

Rural day care provides safe place for farm kids ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A drive down Main Street of Langruth, Man., on the west side of Lake Manitoba leaves little doubt that farming anchors this community.

A high-clearance sprayer and grain truck are parked outside the local hotel restaurant. Inside, the drivers eat lunch and talk about seeding progress.

But just down the street sits a commodity rare in farm towns.

While most Canadians have never been to Langruth, population 120, many have heard about the Lakeview Children's Centre, a day care designed to meet the hectic, unpredictable schedules of farm families.

Over the past decade, the parents and staff involved with the centre have done what many think impossible.

They provide quality, licensed day care for kids aged 12 weeks to 12 years between 6:30 a.m. and 10:30 p.m., or as required by families.

"Anytime you need them, they'll work something out," said Gary Hill, a local cattle producer with three young children.

"It's just that flexible."

Barb Hill drops off Kylynn, 8, Alyssa, 5, and Erin, 2, before driving to her job in Neepawa, and picks them up at 6 p.m.

"I don't know where we'd be without it," said Barb, explaining she needs to work, but wouldn't be able to without the centre's help.

The Hills describe the centre as a home away from home for their daughters, a place where they learn and flourish.

A key tenet of the centre's philosophy is that parents should have affordable child-care choices so that when they're working on the farm, their children are safe, said executive director Jane Wilson.

With modest pride, Wilson tours a visitor through the centre, which is a converted municipal office made cheerful and bright.

She described how 10 years ago, a handful of people in Langruth telephoned everyone they could think of in the area who might be interested in day care. It took a year for the group to turn the idea into reality.

Wilson put together a proposal for funding, the Rural Municipality of Lakeview offered its old building for a token rent, and volunteers overhauled the site.

There was some resistance to the concept of day care, said Wilson.

But the need was obvious. Because of rural depopulation and smaller families, farm families have less extended family available who can help look after children.

Many families rely on one parent working full-time off the farm.

But Wilson emphasizes that quality child care is good for all kids because it teaches them how to get along with others and stimulates young minds.

Langruth had a baby boom in 1991. Most of the eight infants born that year came to the centre, along with 10 other pre-schoolers.

But by the summer of 1992, Wilson and her staff were working with 45 to 50 children. So she applied for more funding to renovate the

basement of the building for school-age kids.

Money is the biggest hurdle for a rural day care to jump, said Wilson, whether it's starting up a centre or adding something new.

Child care has traditionally been viewed as an urban issue. Wilson and parents involved with the centre have worked hard to change perceptions, often meeting with politicians and sending a steady stream of newsletters and faxes to decision-makers.

But the board of directors hasn't let money concerns stop the centre from changing and growing. It sought to help other communities interested in a variety of child-care options.

It built the Childcare-Family Access Network, and helped people in nearby Plumas start a nursery school, and others in McCreary and Westbourne start licensed child-care programs.

Board members speak to parents around the province and elsewhere, encouraging them to develop child care that suits their communities. Wilson has plans for a fetal alcohol syndrome program at the centre, and a home visitor program to help new parents with nutrition and child development.

"This is the first time that rural (child care) has come into its own," said Wilson.

- reprinted from the Western Producer

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