

CONCORDIA AVONDALE CAMPUS

In Chicago, Reika Valentin and Joaquin Montero play at Concordia Childcare Center. A new campus will have two playgrounds.


Chicago congregation breathes new life into Catholic school, rectory

A church on Chicago's North Side perhaps should be called "The little church that could."

Concordia Lutheran Church has a membership of fewer than 200, but it has transformed a Roman Catholic school and rectory into a \$12.5 million campus that will serve all ages when its community and learning center opens this fall.

The congregation has offered preschool, after-school and summer camp programs for 25 years, currently serving 88 children, ages 3 to 12.

When it opens Concordia Avondale Campus (one mile away) it will serve an additional 211 children, including infants and toddlers, through its child-care center. It will offer programs and educational and rec-



THE LITTLE CHURCH THAT COULD

By Cindy Novak



reational activities for teens, parents and the elderly.

Plans for the Avondale site began about 10 years ago after Nicholas Zook, pastor, realized the congregation's child-care center had as many children on the waiting list as it had enrolled in the program. "I asked members, 'Why is the vision of the church limited to the perimeters of the building? Why do the walls define how far we could go?'" he recalled.

So Zook asked his ward's alderman if property was available for the congregation to acquire. He learned the former St. Veronica Roman Catholic School and rectory were available. With help from elected officials, private donations, and city, state and federal grants, Concordia purchased the century-old buildings—considered by many as architectural treasures—in 2001.

Renovation and construction work began last year. It includes restoring some of the building's original architectural features—such

as staircases, facade and stained-glass windows.

A resource for the community

"St. Veronica's was the community's social and spiritual anchor," said Brenda Swartz, executive director of Concordia Avondale Campus, the church's nonprofit umbrella organization. "The community lost that—it was an empty building for so many years. With the new center, we will be a resource for the community again."

By conducting a needs assessment to determine how to best serve the Avondale neighborhood, Concordia discovered people eager to get involved. "Seniors said, 'I'm not looking for programs—I'm looking for something to do,'" Zook said. "Teens said they wanted to volunteer to fulfill required service hours for school."

"Instead of being a place that serves, the center has become a catalyst for people who want to serve. We can provide opportunities for people to use their talents in ways that will benefit others."

The center will provide an alternative for teens, many of whom are at a high risk for crime and gang activity, Zook added. It also will offer fitness classes, arts workshops, computer

instruction, intergenerational programs, English as a Second Language courses and activities for seniors—"those who tend to get isolated in their homes," he said.

Concordia also looked at demographics and discovered the Avondale neighborhood has a severe child-care shortage. And it learned that more than 18 percent of families with children live at or below the federal poverty level. Zook said the Avondale community and learning center will carry on Concordia's tradition of providing affordable child care to families on a sliding-scale tuition program. "Our goal from day one was to make sure anyone could come, regardless of ability to pay," he said.

The sliding scale tuition has been a "godsend" for Terra Johnson, 30, whose 5-year-old daughter, Riley Conway, has attended Concordia Childcare Center since she was 3. As a single mother, Johnson said she appreciates Concordia's affordable tuition—and the peace of mind knowing her daughter is in a safe, loving environment, rich in academic preparation.

"Riley and I are only a family of two," Johnson said. "When I'm not there, she needs a lot of love. The teachers at Concordia always make sure they give her a special hug and give her a special project to do. Concordia has been a great place of support."

Swartz said Concordia has undergone a financial "leap of faith" to make the Avondale center a reality, mortgaging the church several times and taking out loans until funding for the project was secured. She said

Concordia still faces some challenges as the project nears completion. Although the congregation obtained \$7.5 million in construction funding, it still needs an additional \$3 million for remaining construction expenses and for equipment, furnishings and start-up operations.

"We knew at various points that this whole thing could fail—it could become Concordia's folly," Zook said. "But I think the willingness and spirit of this congregation to continue to persist at [giving financially] has made such a big difference."

Swartz added, "We call Concordia 'the little church that could.' We're so proud of this project. You don't have to be in a large suburban church with a lot of money already to do this. It's not about the size of the church—it's about faith and perseverance." □



The Concordia Avondale Campus, Chicago, will include a computer lab, indoor play area/banquet room, fitness room, arts and crafts room, and cafe.

How they're doing it

Concordia Avondale Campus, a \$12.5 million project (construction, program development and operations)

Income

- \$4 million federal grant
 - \$2 million state grant
 - \$3 million city of Chicago grant
- Total: \$9 million

\$7.5 million for building construction (out of \$8.2 million construction cost).

\$1.5 million for program development (research, program start-up, pilot projects, marketing, outreach, materials, job employment, etc.).

Other income

- Parishioners' donations \$300,000
 - Private foundations \$200,000
 - Individual donors and businesses \$70,000
- Total: \$570,000

Income grand total: \$9,570,000 for project

\$3 million more needed.

\$2.3 million for program development (equipment, furnishings, computers, salaries until tuition comes in, program support, scholarship program, other start-up costs).

\$700,000 to pay back loan.

SOURCE: CONCORDIA AVONDALE CAMPUS

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