

## Regina Coeli Child Development Center - History Page

### LOOKING BACK: A HISTORY OF REGINA COELI CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

In 1968, an organization called The Human Relations Council was formed in the city of Covington, Louisiana. The purpose of the group was to assist the Covington community in the integration of the public school system and to promote jobs for underemployed poor citizens of the community. About that time, the group received word that there were funds available in Washington D.C. for Head Start. The Council contacted Washington to inquire about some of these funds for a Head Start program in Covington. The first grant application was written by Dr. Suzanne Hill, a professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of New Orleans and Garic "Niki" Barranger, a local attorney in Covington. As a result of that proposal, the group received a \$45,000 Head Start grant to operate an eight-week program in the summer of 1969.

Some of the nuns from the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic at Regina Coeli joined the Council, and they offered the use of their convent as housing for the first Head Start program. The facility was used, rent free, that first year, and Sister Stanislaus served as the first Head Start Director. The group decided to use the name of the convent in its organizational name so that people would know where the program was located. That is how the organization became known as Regina Coeli Child Development Center. Regina Coeli is Latin for "Queen of Heaven". Other than using the convent as its first location, the organization has never been affiliated with the Catholic Church. It should be noted, however, that some of the Regina Coeli nuns gave great support to the Head Start program in its early years. Among those Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic who worked hard to get the program going were Sister Stanislaus, Sister Madeline, Sister Victoria, Sister Barbara, Sister Cathy, Sister Carmel, and Sister Joan. Their continued support of Head Start over the years was greatly appreciated. All volunteered their time and energy toward making the program an early success.

The Covington law firm of Barranger, Barranger, and Jones drafted the original corporate charter as an in-kind service for the group. On August 14, 1969, the Secretary of State affirmed that Regina Coeli Child Development Center was officially incorporated as a private, non-profit corporation. The first board members of the corporation were Curtis Thomsen, Dr. Walker Percy, Garic K. Barranger, Dr. Suzanne Hill, Henry Randle, Lester Dunn, Dr. Charles Hill, Helen Frick, Leroy Frick, Andrew Lange, Clarence Favret, Jr., Rev. Lawrence Tyson, William Butler, Rev. Nolan Pipes, Virgil Baham, Malcolm Byrnes, Herbert Anderson, and Russell Burton. Few Head Start programs in the country can boast of having a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist (Dr. Walker Percy), a Yale educated attorney (Garic Barranger), a university developmental psychology professor (Dr. Suzanne Hill), a Tulane Delta Primate Research psychologist (Dr. Charles Hill), a Baptist minister (Rev. Lawrence Tyson), and an Episcopal minister (Rev. Nolan Pipes) on their original board of directors. Others on the original board of directors were elementary school teachers, building contractors, social workers, local businessmen, and interested community members.

The first officers of the board were Rev. Lawrence Tyson, President; Dr. Walker Percy, Vice-President; Helen Frick, Secretary; and Virgil Baham, Treasurer. Rev. Tyson, from Folsom, served as the Board President for that first year. Helen Frick succeeded Reverend Tyson as president and served for 13 years from 1971-83. Ralph Miller served as president from 1984-97. Victor Doucette was elected president in 1998 and is currently serving in that position. Evelyn

Greenwood was among the group of teachers who taught Head Start children that first summer. She came to Regina Coeli, on loan for the summer, from Folsom Elementary School where she taught first grade. She brought with her many of her own teaching materials as there was very little room in the \$45,000 grant for education supplies. After retiring from St. Tammany School Board, she joined the Board of Directors where she served until her death in September 2003. The first teacher assistants were Imogene Heisser, David Schoen, and Les Landon, Jr. Sister Stanislaus directed the program for the first year. Karl Wood was the director from 1970-76, followed by Bob Hanisee from 1976-79, and Sharon Conroy from 1979-81. Judy Loyde was appointed to the position of executive director in 1981 and is currently serving in the position.

