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"Mother Owl" Ona Wilsey, above, says her charges "absorb like little sponges." At right, Kara Nyberg and Justin Reed test a doorbell contraption.

Soaking It Up



Happy Owl Is A Class Full Of Love

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

She is tiny and 3, clutching her blanket with a vengeance even Linus might find excessive.

It is her first day at The Happy Owl, an unusual "early learning" program for preschool-age children in Carmichael. Wailing hysterically, she flatly refuses to move past the front door.

Her mother looks stricken. "I wannnnna go home," the little girl keeps repeating, one arm on her blanket

and the other wrapped like a vise around her mother's right leg.

Ona Wilsey has seen it all at least 1,000 times before. There are a lot of 3-foot-tall people standing around the Wilsey kitchen right now, looking at the new kid as though she is slightly daft.

It is time for teacher to move in. She tells the others to go to the classroom, which used to be the Wilsey family room and is now an astounding collection of shelves and books and toys, paper and paints, rocking giraffes, records, a piano and two big tables with short legs and lots of little chairs.

In height, Wilsey is average to tall. When there is a

crisis or a time of intense rapport, which is almost always, she somehow seems to blend to their size. She doesn't exactly kneel, because after years of teaching preschoolers her back is sensitive; she just sort of meets them where they are.

It's hard to explain, her rapport with little children. She has it, that's all.

Today, she speaks softly to the terrified little girl clutching her mother and her blanket.

"It's tough being 3," she says quietly, evenly, with a tone of enormous reassurance and calm. "You look so nice today, and we're going to have such fun." And Ona Wilsey gives the little girl a big hug.

The wailing subsides, the little girl smiles, takes her teacher's hand and goes inside.

Parents whose preschoolers attend The Happy Owl are accustomed to smelling the faint, pleasant scent of Wilsey's perfume in their children's hair. There are a lot of hugs and love between this teacher and her tiny students. Preschool administrators who tell their teachers to avoid "emotional involvement" with the kids — as Ona Wilsey was once advised — would not be comfortable at The Happy Owl.

If success is measured in the love of children, then Wilsey has it made. And parents looking for a special place like hers are advised she is full up, always. By word of mouth, and simply by the fact of new brothers and sisters, The Happy Owl has no vacancies, and a long waiting list.

"I wish we had a hundred more like her," says Claire Gunderson, the Sacramento County licensing worker assigned to monitor The Happy Owl.

Twelve years ago, Wilsey became a teacher in children's center programs that provided day care and preschool activities for low-income parents in the San Juan Unified School District. She stayed for five years, opting seven years ago to start her own small program in her home.

Owls are everywhere — on the doormat, the walls, the light switch in the bathroom, the wastebaskets and flower pots. Happy owls and solemn ones, plain and fancy owls, carved wooden owls and elaborate brass and pewter owls, and the inimitable stained glass owls

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by Happy Owl Grandpa Don Wilsey, Ona's husband.

It becomes a challenge for the parents, to find a new owl in a new design to bring at Christmas or other special days. Wilsey says she'll always have room on the wall for one more owl.

She always planned to teach. In the late '60s, as her three sons grew older, she went back to school. She earned an associate of arts degree in nursery

school education from American River College, an adult education credential (to teach parent education courses) from the University of California, Davis, and a bachelor's degree in home economics and family development from California State University, Sacramento.

One day in a class at UCD taught by a California pioneer in early childhood education, Estelle Farber, the professor singled Wilsey out. "In front of the en-

tire class, she told me, 'Ona, preschool teachers are born and not made, and you are one of them.'

At the Howe Avenue School Children's Center, she was responsible for 60 children and a staff of five. Later, at Orville Wright School, 87 children were enrolled in the program. The children ranged from age 3 to 6th-graders, with the school-age children coming to the center after school. Their parents were uniformly poor, most of them single mothers.

Wilsey is quick to say her criticism of public day care is not aimed at the San Juan district, but rather at the American tradition of inadequate funding for early childhood education. Despite the reality of working mothers in the United States today, this country lags far behind European and some Asian nations in its support for day care and preschools.

Wilsey learned that reality the hard way. "Everyone wanted me to do what I did," she recalls, "but there was never enough money or sufficient staff. I was working 11-hour days. We never knew from one year to the next if funding (federal and state) would be available."

The Happy Owl is happily subsidized by Don Wilsey, an electronics specialist for the state Department of General Services. His wife's full-time services are reimbursed by parents at about \$1 an hour per child, which is less than or about the same as day-care and preschool programs elsewhere in Sacramento.

Everything she makes goes to new material for the classroom, new playground equipment for the Wilsey backyard, which is turned over exclusively

to swings and slides, concrete runs for tricycles and "big wheels," raised borders for vegetables and flowers that the children learn from and help tend. The Wilsey sons, all grown now, help out, and 23-year-old Mike Wilsey designed and built a geodesic dome for the children to climb.

"I did not expect to make money," she says. "My goal was to work with children. In public day care — and unfortunately in some large private day-care facilities where the goal is profit — you don't have any real opportunity to work with the children. In many cases, it's just too big."

With one assistant — usually a high school student interested in early childhood education and assigned through a work experience program — she teaches the children how to draw, color, paint, work with glue, wood, cloth — and, most important, each other. They listen to records and sing songs, and have Halloween, Christmas and birthday parties. She personally designs artful projects for them to do. She reads to them and subscribes to a children's book service from which parents can order books and records.

"Some people are totally unaware of the value children place on learning," she says. "Children are learning more in their early years than we know. They absorb like little sponges."

She bemoans the loss of art and music curricula in public schools strapped for money. "Children are so creative, and so interesting and fresh and honest. We browbeat that out of them when we put them in little chairs in school and say do it this way. They end up hating learning, hating school."

Bee photos by Dick Schmidt



Justin Reed, left, Ted Sparks and Jordan Reed enjoy individual attention.