

Preschool director realized her dream with Glen Oaks help

STURGIS---Michelle Johnson, a Glen Oaks Community College graduate who directs the First Promises Preschool in Sturgis, makes no bones about it: “I owe knowing how to do this job I love to do every day to the Early Childhood Education program at Glen Oaks.”

Johnson returned to the classroom after working in the business world. She began classes at Glen Oaks Community College with the intention of some day teaching at the middle school level. She earned an Associate of General Studies transfer degree in 2002. “I love math and enjoyed Ann Cook’s math classes at GOCC. I especially liked Algebra II and the higher math,” Johnson recalled.

Johnson was later employed with the Michigan School Readiness Program (MSRP) in Sturgis. “I fell in love with working with small children. I don’t know why, but I really seemed to be able to communicate with the children. I can figure out why they are doing what they do...I love to teach them. I just love these kids,” said Johnson.

Johnson shifted gears and swung into overdrive. She returned to Glen Oaks for an Associate of Early Childhood Education degree. The degree requires a total of 62 credit hours. Many of her classes were taught by Karen Grunert, Professor of Early Childhood Education. “Karen’s classes were excellent. She knows so much about this field and she has operated a learning center for children. Many of the concepts from both Glen Oaks and my textbooks are being used at First Promises Preschool,” explained Johnson.

One of her college child education projects, a brochure, included the design and layout of a preschool center, with a budget, staffing, learning toys and storage, playground equipment, state licensing and more. “So when I was able to realize my dream of opening a preschool child center I had everything ready to go,” Johnson added.

Last year, after graduating with an Associate of Early Childhood Education degree, Johnson began considering her next step.

“I have a strong faith and I feel my love for teaching youngsters is a gift from God. It is something He gave me. Something I love and I can do. God told me to look close by, so I considered our First Presbyterian Church on South Lakeview Street and week day use of the regular Sunday school room for the center,” Johnson explained.

She presented her preschool idea to Pastor Mike and Sally Wicks and the project was brought before the church Session. The church agreed to make the preschool program a mission project for the community. “I just felt, as they did, that all studies show how important an early start is for good child development. Preschool education is more important than ever. Early childhood sets the foundation for success for much of the rest of educational life,” said Johnson.

Donations came through the church and volunteers stepped forward to help turn the room into a true preschool for state licensing. There are two bathrooms, two sinks, two fire doors, and the room is a nice size with calming blue walls. Butterflies and other animal illustrations grace the walls. Johnson said one church member made a generous donation and more people added time and materials. Dry walling was completed by Don and Mary Moses and playground equipment was given by Bob and Joyce Sterrett. Church members rallied around a Giving Tree to answer the many needs for equipping the preschool. “With the support of the First Presbyterian Church it was possible to do this without loans. As we go on we anticipate this will be a self-funded program,” Johnson explained.

Johnson's role as teacher/director is to operate a quality program and give each child a positive experience. She currently has about a dozen students, with 3-year-olds meeting Tuesday and Thursday mornings and 4-year-olds attending Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning or afternoon. This fall she plans a Young 5's class Monday through Friday at 1:00-3:30 p.m. "That class is filling fast. I have an assistant for next year, so we will be able to do more one on one instruction," said Johnson.

First Promises Preschool incorporates hands-on activities that focus on the whole child, story time, play-center activities, and regular practice with pre-reading and pre-math skills needed for kindergarten. Plenty of time is spent during the day for interacting with others in a social setting. "We want to meet the emotional, physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs of each child," Johnson said as she finished another day at her dream job.



Michelle is shown with Savannah Hahn. The toddler moved the computer mouse around and clicked on commands with no fear as she navigated a learning program.



Michelle, at a table with Christian Quirin as he creates a picture with magic colors.