After operating the eight week Head Start program for two summers, the board felt the need to convert to a full year program. It was hard to do very much for children and families in a short eight-week period, other than getting them examined by a doctor and a dentist, and providing them with a brief pre-school education experience just before entering first grade. (There was no kindergarten in the public schools then.) The board approached the Regional Head Start Office in Dallas and asked if the Covington program could be expanded to a full year program. Mr. Gerald Hastings, Regional Head Start Administrator, came from Dallas to meet with the board in the old Regina Coeli Convent Library on a hot summer evening. The air conditioning wasn't very effective in the library, and as he sweated in the south Louisiana humidity, he began the meeting by complimenting the board for running such a quality program on such little funding. He told the members of the board how impressed the Regional Office was with the way Regina Coeli was administering the program. Then he discussed the request to expand to a full year program. He stated that the Regional Office had recently withdrawn Head Start funds from the grantee known as "Tangilena Head Start", in the neighboring parishes of Tangipahoa and St. Helena. It seems, according to Mr. Hastings, that the grantee had problems administering the program in accordance with federal guidelines. He told the board if they would consider being the grantee for these two parishes, in addition to St. Tammany, that the Regional Office would approve the request to expand the Covington program to a full year program.

This was a very difficult decision for the board. There was much difference of opinion among the membership as to whether or not they wanted to take on such a large responsibility. After all, they had only one goal at that time - to run a small, quality program which would serve children from the greater Covington area. There were some who said that Regina Coeli could not maintain the quality of the program if two other parishes were added. But finally, after much debate, the majority voted to take on the additional responsibility and try to do the best that they could in serving children and families from the other communities. Thus in 1971, the Covington program, then known as Regina Coeli Head Start, was expanded to a full year program. The Covington Head Start program remained at the Regina Coeli Convent for 25 years. Need for a new facility and future plans for an early intervention program which included Covington High School led to the board's decision to relocate the Covington program in 1994. A new facility was constructed on East Stadium Drive just across the street from Covington High School. It was not an easy decision, and it required much soul searching on the part of the board to leave the peaceful, original home at the Regina Coeli Convent.

In 1971, the board took over Tangipahoa Parish Head Start, a summer program that was delegated to the Tangipahoa Parish School Board. The Tangipahoa program utilized the vacant public schools in the northern end of the parish during the summer, and like the original Covington program, they only served children during the eight weeks of summer. A community needs survey of the Tangipahoa parents conducted in 1981 indicated that they really needed a ten

month program, so the program was converted to North Tangipahoa Head Start. The direct operation of the program was delegated to a local community group instead of the school board. It opened in two locations – the old school building in the Town of Tangipahoa and an old store-front building in Amite owned by the Guzzardo family at the intersection of I-55 and Highway 16. After repeated, failed attempts at patching leaky roofs and poorly working heating systems, the program was relocated once more in 1986 to a combined facility, another store-front, in downtown Roseland, LA. In 1997 a new facility was built on five acres of land purchased by Regina Coeli on Roch Road in Roseland, and the North Tangipahoa Head Start program found its present home. The program continues to serve children from throughout the northern end of Tangipahoa Parish.

The Regina Coeli Board also assumed responsibility for St. Helena Parish Head Start in 1971. Direct operation of the program was delegated by Regina Coeli to the St. Helena School Board. The St. Helena program began operation in the very northern end of the parish in an old four room school that had been abandoned by the public school system near Easleyville. The building was used as the setting for the movie, “*Souder*” which was set in the early 1900’s. On July 9, 1979, the building was completely destroyed by fire. On August 27, 1979 a lease agreement was signed with the St. Helena Parish School Board to provide space for the Head Start program in the old elementary school in Greensburg. This 1930’s facility was utilized until funds were obtained in 1994 to purchase five acres of land and build a new facility on Greensburg Street in Greensburg, Louisiana. Since 1994, this beautiful brick facility has served children from throughout St. Helena Parish.

