

Special Ed in OC

"She's a prime example of someone who really has the compassion and the calling and the heart." Orange County Director of Special Education, Jan

Carpenter praises Sallie Barber and wonders aloud how to replace her. In addition to Barber, she may be losing another experienced teacher in the area which used to be known as Severe and Profound and is now called Multiple Disabilities.

Wheelchair-bound, sometimes motionless and unresponsive, some of these kids can't chew; can't swallow. They have to be fed through a tube in their side. The general public doesn't realize that Special Ed teachers not only have to be trained

in the tube feeding procedure, they have to change diapers. "That takes strength," says Carpenter. "You have to be able to lift. So you have to be able to put them up on a changing table. That's different than putting a six-month-old baby on a changing table... And that can happen multiple times. It can happen at inconvenient times. It can happen on field trips." Her eyebrows arch in query. "What do you do on field trips with that tube feeding?" she continues. "You have to keep that food refrigerated. So, there are so many things that these teachers of multiple disabilities manage throughout their day. I highly value those people."

All told, 486 children are being served by the Orange County Special Education Department. That's out of a total student population of 5,010. It takes 88 staffers to educate them.

Jan Carpenter is quick to point out that "We're educators; we're trained to educate. I like to keep our nose in education. We're not medical people."

Special Ed costs about \$1 million a year, most of it federal. To get that money, Carpenter has to "seek and find individuals with disabilities," even if they are attending a private school.

"Even though their parents may reside in another county, I'm responsible for all the private schools in my

division," says Carpenter flatly. Then she or a staffer has to write what's called an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for every Special Ed student in the program.

She "seeks and finds" these kids by publicizing a Child Find on the last Friday of every month (May and June excluded). On those days, "Parents may bring their children to us here at the school board office and I have specialists...and we screen their children...If we suspect that there is an issue, then we bring you back for something called a child study meeting."

This whole Special Ed thing started in 1975 when a census discovered that there

were a million plus school-age children in the U.S. who were not attending school because of disabilities. The result was the Education of All Handicapped Children Act.

"We don't say you're handicapped anymore; we don't even say you're disabled," corrects Carpenter. "We say you are an individual with a disability. It's a person first; the person comes first."

Concerning the frustrating back and forth rewording of politically correct labels, Carpenter makes a point when she says, "It's a hard thing to take when I look at you and say, 'Your child is mentally retarded.' But if I look at you and say 'Your child has some challenges. They are cognitive challenges; he's not going to learn as quickly as we would expect,' that's just a nicer way to do things."

Carpenter has been the bearer of these bad tidings to parents many times. "It's almost like the stages of a death in the family because at first it's denial. Then you move into acceptance. And then you move into anger. And then you move into 'What did I do wrong as a parent?' Where none of those things are really relevant."

The federal government recognizes 13 different disabilities. "If you do not meet that federal criteria, then we're not going to identify you with a disability. For example a behavioral child with an oppositional defiant disorder; that's not recognized by federal legislation."

Jan Carpenter has 15 years experience in Special Ed. Although she's noticed more tolerance of Special Ed over the years, she's also seen a change in the parents of disabled children that is directly linked to the economy. "I see parents relying more on the school nurse for medical care instead of spending the money to take their child in to the doctor...I've seen more reliance on Special Ed because the parents are stressed, the children are stressed." Still, she adds, "Generally speaking, we have really good parents who want nothing more than their children to be successful, contributing members of society."

The 13 disabilities

1. Learning disabled, which is hard to detect because the child has average intelligence; he or she's just not learning.
2. Emotional disability- includes mental illness such as schizophrenia
3. Developmental delay- offers the hope that the child can catch up
4. Speech/language impaired- has trouble speaking intelligibly; not to be confused with language disability which is "when you can't name things."
5. Vision impaired- have trouble seeing, but not blind
6. Hearing impaired- have trouble hearing but not deaf
7. Deaf- self explanatory
8. Blind- self explanatory
9. Intellectual disability- used to be called mentally retarded and includes all kinds of syndromes and conditions such as Down's and autism.
10. Multiple disabilities- used to be called Severe and Profound
11. Orthopedic impaired- every thing from polio to amputations and fractures
12. Traumatic brain injury- self explanatory
13. Other health impaired- the catchall, including every thing from attention deficit disorder to sickle cell anemia, juvenile diabetes, bi-polar.

"I love my kids"

"Oh yeah! Oh yeah!" Lauren can barely contain her excitement as John carefully introduces us to his classmates. She giggles and bubbles and swoops in for hugs.

John, meanwhile, concentrates hard, trying to remember the names. His teachers, Sallie Barber and Renee McCarthy encouragingly nod their heads with each syllable, as if willing the words out of his mouth.

When his name is called, Tori looks up from where he is seated at the desk and smiles. He proudly shows off their latest creation, a Mexican breakfast casserole that looks and smells delicious. This has been a team effort. Rebecca located and read the recipe; Tori assembled it; Samantha cracked the eggs; Kyle beat the eggs; Rodney opened the cans of tomatoes; John chopped the onions; and Lauren added the butter-milk and cheese.

