

# A heart for helping others

When Mary Macedo and her husband, Daniel, were first married, Mr. Macedo's line of work caused the family to relocate often. It was during these years that Mary recognized the joy found in sharing her time and her heart through volunteer work.

Having been challenged in college to give back through service to others, Mrs. Macedo realized that she could also have a lot of fun volunteering. "When you do something for free, there are lots of fun things to do," said Mrs. Macedo, a 69-year-old Timonium resident and active parishioner of Church of the Nativity, Timonium.

Mrs. Macedo continues to live the challenge to give back today as a storyteller at the Cockeysville Public Library, as a longtime volunteer of the Linus Project, and as a mentor to children at Villa Maria in Timonium.

An avid knitter, Mrs. Macedo now provides at least two hand-knitted blankets per month to Project Linus, a nationwide service group that provides handmade blankets earmarked for infants and toddlers in hospitals and institutional settings. It was Project Linus that brought her to Villa Maria, where for the last nine years she has been a weekly volunteer and a strong voice for Villa's Therapeutic Mentoring Program.

Lauren Porter, Villa Maria's mentoring coordinator, recalls when Mrs. Macedo arrived at the front door of Villa Maria with dozens of blankets.

"She was a member of the Linus Project and heard that there were 96 children who could use a little comfort," said Ms. Porter.

Little did Mrs. Macedo know that the warmth and comfort she provided would extend far beyond the blankets she has delivered. Since that initial visit in 1999, Mary has been warming the hearts of children through her continued commitment as a residential mentor, providing comfort, caring and guidance to four boys and one girl.

"The atmosphere at The Villa is special," said Mrs. Macedo. "They work very hard for their volunteers, especially in terms of offering trainings and support. The other

thing that strikes me is the friendliness from all staff members; they are all so kind to the children.”

The Therapeutic Mentoring Program, which began in 1998, has two separate tracks: the Residential Program, for the 96 children who live at the facility, and the School-Based Program, for non-residents who attend the special education school. As the Therapeutic Mentoring Program gets ready to celebrate its 10th anniversary, one of the many things that they will celebrate are the relationships that are built and then grow and flourish as the mentor becomes a special friend, a positive role model and a consistent caring presence in a child’s life.

Currently, Villa Maria has 50 active mentors, according to Ms. Porter, serving 22 children on the school side and 28 children on the residential side. There are 13 children awaiting a mentor.

Forty percent of those mentors are between the ages of 51-65.

“There are many reasons for seniors to get involved here,” said Ms. Porter. “For some, their children are grown and out of the house – the empty-nest syndrome. They’ve been a parent and bring a tremendous amount of experience, wisdom and knowledge, and for many, they are ready to take on a new roll.”

Mentors vary the activities with their mentees. It could be a trip to McDonald’s, the movies or the Maryland Science Center, once the child is able to travel off campus. But for Mrs. Macedo, the best activities are the simple ones.

“What I like about mentoring are “the simple things,” said Mary. “We go on hikes, explore new trails and sometimes cook. The kids have the freedom to go at their own pace, their own way, and you can see more of who the child was meant to be.”

Mary recalls, “My first child wasn’t allowed to go off grounds with me for over a year. Trying to make a connection with him was a very slow process, especially since he had limited experience with family, or ongoing relationships with adults (except for staff). He didn’t really understand how to play with others and had no interest in my suggestions. It was when I came with the materials to make a terrarium that I finally saw a spark of interest. Nature became our thing. ... People were a puzzle for

him, but learning about nature together, our friendship developed and his pride in 'going exploring,' as he described it, gave him a feeling of competence and mastery that was very new to him."

Mrs. Macedo has a natural ability to build relationships and gain the trust of broken or fragile children, which can be a delicate process. She is emphatic about the importance of giving the mentee someone to trust and someone to believe in.

"Children today have it very difficult," said Mrs. Macedo. "Our world is so filled with danger and loss. It's sometimes hard to know where to begin."

When Mary's current mentee leaves the program this summer, she's not sure what she will do.

"I have no idea what the future holds for me and the Therapeutic Mentoring Program, but I cannot imagine not being involved with The Villa. It's a small thing that I can do, and it is so very rewarding."

To learn more about Villa Maria's Therapeutic Mentoring Program, contact Lauren Porter at 410-252-4700, ext. 204.