In 1972 the Regina Coeli Board became the grantee for the Hammond-Ponchatoula Human Development Center which provided programs in both Hammond and Ponchatoula. The programs were operated in old World War II barracks which had been donated by Southeastern Louisiana University (SLU) in Hammond after they were no longer used by the university as free housing for veterans attending SLU on the GI Bill. In 1985 staff and parents bid a fond farewell as the old buildings which had been moved from army posts, to the SLU campus, to the Head Start site were loaded on trailers and hauled away to be used as fishing camps by the new owner. The new facility, now known as Hammond Head Start was built and opened that year. The center was closed in Ponchatoula, and children were transported by bus to the new buildings in Hammond. With the use of expansion funds in 1995, land which had been leased was officially purchased by Regina Coeli from the City of Hammond, and the buildings were renovated to serve 140 children. In 2002, an additional 1.5 acres was purchased by Regina Coeli from the Tangipahoa Black Heritage Festival to provide for future expansion. The modular buildings joined by porches overlook a peaceful setting on Phoenix Square in Hammond. Though the buildings do not conform to the “bricks and mortar” used at the other sites, visitors often say that this is their “favorite” setting in the Regina Coeli program.

A very persuasive gentleman by the name of Mr. T. J. Butler, Sr. approached the board in 1972 with a group from Franklinton. His group was running a state funded day care program called the Community Day Care Center of Franklinton and they were in need of additional funds to expand their program. The board, once more after a long debate, decided to help the children and families of Franklinton by applying for Head Start funds. The program was delegated to the local community group and T. J. Butler, Sr. was President of the nonprofit delegate Board. The Franklinton center operated as a combination Title XX day care and Head Start program for many years, and was finally converted to the fully funded Franklinton Head Start in 1987. The program originally operated in the old Franklinton Primary School building until 1988 when

Leeke and Bobby Magee built and leased a new facility for the program on Hilltop Drive. Regina Coeli purchased the building and adjacent land from the Magee brothers in 2002.

Another program was added in 1972 as a group from Slidell led by Ms. Linda Walz approached the board and asked for Head Start funding. This was a community based group which was operating a child care program in the old St. Linus School on Bayou Liberty Road. The program known as the Slidell Office of Child Development-Children's Village had been operating with very little financial support and a lot of volunteer help. That program is now known as Slidell Head Start. In 1988, the Archdiocese which had been providing the facility for a nominal annual rental fee, determined that they needed the building for church use. The Slidell Head Start program was temporarily relocated to the old KinderCare building at Kingspoint. In January 1990, a new facility was constructed for the Slidell program which relocated to Airport Road. Plans are currently in place to build a new Slidell Head Start facility on Highway 11 just north of I-12 in Slidell.

In 1973 the word about Head Start funding reached Bogalusa. A group known as the Child Care Center of Bogalusa came to the Regina Coeli Board to ask for funding. Like the Franklinton program, the group in Bogalusa ran a combination Title XX day care and Head Start program for many years. It was fully funded by Head Start in 1987. The program continued to operate in the old Bogalusa City School building on Sullivan Drive which had been vacated during integration. The persistent leaking roof and an even more persistent bunch of pigeons made it impossible to continue serving children there. A new Head Start facility was built, and the children and staff moved on Martin Luther King's Birthday in 1991 to 1202 Erie Avenue – their new red schoolhouse. One Head Start student responded to his mother when she asked how his first day went at the new school, "Great! It rained and it didn't rain inside."

Another very hard decision for the Regina Coeli Board came in 1985 when they were asked by the Regional Office to consider expanding to Livingston Parish. Head Start services had never been provided in Livingston Parish, and once again, there was much disagreement among the board. The organization had not expanded since 1973, and many board members wanted to concentrate on quality in the programs that were already being operated. Board President, Ralph Miller, made a very passionate speech to the board about the social, racial, and economic conditions in Livingston Parish, and how much the program was needed by the children and families there. The board voted, by a slim majority, to expand and provide a new program in Livingston Parish, located in Walker and known as Livingston Head Start. The program started in an abandoned meat market on Walker South Road. In 1997, five acres of land were purchased by Regina Coeli next door to the old facility, and a new facility was built to serve children and families from throughout west Livingston Parish.

A major change in the Regina Coeli organization occurred in 1990 when self assessment of the programs which had been delegated to local community groups indicated that the programs were not being run in a way that met high Regina Coeli standards and expectations. After a long debate over many months, the board voted to reorganize and assume direct operation and administration of all of the Head Start programs under its grant. In an effort to include community members from all areas, the by-laws were restructured to assure representatives on the board from all parishes served.

In a continuous effort to meet the growing needs in southeast Louisiana, in 1992 the Regina Coeli Board added a new program in Independence, known as Central Tangipahoa Head Start.