"Oh yeah! Oh yeah!" Lauren sidles over for another hug when she hears her name again. "Three or four years ago, this child wasn't even talking hardly," whispers Sallie Barber. "Now, we can't shut her up!" She turns to this delightful, giddy but-oh-so-frail child with the infectious gap-toothed grin and asks, "What were you last year at homecoming?" Lauren is momentarily puzzled. Then she brightens and whispers wide-eyed, "Queen."

Lauren Johnson, voted overwhelmingly Orange County High School Homecoming Queen for the



PHOTOS BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Above, Hungry Hornets is open for business. From the left to right: Rodney, John, Samantha, Rebecca and Lauren. All told, there are 486 identified Special Ed students being served by the Orange County Public Schools system. Below, Lauren Johnson and teacher Renee McCarthy show off their latest creation, a Mexican breakfast casserole. The OCHS student body overwhelmingly voted Lauren Homecoming Queen for the 2009-2010 school year.



2009-2010 school year, has, what's called in the latest round of politically correct labels, an "Intellectual Disability," (ID). A 20-page federal document says ID was "formerly known as 'mental retardation,' and means significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance."

Whatever! But down here in the Special Ed classroom at Orange County High School, Lauren is both sweetheart and imp, an obviously happy child, full of wonder and love and personality and humor and all the other things that make us each unique. It's just that she's trapped in this body with some scary medical issues and some insurmountable mental ones. You will be shocked to learn that although she looks like she's a 12-year-old, she is actually almost 22. By law, this is her last year at Orange County High School. What then?

Lauren is lucky. She has a magnificent extended family that will make sure that she is not only cared for but still learning, albeit at her pace. Other 21-year-olds leaving the high school this year will probably go to the next step, which is Bridges, located out of sight and out of mind in a far corner of the Colonial Square shopping center. Still others may not be so lucky. There's only so much a parent of a handicapped, (oops, we're not supposed to use that word anymore) child can do, particularly in these tough economic times. So, these last few weeks of school are important for these kids. They need to practice these skills they've learned so they can maybe make it in that big bad world of "normal" people.

It's time for Hungry Hornets. Sallie Barber and Renee McCarthy help the kids don the matching aprons and caps. They roll the food and beverage carts down the locker-lined hallways to the front entrance and set up shop. "What do we learn by what we're doing?" rhetorically asks Renee McCarthy. "We're teaching you how to possibly work in a restaurant when you get older."

I test them by ordering a cup of coffee. "Yes, what type do you want?" asks Rebecca as she turns the

display to reveal an eclectic choice. "It's got hazelnut, French vanilla, we have French roast decaf, all different kinds."

I select one. Rebecca helps Lauren brew the cup. "That will be \$1 please," says Samantha. I give them



PHOTO BY SALLIE BARBER

Jeremy assembles electrical components for Dominion Power. Orange County Special Ed kids have been helping the utility company for 15 years now.

a \$20 bill. John and Kyle open the cash register and painstakingly count out a \$5 bill and 14 ones in change. "How does that taste?" asks Rebecca, hanging on my every word. I tell her the coffee is excellent, which it is. She offers to hold the cup for me as I fiddle with my tape recorder. Rodney helps Lauren with her apron strings. These kids have got each other's back.

The bell rings. The hallways flood with humanity; then it's empty again. A few of the "normal" kids smile as they pass, but these are not mocking smiles; they are ones of bemusement. They laugh with these kids, not at them. John Henry Ryder comes out and good naturedly joshes with them.

The Hungry Hornets are out here during fourth block every day, selling their wares, not to students, but to teachers and staffers. This is multi-tasking at its best. Every day they measure ingredients, assemble and prepare them. They take orders from the teacher's lounge and ROTC, fill and deliver those orders. They brew coffee and tea and hot chocolate. They stock an inventory of juice and snacks. They make lists and follow a schedule. They keep track of

money, make change, and use the profits to buy more food. And if they have anything left over, they'll throw a party for themselves at Christmas. "Do we ever have any complaints?" asks Renee. "No," they all chorus. Sallie Barber clarifies; there is one recurring complaint: "It's too good and we don't have enough."

That's not all they do. After first block, when many of them have math and reading, if it's Tuesday, they go to the Love Outreach Food Pantry to unload trucks, stock shelves and re-bag tater tots. The rest of the week, during second block, they're working at the Goodwill store, rotating inventory. Third block, they clean the cafeteria after lunch. And fourth block they run the Hungry Hornet food and beverage stand.

They also run Hornet Industries. They have machines that can imprint lettering and images of the OCHS hornet on everything from T-shirts to coffee mugs, mouse pads to name tags. Sallie Barber hauls out a heavy box loaded to the gunnels with electrical fittings. "We're the only school in the state of Virginia that works for Virginia Power too," she points out. They've been doing that for 15 years, since before the name change to Dominion.

