing total or nearly total blindness beginning at birth or soon after - now scurries on her "move-about" at home, around the market and with eager new-found friends.

"She does fantastic," said Children's Program Director Diana Dennis, clasping the little girl's hands. "In six months, she's a different child ... She's absolutely thriving."

"I'm so proud," added Reyna Martinez, of Van Nuys, through a translator. "I've not only seen physical change in my daughter, but spiritual changes as well. I was told I couldn't have children, but my daughter is a blessing.

"I thank God for Diana and all the other teachers in her life."

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