



MISSION ROAD MINISTRIES

A caring environment for San Antonians
with mental retardation

By KAREN KOLIVOSKY Photography ROBERT FRENCH

On a recent spring night, a group of high school students got ready for the senior prom. The girls wore gowns, new hairdos and makeup jobs fresh from a department store cosmetics counter. The boys wore rented tuxedos. After pinning on corsages and posing for pictures, they were picked up by a limo, which took them cruising for an hour, then on to the prom.

At the end of the evening, the limo brought the kids back home to Mission

Road Ministries, a 20-acre campus on San Antonio's South Side that offers residential care and other services for people with mental retardation.

The prom-goers are some of the 58 children and eight adults living at Mission Road's main campus. Every weekday, 45 more adults come to the campus for programs that help them with life skills. With 15 other residential and daytime centers that Mission Road Ministries operates throughout San Antonio, the 60-year-old organization

helps more than 550 San Antonians who have mental retardation each day.

The goal for every one of them is the same: to help them move toward as much independence as they are capable of. The steps vary with each person.

José (with guitar) is one of the adults living in Mission Road's Independence Square apartments near the main campus. Enjoying his music are several younger residents and, standing, Kate Leslie, a development associate.

For some, the goal is to help them find and keep a job. For others, it's learning to shower themselves or brush their own teeth.

The all-out prom experience is an example of Mission Road's goal of providing residents with a quality of life beyond the minimal requirements.

"We strive to give our children the same opportunities that any parent would want for their child," says Kate Leslie, a development associate at Mission Road. "All high school students look forward to their prom, and the Mission Road children are no exception."

THE KIDS

The mainstream experience of prom night is also a chance to create a happy memory for the teenagers. Like all children who live at Mission Road, they were removed from their parents because of abuse or neglect. Mission Road is one of two facilities in Texas serving children with mental retardation who have been removed from their family by Child Protective Services. The children at Mission Road face a double challenge: In addition to mental challenges, they also suffer depression, emotional trauma or other fallout from their backgrounds of abuse.

"One of the biggest things we have to do is teach them to trust adults and that they have control over their lives," says Suzanne Letch, director of development and public relations. "A lot of them have been hurt, and they're scared."

Today, the dominant philosophy in caring for children with disabilities who have been removed from their parents is to place them in another home environment. Whenever possible, children are placed with relatives or foster families.

However, it's difficult to find foster families who are able to care for children with such intense needs, and often placements don't last. More than half of Mission Road's children have been in 15 or more failed foster family placements before they arrive at the facility.

"We agree with the concept that a child can do better in a foster family situation, but the needs are so great that a family can throw their hands up in frustration," Letch says. "It's great to be placed in a family if you can succeed, but that's not always the reality."

For children who live at Mission Road, the employees become their family, and the campus is home. Staff members help them around the clock with everything that a parent would, from taking them

to the doctor to checking on them during the night.

"We become 'it' for the kids because they don't have anyone else," Letch says.

After school, the campus soccer fields and basketball courts are filled with playing kids. During the summer months, the home turns into a summer camp with additional staff and a full slate of activities every day. "Despite the kids' tragic circumstances, Mission Road is a happy place to be," Letch says. "Once they get here and settle into a routine, there's a lot of laughter and fun here."

THE ADULTS

Some of the children are eventually placed in Mission Road's adult facilities when they get older. But most adult residents at Mission Road come from loving families who place them in group homes or apartments when aging parents can no longer care for them full time, or simply to further their development and give them fuller lives. Once they move to a Mission Road home, they can stay there for the rest of their lives.

José, 53, came to Mission Road 20 years ago after the death of his mother. He lives in Mission Road's Independence Square apartments, adjacent to the main campus. He works for Mission Road, making daily rounds throughout the campus helping with janitorial duties. An accomplished musician who plays classical guitar, *guitarron*, violin, *bajo sexto* and accordion, José has played in the mariachi mass on Sundays at San José Mission for the last 20 years.

If José stops by on your birthday, get ready for a serenade, in English or Spanish or both. José loves to perform; in fact, his impromptu concerts sometimes go on as long as 30 minutes. He also plays at special events for Mission Road — with a caveat: He's been known to stop performing mid-show when he sees food come out.

"If you put the food out before he's done performing, he'll quit playing," Letch says with a laugh. "The only thing he likes more than music is food."

José is in the 20 percent of Mission Road's clients who are 50 years old or older. In 1947, when the organization started, very few people with mental retardation lived past their 20s. Today, with better health care and services available, clients who are well into their 60s and 70s are being served by Mission Road.

A primary focus is serving clients

beyond providing basic care, by helping them lead fulfilling, purposeful lives, whatever their ability. One way Mission Road does this is through the Unicorn Center, a vocational training facility for adults located in the Medical Center area. Every day as many as 300 clients from ages 18 to 80 come to learn life skills, get jobs or earn a paycheck by performing production type work on site, fulfilling contracts with area businesses.

All of Mission Road's operations are covered by a \$13 million budget, with 85 percent provided through state funding and the other 15 percent through United Way funding, donations and other fundraising efforts. The state funding covers basic operating costs; the private funding fills in the gap between the state-required minimal level of care and what the staff considers to be an appropriate level of care, says Toby Summers, CEO of Mission Road.

"That margin is where care comes in, like summer camp and a staff ratio in children's programs that's two times what's required by the state," Summers says. "It's the ministry part of what we do."

Merle Segler knows firsthand how important that margin is. Segler's 53-year-old daughter, Darlene, has lived in a Mission Road group home for two years. Darlene likes her home so much that Segler admits that sometimes her feelings get a little hurt. When Darlene was home for Mother's Day weekend, she seemed unhappy; she was missing her friends and the constant schedule of activities the home provides residents. At the same time, that's exactly what Segler wants: the peace of mind she has knowing that Darlene is happy at Mission Road.

Before coming to Mission Road, Darlene spent 13 years at another group home. While at first it was a positive experience, Darlene grew unhappy there as recreational activities for residents were cut. Eventually, she would resist getting in the car to return at the end of weekend visits home and cried when Segler dropped her off.

"When she'd cry when I'd leave, I'd cry all the way home," Segler says. "Now I drive up, she hops out, waves bye and goes in. I hope it never changes, and I don't think it will. I want Darlene to stay there for the rest of her days, and I imagine her days will be long after I'm gone, and I feel like she'll be taken care of even though I'm not around to check on her," Segler says. "That's what I need."