

## Meet Alicia Lewis, Center Director, Child Development Center at Lou Williams Variety Club Children's Center through Children and Families of Iowa

Interview with Alicia Lewis, Karen King, and Gloria Gray

Des Moines, Iowa

"Every year we get new marbles to play with." Alicia Lewis talks about the challenges of directing a program with so many components during our tour of the Child Development Center at Lou Williams Variety Club Children's Center through Children and Families of Iowa — Child Development Center for short. If ever a director was adept at playing with those marbles and winning the game for children and families, that director is Alicia Lewis.

The Child Development Center is part of Children and Families of Iowa, a private, non-profit, nonsectarian human services agency serving Iowa families since 1888. The Center currently serves 300 families through services at the center and 20 home-based programs. In addition to child care, services of the Center include therapeutic programs; a partnership for wrap around care with Head Start; medical services through the agency nurse; and Shared Visions, a readiness and wrap around for four year olds at risk.

Agency director Gloria Gray believes in the importance of quality child care. "I bring the new board members and anyone else I can to the Child Development Center to open their eyes to the world of child care. People don't understand the complexity of operating child care, especially a child care center committed to meeting the needs of low income families and children with special needs.

The Child Development Center fits well in the array of "child serving" programs offered at Children and Families of Iowa, including residential treatment for teens, foster care and adoption,

domestic violence shelter and services, and family counseling.

"Our funding is broad-based and comes from state, county, federal, and city sources as well as donations from the United Way. There are 33 sources of funding for the Child Development Center and the child care homes. Iowa is currently in a difficult economic situation and money is short.

"We've been around a long time, and we're committed to what we do. This is the best thing going for kids and families. Most families here need subsidies. Here they find safety and quality."

Previously in an old Catholic church, the program is currently housed in a building constructed 11 years ago for child care — it even includes a children's entrance which adults as well as children seem to find as the best way to enter. "It was a major decision to stay in this neighborhood when we decided to build a new building. There were suggestions of moving to the suburbs, but these are the people we are going to serve. Traditionally, they are the most vulnerable, at risk children and families. This is our home, our neighborhood. This is where we belong."

Child Care Resource and Referral Agency director, Karen King, comments, "The program is the

people, not the building. And the people here are committed; they really care." She refers to the CDA graduations, when parents introduce the teachers of their children — the pride, the achievement for everyone.

Another source of pride is that the Child Development Center was accredited in March on their first try. "So many things have happened because of accreditation — grants, awards, participation in a video. It's been wonderful for us in so many ways; but when we started the accreditation process, there was resistance: 'Why do we have to change?' But we were determined. We felt that children deserve the level of quality accreditation requires. Our staff began to see the value in achieving that level of excellence, and that we can always strive to improve our services.

"It took a solid two years. Community people came in and gave us feedback.



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Finally, self-esteem began to grow in teachers and then the classrooms began to bloom. It was incredible watching staff grow in confidence and become more competent. All staff but one have minimally their CDA. Staff have taken ownership in making the program run. They are more confident talking to parents, more professional.

“It’s staff who keep us going. Teamwork makes it all fit. No one person can do it for even 10 minutes by themselves. Sometimes we step on each other’s feet in our committed efforts to meet all needs. If someone is falling, there is always someone paying attention and catching them. Support around front line people relates to quality.”

Licensed for 158, the Center runs with slightly less enrollment because of difficulty in finding qualified staff — “We are in the position of matching the number of children to the number of staff available, rather than the other way around. Some people come here because they think the work is easy! Our interview process is rigorous and we focus on expectations; we make sure that candidates know that the job has everything to do with children.”

Alicia has spent her life in child care. “I was born to this. As the oldest daughter in a family with five children, I did a lot of sibling care, then babysitting. At Purdue I went straight for child development. So I’ve been in the field for over 30 years.” Her career has followed a familiar path from assistant teacher to lead teacher then director.

“Every two to four years, I have to deal with feelings of burn out. Usually I take a break and when I come back there’s a wonderful experience with a child or helping a family. And I realize again that I am good at this. It helps that I have had different responsibilities

throughout my career, so it isn’t like I have been in exactly the same position for all that time. And there have been changes in the field. The current focus on brain research brings validity to what we do.

“What I like best about my job is the kids. Everything I do comes back to children and children’s behavior. No matter how horrible life may be for children, there is something internal that continues to be so good and so honest. Sometimes they let us inside and sometimes they don’t. Either way, they let us know. I try to be basic about everything — what is this child trying to tell us?”

“I love my job even on a bad day. At the end of the day I know that every child has been taken care of and that we are coming back to do it again tomorrow; but tomorrow we will do it in a different way. We’ll do it better.”