



DAVID ZALAZNIK/JOURNAL STAR Sister Cor Marie praises the Illinois Facilities Fund which offered financial assistance to renovate the Creve Coeur Children's Center of Tazewell County which she co-founded and operates.

Kid-centric center

Renovations at the Children's Center of Tazewell County have transformed the facility - and energized its founder

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**story BY CLARE HOWARD #
photographs by david zalaznik # OF
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Sister Cor Marie, 77, still works 14-hour days at her Children's Center of Tazewell County, but she's not as likely as she once was 30 years ago to sit on the floor with children or crouch down to a child-high table one foot from the ground.

Despite the aches and pains of aging, Sister Cor Marie becomes young again when she points out the renovations paid for by a grant from the Illinois Facilities Fund for her day care and school located in Creve Coeur.

For the Illinois Facilities Fund, this \$91,000 renovation was one of seven grants it awarded in the Peoria area, but for Sister Cor Marie, it was a once in a lifetime miracle. Classrooms inside her 30-year-old facility look new, and the renovations were designed in consultation with an architect experienced in child-friendly environments.

Enrollment at the children's center had slipped to about 30 from a peak of 136, but the school is now hoping to start accepting more children.

Sister Cor Marie's benefactor, the Illinois Facilities Fund, is a Chicago not-for-profit that offers grants and below-market interest rates on loans to not-for-profits that serve low-income and special-needs populations. In 2006, the organization selected the Peoria area as its focus. It received 30 applications for grants and funded renovations totaling \$380,000 with help from the Victoria Foundation.

An advertisement for Jody Kelly OB/GYN. It features a decorative floral border at the top with a central illustration of a woman's head. The text is centered and reads: "Comprehensive and compassionate OB/GYN care in an all female practice". Below this is the phone number "688-7010", the address "2901 N. Knoxville, Peoria, IL 61603", and the website "www.jodykellyobgyn.yourmd.com". At the bottom, it says "or Click Here".

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Grants went to Neighborhood House, Southside Catholic Childcare, Crittenton Center, Peoria Citizens Committee for Economic Opportunity, YWCA Peoria, YWCA Pekin and Children's Center of Tazewell County.

"We are a private nonprofit, and we understand the mission of nonprofits. We help with lead abatement and other renovations," said Heather Heaviland, community initiatives manager with the Illinois Facilities Fund. "We also work in partnership with local banks, but sometimes we can make loans local banks can't."

She said the fund has made about 515 below-market-rate loans to Peoria-area organizations totaling about \$3 million. Statewide, it has made \$125 million in loans.

Eco-friendly renovations

The recent grants to seven Peoria-area organizations focused on environmentally friendly renovations. Work included special odor-free paint, carpet made from recycled materials, child-friendly furnishings with non-toxic finishes, sound-proofing and light-screening window coverings.

Kristen Berchtold, development director at the YWCA, 1013 W. Lake Ave., Peoria, said her agency received \$122,000 for renovations of the 40-year-old child-care facilities. Changes are enabling the YWCA to accept more infants into its programs.

"We were able to work with an architect specializing in child-care facilities," Berchtold said. "The renovations took about three months. The rooms are absolutely fabulous - much nicer than we could have done on our own without this grant."

'Miracles happen here'

At the Children's Center of Tazewell County, Sister Cor Marie said she's reluctant to accept any funding that comes with control over programming and children.

"This is a very good group to work with. They took into consideration the needs of our children and our experience. We were able to get my dreams for the children," she said.

"I worked in the inner city of Chicago, the start of childhood development programs at Illinois Central College and then started this day care with \$2,000. I diagnose problems and fix them. We work to prepare each child for success in regular schools."

Friends of the Creve Coeur children's center support scholarship funds. Tuition for children is \$105 a week, and that includes breakfast, lunch and snacks. Kroger donates many food staples to the center, and

Sister Cor Marie prepares meals from scratch.

"The children all love my beef stew, and we get lots of vegetables in them," she said on a brief tour of the kitchen, where a huge pot of beef stew simmered on the stove.

"No, no!" she responded to a question about how much longer she plans to work 14-hour days. "I'll retire when they put the lid on the coffin. When my back was so bad I couldn't stand up, I taught lying on the floor."

She pointed to a child with autism.

"She couldn't walk, talk or feed herself when she came here," Sister Cor Marie said. "Look at her now. Miracles happen here. This is a development center, and children develop here!"

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