



Nikki Bowman  
and Skylar

little **steps** to  
**big futures**

Story by Lois Czerniak | Photography by Joe McKenney

**T**eacher Heidi Allen gently soothes a teething toddler, while across the hall, assistant teacher Brittany Pelletier helps four-year-old Skylar un-jumble a jigsaw.

“I like this puzzle!” exclaims Skylar.

“Do you want to do that puzzle? We can do that puzzle,” says Pelletier.

A gentle embrace, encouraging words, the tools for teaching — you’ll find them all in abundance at the St. Louis Child Development Center in Biddeford.

“Everything is about the kids and I love that,” says Allen.

“It’s a great place for children,” says Todd Winship, site director.

For 35 years, the St. Louis Child Development Center, a Catholic Charities program, has been partnering with families to give children the best possible beginning. The center, which moved into a state-of-the-art, specially-designed building four years ago, combines a compassionate, creative environment, with an early-learning curriculum. Programs are designed to spark imagination, stir curiosity, and help children excel academically, all while having fun.

“You’re setting up building blocks for learning, and you’re showing them that learning can be fun,” says Pelletier. “They’re getting the tools that they need to go on to future grades and that’s awesome.”

“I love children to have fun,” says Winship.

“Every time I see a child who doesn’t have that laughter, doesn’t have that drive to feel they want



to play and explore, I want to make sure we try to give them that here.”

With storybooks and science games, paints and puppet shows, the center’s eight classrooms are packed with possibilities. The rooms are divided by age level and include the new Puffin Place, designed for infants. St. Louis now accepts children age six months to seven years. Some attend all day, others half days or before and after school.

The children are all regularly evaluated to make sure they are developing the way they should. Parents are given regular updates on their progress. If a child has some type of delay or shows a weakness in some area — whether academic, physical, emotional, or social — an individual education plan is put together to address the issue.

“We do everything possible to assure ourselves and the parents that if there are any delays that are seen or diagnosed, that we give the best help we possibly can,” says Winship.

The center has trained therapists on site, but all the teachers also have expertise in early childhood development. Classrooms have both a head teacher, who must have a four-year degree, and an assistant teacher who is required to have a two-year degree.

“They are all skilled and trained to work with children every day. They know what the expectations should be for children that age, and they’re trained in observance

skills so they can track and make sound decisions on whether this child is progressing developmentally as expected,” says Winship.

But these teachers share more than degrees; they share a desire to make a difference.

“I don’t know if there is anyone working here who doesn’t have a love of children and doesn’t have a drive to make a difference

in each, individual child’s life. It’s ingrained throughout the whole program,” says Winship.

“I come into work every day for them,” says Darcie Perkins, a head teacher. “How can I help them? How can I nurture them? How can I teach them? What opportunity can I, kind of, play off of today to teach them something new they didn’t know? Or what can I do today that is going to make them feel better about themselves? Or what can I do today that is going to allow them to achieve something that they haven’t before?”

“It’s those aha moments, like, oh my gosh, you got it. It makes it all worth it,” says Pelletier.





Puffin Place

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– Todd Winship

Certificates on the wall testify to the center’s standard of excellence. They will tell you that it has met the highest level of accreditation possible, both at the federal and the state level.

The smiles on the children’s faces and the praise of their parents will tell you even more.

“She’s so happy. She’s doing so well here,” says Nikki Bowman about her daughter Skylar. “As a parent, you definitely have high standards for what you want your child to be involved with, and she’s only four, but they have certainly surpassed, for me personally, any expectations I would have had.”

“She’s happy. She’s very engaged,” says Jennifer Thivierge about her four-year-old daughter. “They have to say, slow down Emerson, because she’ll be running to her classroom.”

Emerson started attending St. Louis when she was two and a half years old. Thivierge says one of the things that attracted her to the center was the early reading program.

St. Louis was one of only two Maine recipients of an Early Reading First grant awarded four years ago to support early literacy. Although the grant has since run out, St. Louis’ commitment to the program has not.

“They’re not just reading books. We really dissect books, if you want to call it that,” says Winship. “You know, what’s happening? How is this person feeling? What’s their emotion? What’s going on in the background? What do you think is going to happen next?”

