

Meet Marisa Edwards, Executive Director The Winston L. Prouty Center, Brattleboro, Vermont

by Bonnie Neugebauer

People who are full of energy make things happen. Some are so energized that they energize others. Such a woman is Marisa Edwards, executive director of The Winston L. Prouty Center in Brattleboro, Vermont. Her vision and zeal have fortified a program and rallied a community to better serve the needs of young children and their families, including those with special needs.

In operation for 30 years, The Winston L. Prouty Center is named after the senator who fought for the Early Education Act of 1969. It began as a demonstration project, one of five in the country, to provide preschool services to children with special needs. After its three-year funding, the center was able to continue through the support of the school districts and Block Grant funding. This funding enabled the program to bus children in for special services and to become the first early intervention preschool program in Vermont.

The Winston Prouty Center has two distinct yet combined programs. The Family, Infant, and Toddler Project is the statewide Part C service to Vermont families with young children, from birth to three, who have either a developmental delay or a medical condition which may likely lead to delay.

The Early Learning Center began in 1984 as a respite program, offering services 24 hours a day to parents of children with special needs. The program was underused because parents found it difficult to leave their children for extended periods of time. Based on parent need, the child care program was developed in 1986 to offer short-term care during daytime hours for children with special needs.

Changes in legislation in 1991 pulled the Block Grant money and initiated a difficult period for the center. They were struggling to find a funding strategy. The school district gave money to have children in the program, but after a while they, too, backed out. For six years the center floundered in its efforts to define and identify itself.

Marisa Edwards was hired in 1995 to pull the program out of its quandary. Significantly, this was also the year that the center achieved NAEYC accreditation. "When I came to Winston Prouty, the Family Infant Toddler Program and the Early Learning Center were housed together but they were not linked. My goal was to make the two programs viewed as one."

The child care program focused on the typically developing child, but Marisa's goal was for the children with special needs to be part of the fabric of the center. "I wanted the kids to be just kids. At first there was confusion and fear that the program would lose what it had always been; but there were enough people who really understood the enhancement. As you might expect, we did lose staff and board members because of this goal — it took five years. But for the past one and a half years, the board has fully embraced the goal of a fully integrated program.

Every child should be included in their school and their community. This can be done. Of course, it takes more money and staff to do this, but the resources are out there.

"The staff are incredible, they are dedicated to the mission of fully integrated services. We want people who have experience in some realm with children with special needs; that's one requirement of employment. We do team interviews because we want to think about personality and how the person would fit within the team. We look for skills that would enhance the team. We look for the unique gift that no one else has that this person has to share. Everyone knows they are part of the team; everyone has a voice in what we do."

As a society we need to change the focus in how we pay people who work with young children. How do we make people feel professional? One of the things we do is to support ongoing education as an entire community.

"It's worked here because we have built a strong early childhood community in Windham County. Representatives from the school district, health professionals, local R&Rs, Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood professionals meet monthly. We've created task forces. We made the decision as a community to focus on the needs of children and families, not on what programs need to stay afloat. This commit-



ment has been very successful as we have stepped back to rally support for what families really need. Last week we did showcase tours of centers for business people and legislators. This is our community. There is the variety of services here for everyone, but we need your support." Marisa was a keynote speaker at the event which hosted about 50 attendees who were driven around on a tour of centers and treated to lunch, a captive audience for talk and sharing.

"Also, we have an endowment. The board has designated part of the profit from the endowment to salaries which has enabled me to increase salaries up to 15 percent.

"We have a unique group of parents. They are involved on many levels. As board members, advocates, fundraisers, and friends to one another. We do everything we can to make parents feel ownership of this program.

"I started my career as a special education teacher, working for five years in public education with children with multiple handicaps. The bureaucracy of the public system was very difficult for me. I went back for my degree.

"Actually, my commitment to special needs began earlier. In college I took a work-study job in a transition program for adults. I was won over by working with these adults who were so honest, and then I loved the young children who are so genuine and unscathed. I decided — this is really what I want to do. So I began my progress downward. I got my masters degree in early intervention and administration. That part of my life is a whirlwind; for five years I worked with ARC Allegheny, serving 350 children and their parents, many of whom were also developmentally delayed. I burned out. Pediatricians hired me as part of an evaluation team

at Children's Hospital; I was the resource connection to the community. It was an incredible learning process (three years). When the grant ended, a friend in Vermont said, 'I have the job for you.'

"That was five years ago. This job is a little bit of everything I'd already done; it puts everything together.

"The beauty of Vermont is that it's so small you can get involved in all levels. I did. I became involved in local early childhood issues, task forces, business organizations such as Rotary, the Inter-agency Coordinating Council at the state level — now I am co-chair of that with a parent. I am working to affect things locally and at the state level.

"We try to be good observers of children and to give them tools to think what is this? and to offer unique ways of interacting with the world. How can we change what we're doing here to accommodate a particular child? We work as one team now. But all of this wouldn't have worked if I hadn't been supported in so many ways by the board, the staff, and the community."

And, one might add, if Marisa Edwards were less dynamic and had less energy...

