

Orange Park Methodist's Early Education more than a daycare

By Kyla Woodard
For Clay Today

ORANGE PARK — Located on Reed Street is a hidden gem dedicated to changing the lives of young children.

Since 1982, Wonderworks, the early education center of Orange Park Methodist Church, has dedicated time to teaching kids from infancy. From 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., the center makes its mission to allow local children to learn.

And with the start of the new school year, Director Pat Noonan said the center is ready to continue its calling.

"We've had so many kindergarten teachers say that the kids from here are just ready. They're ready to learn. They love learning because we instill that in them," Noonan said.

Opening 30 years after the church's birth, the quaint center originally began as a "Mother's Day Out" program, eventually morphing into a full-blown childcare facility.

The center has found great success in the local area, focusing on providing an early education and a social environment for children.

With about 75 children currently enrolled, Noonan said her daily responsibilities as the center's director consist of maintaining the flow of the school, such as caring for maintenance and ensuring the school is fully staffed.

"Even though we're a daycare, we try to run it as a preschool," Noonan said.

Noonan said her journey at the school first began back in 1987. Searching for somewhere to place her child, Noonan said working at the center was the last thing on her mind.

"I mentioned that I had worked with young children, [and] the director gave me a job application," Noonan said.

After working with the school's bookkeeping and resource offices, she took her place as the woman in charge back in 1991.

In her time at the center, Noonan said she has witnessed the dire need for childcare in the community, especially during the pandemic. As many of the parents were first responders, Noonan said that the center kept its doors open daily through the pandemic to give the parents and children a place of solace.

"A lot of our parents are policemen,



PHOTOS BY KYLA WOODARD

While it's considered a daycare, officials with the Orange Park Methodist's Early Education run it like a preschool, where children are immersed in educational and social environments.



"When you've been working with them with something, and they're not quite getting it, and just the look on their face when they're like, 'I get it now.' It's rewarding to see that happen."

—Susan Nowlan, VPK Teacher

nurses, doctors. And they needed us. They needed a place to go," Noonan said.

With its colorful and kid-friendly atmosphere, the school continues to be a place of comfort for many. Filled with rooms about each child's educational and social needs, the school prides itself in being the 'first stop' to a child's future success.

Following the Starfall curriculum, Noonan said the school aims to create a computer-based, interactive learning environment for VPK students to participate in. Noonan said the school tries its best to allow children to have fun while providing the necessary educational nourishment to satisfy the curriculum requirements.

VPK Teacher Susan Nowlan said for her class, she likes to take an interactive

approach to teach her kids the alphabet, numbers, basic math, and even their five senses.

"We do a book a week that goes along with the letter of the week. And, then, we try to pull in a science activity," Nowlan said.

Students are currently reading the popular children's book, "Chicka Chicka Boom Boom." Nowlan said for that lesson, the kids will experience cracking a coconut open and using their five senses to explore it.

With servicing children all over the county, Noonan said most students filter out into local schools such as R.M. Paterson, Orange Park and Grove Park

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elementary schools. Noonan even noted that some come from Green Cove Springs.

Equipped with many teachers on-site, the facility operates as a full-time, year-round program. Only closing on six holidays a year, the facility undoubtedly puts childcare needs before anything else.

As a teacher for the 1-year-old group, Sydney Fields said her favorite part about her job is watching the kids advance through the program.

"Seeing how the kids grow from when they come into your class to when they go out. Seeing how far they've come, that's my favorite part," Fields said.

Beginning the job in 2019, Fields has been dubbed the 'mother duck' of the center.

"She'll walk on [and] she'll have six kids, and they all follow her. She makes it look easy," Noonan said.

Nowlan said her favorite part of the job is the satisfaction of knowing she is doing something right and impacting a child's life.

"When you've been working with them with something, and they're not quite getting it, and just the look on their face when they're like, 'I get it now'. It's rewarding to see that happen," Nowlan said.

In addition to servicing the currently enrolled children, Noonan said it's always a pleasure to see past students come back and visit the center later on.

"We have so many kids that they're A students in school. They love to learn. They'll come back, and they'll read to our kids. And they love to show off," Noonan said.

Wonderworks remains a place where children can be themselves and learn simultaneously. And Noonan said the overall success of the childcare center can be attributed to just that.

"The one thing that a lot of people have commented is the kids are happy. They're not crying. They're happy to be here," Noonan said.