Thivierge and Bowman say they have seen the difference it has made for their daughters.

“Her verbal skills skyrocketed through the roof without a doubt, and she’s able to read fairly well. She

just turned four and she’s doing really well,” says Bowman.

“She has grown leaps and bounds. We’ll be reading and she’s picking out letters in the word. She knows authors now,” says Thivierge. “The author of *Corduroy* is her favorite. Robert Munsch is another one of her favorite authors, and Dr. Seuss. She loves Dr. Seuss. We went through all the Dr. Seuss stories.”

Skylar has also become quite an artist. “She loves the art projects that they do. She has probably two or three things a day that she will bring home with her,” says her mother. “My fridge is a revolving door of pictures and what not.”

And Emerson has developed a love of math and science. “Her favorite planet is Saturn. She’s learned that in the science program. That’s funny to me that at age four she has a favorite planet.”

Thivierge says her daughter’s listening skills and attention span have improved as well. “She’s very engaged. You don’t have one friend here. They’re all friends here. The staff and the students are so friendly,” she says.

At first, Thivierge says she was concerned that her daughter wouldn’t get the same one-on-one attention that she

was getting in a smaller daycare, but she says that turned out not to be the case.

“They are very in tune with what is going on with each and every child and have a great understanding of each child as an individual and what their individual needs are,” says Thivierge.

She remembers, for instance, a time, shortly after Emerson started at the center, that she got a call saying her daughter was sick. “When I got there, one of the teachers was actually in a rocking chair, holding her, and she was sleeping. Did I ever think that would ever happen in a daycare this size? They definitely get the one-on-one attention even though it’s a larger facility.”

Both these parents can’t say enough about the staff at the St. Louis Child

## Catholic Charities

The St. Louis Child Development Center is among Catholic Charities’ 30 programs and ministries, which served 55,000 people last year. The Center is supported in part by the annual Catholic Appeal as

are several other Catholic Charities’ programs including Greater Bath Elder Outreach; S.E.A.R.C.H.,



which serves the elderly in Androscoggin County; and the Home Supplies & Food Bank in Caribou. The Catholic Appeal is the primary source of funding for Catholic Charities Parish Social Ministry, which includes emergency assistance, divorce ministry, Project Rachel, and Birthline pregnancy support.

it right up. And they always know exactly what I’m talking about.”

The center strives to get and keep parents involved, both through regular updates on their children’s progress and with special activities such as an Easter egg hunt or smoothie making.

“We try to build parent appreciation and parent



Jennifer Thivierge and Emerson

Development Center. “It’s mainly just the dedication of the teachers that I pick up on. They really have a desire to want to get to know, I think, all of the children. The teacher in my child’s class tells me every day what she did, how she interacted with the different kids, the different projects she did,” says Bowman.

“As a parent, you can’t walk through the doors without a staff member acknowledging you and saying good morning to your child. And to me, that is so wonderful,” says Thivierge. “They are so open, and there are such strong lines of communication between the staff and the parents. If I ever do have a question or a concern, I feel very comfortable bringing



identity within the building, so every quarter we try to do some kind of activity to engage parents,” says Winship.

This past fall, they roped off the parking lot for chalk talk. “Parents could go off and do their own artistic design in the parking lot with their children,” Winship explains. “I had a grandfather lying on the ground with his grandchildren who were tracing his body. It was just fabulous.”

Parents are also encouraged to stop by whenever they want. They all have a pass code to get in, one of the center’s many security measures.

“We always tell parents safety is number one with us,” says Winship. “We have to make that the most important thing in a child’s life.”

The St. Louis Child Development Center doesn’t want to leave any boy or girl behind. It is proud to provide the highest quality care to all children regardless of family income. It accepts ASPIRE and Department of Health and Human Services’ vouchers, offers scholarships, and strives to keep tuition affordable. Its work is supported in part by the annual Catholic Appeal.

“The center is geared to help everyone,” says Perkins. “There is something here that assists every child, and I think that is really important.”

“We’re trying to build a positive, inclusive environment for anyone who wants quality, sound childcare,” says Winship. “We want to be able to serve everyone!”

So that today’s childhood aspirations will become tomorrow’s achievements.