She dumps the components onto a table and shows how her kids put them together, like a turnbuckle or a heavy bolt with washer and nut attached. This saves linemen valuable time. Instead of having to assemble this stuff themselves, the kids do it for them. Every year, Dominion hosts a picnic for Sallie's kids in appreciation for what they do. They get to see their work in action.

"I love my kids," says a fiercely protective Sallie. "I love working with these guys."

Sallie's been working with these guys for 34 years now. Special Ed is a whole lot different today than

when Miss Lundstrum, fresh out of college, arrived on the job at OCHS in 1977. "I had five black boys who were my students, and that was it. And they were all bigger and two and three years younger than me. I was like 23 and they were like 19, 20...I still see them all." Just the other day she and one of her former students, Dennis Holmes, fell into each other's arms. He's in his 50s now. "Wonderful family," she says shaking her head reverently. "Awesome, awesome family."

Back in those days Special Ed kids were sequestered. "We were self-contained in a little classroom and we ate lunch between lunch shifts." Then a mischievous grin creeps across her face. "We just happened to stay in there for the next lunch shift, like 15, 20 minutes longer. Slowly, we just stayed in there a little bit longer each day, and nobody paid any attention to us... We were the people that were put away in a little corner there, and slowly we all came out."

She had some help. Basketball coach, Skip Hudgins taught math and history next door. "And he just really loved my boys." Pretty soon, Sallie's kids had become the basketball team's mascot, showing up at pep rallies and sharing the bench with the players.

Remember the word 'mainstream?' "I think we kind of pushed it a little faster here," says Sallie with a sly wink. As a result, Orange County earned a reputation for going the extra mile in Special Ed. Realtors back then would tell you that families with disabled children were locating here for that very reason; so they could put their kids into this program! "We were just treating them more like normal kids," says Sallie.

She tells a story from those early days. The school was under lock down for whatever reason, but she

had promised her kids they would go to the movies that day. So, they snuck out a back door. "One of my kids walked up to one of the policemen, blew on his badge, shined it and said 'We're going to the movies. Bye.' And we did. Nobody said a word to me!"

You could never do that today. Special Ed has grown complicated just like everything else. But down here in this classroom, Sallie has seen it all, even a child who was so violent, "I made them put a window in my door so that people could see we were still alive...This child, she could break a door if she wanted. She hurt me once or twice." There are Special Ed kids who are disruptive... loners, bullies, and class clowns, just like in regular classrooms. But Sallie won't coddle them just because they are disabled; she deals with them like she would anybody else. On this particular day, she pulled two boys from Goodwill because they were picking on each other. "I corrected them like three times and said, 'Okay guys, we're in public; I've corrected you three times. Put your stuff up; we're out of here. They caught it all the way back, and they had to eat lunch with me today... 'I don't care what you've got to do, you're mine, till I tell you you're not,'" she scolded.

She also maintains an excellent relationship with the parents, even visits them in their homes, which



PHOTO BY SUSIE ALDIBERT

After 34 years as a Special Ed teacher, Sallie Barber is retiring. She won't miss the red tape, but she will miss the kids.

can be frowned upon by higher-ups. "I know all my parents. I can call every one of these parents," she says confidently. During her recent 45-day medical absence, the parents were calling her. "When are

you coming back?" they demanded.

As in the able-bodied world, everyone is different in the disabled world. She points to two autistic children in her classroom. "Two...totally... different... kids." Because of this variety, it is something like a one-room school house around here; the teacher has to adapt to all levels of ability and disability simultaneously.

Here progress is measured in tiny steps. "They sometimes come to a stop where they won't learn any further. Sometimes they'll come to a plateau for a little while and all of a sudden, it'll blossom out again. It might level off for about a year or so and they start again. Sometimes they regress back. It all varies. A lot of it depends if they've left school or what's been done to them at home or what they've been involved with otherwise." She watches as John and Kyle confer on how to make her daily cup of hot chocolate. "What you find, which is really neat, is sometimes you give the lower kids a little bit harder work and the upper kids help those kids."

Sallie has also noticed an improvement in the way her kids are regarded by the general public. "They've gotten a lot more accepted. You're always going to have regular ed kids make fun," she admits. But she adds, pointing to her brood, "They make fun of each other a lot of the time too." She tells a story how during Hornet Hour, three regular student population girls will hover around John to help him with one of his beloved puzzles. "I don't know how it is in other schools in other systems, but the kids here are out and about constantly."

School is done for the day. Sallie's co-teacher (there are two in every Special Ed classroom for good reason) Renee McCarthy escorts some of them to the bus or waiting parents. Sallie is alone. "They're...just...fun," she says wistfully. "And they are so caring for each other and for everybody." Asked about milestones and victories, she responds, "They are their own victory...It's more when the community gets it that they're human beings. And the community has come a

long way. It really has in the 34 years I've been here."

This is Sallie Barber's last year. She's retiring, for a variety of reasons, none of which have anything to do with the enduring fact that, "I love my kids."



PHOTO BY SALLIE BARBER

Samantha and Kyle share a light moment. The "Intellectually Disabled" (ID) kids at the high school frequently look out for and help each other.