The facility was built by the Town of Independence and leased to the Regina Coeli Board for fifteen years. The “Central Tangi” program still operates at the Railroad Avenue address, but long range plans are being considered to relocate the program away from the railroad tracks to a new building to be owned by Regina Coeli.

The program was expanded again in 1993 to serve children and families in the Lacombe and Mandeville communities. The program began in a facility located on 24<sup>th</sup> Street leased from Mr. Joe Ziegler. Regina Coeli purchased the facility from Mr. Ziegler in 2004. Children are bused from Mandeville to Lacombe to receive services there. The program attempts to serve children from a broad target area, reaching almost to Slidell on the southeast and beyond Mandeville on the west.

In 1994, more children were added through expansion at Springfield Head Start. The new facility in Springfield is located just at the gates of the old Carter Plantation at the end of Carter Cemetery Road. The purchase of the five acre tract “out in the country” for \$25,000 was heavily debated at the time but now appears to be a bargain as the Springfield Head Start program presently sits directly across the street from the 13<sup>th</sup> hole of the beautiful Carter Plantation Golf and Residential Resort Community. When the Springfield program was opened, it was determined that this was a closer facility in which to serve Ponchatoula children and families. So the children are now bused from Ponchatoula to Springfield.

For many years, Dr. Suzanne Hill and Beverly White, two very visionary Regina Coeli Board members, kept telling the Board that the program was not beginning early enough to serve children in need. They insisted, “In order to make a difference in the lives of children at risk, we must begin earlier - before they are four years of age, and we must involve their parents at an earlier age.” In 1997, a grant was received from the State Office of Community Services to begin an infant-toddler program. Jane Moncrief, Regional Director of OCS was instrumental in getting these start-up funds for Regina Coeli. The program was first opened with eight children in one room and a closet (with the door removed) at Covington Head Start. On June 1, 1998, the first grant of \$536,799 was received from Washington for the new Early Head Start program – designed to serve infants, toddlers, and pregnant women. A new facility was built adjacent to Covington Head Start and it was called the Covington Family Service Center. In 2002 the name was changed to Covington Early Head Start.

In January 1998, an interagency agreement was signed with Southeastern Louisiana University (SLU) to place a Head Start center on campus. The joint effort by Regina Coeli and the university would provide not only a place for quality child care and early education to the children of SLU students, but it would become a major training facility for students in many areas including early education, social work, psychology, nursing, and various other fields of study. Both Pre-K and Early Head Start opportunities are offered at the SLU facility. First priority for enrollment is given to full-time students at SLU, but other community children are also served.

A dream came true in 2000 when expansion funds were utilized to provide Head Start services to children who had no preschool services available in the community of Robert, Louisiana. In conjunction with the expansion, Regina Coeli was able to add new administrative offices, a state-of-the-art training facility, a centralized purchasing warehouse, and meeting space for parents and board members. This new facility is located in the center of the Regina Coeli target area.

In 2003 The Regina Coeli Board embarked on a very new venture. The board assumed the administration and operation of the Migrant Head Start Program in southeast Louisiana. The program had been operated for six years by the Community Action Program of Central Arkansas (CAPCA) located in Conway, Arkansas. On February 1, 2003 CAPCA delegated the authority for operating the program to Regina Coeli. The program serves children from birth to five years of age from migrant or seasonal farm-work families. The addition of the Migrant Head Start services in Amite and Franklinton has added a whole new dimension to the Regina Coeli organization as it attempts to make learning and quality childcare available to the children of a very hard working group of people who put food on our tables and flowers in our yards.

As funds became available, Early Head Start services were expanded to infants, toddlers, and pregnant women at Greensburg, Bogalusa, and Franklinton. An additional opportunity to expand Early Head Start services arose in 2004. The Ascension Parish School Board had been awarded funds to provide Early Head Start services, but extenuating circumstances prevented them from implementing the program. The funds were returned to the Administration for Children and Families and a Request for Proposal for the funds was announced from Washington. Once again, the Regina Coeli Board debated into the night about the pros and cons of extending the program to yet another parish (the 6<sup>th</sup>), and the problems of administering a program with such distance from the administrative offices in Robert. Toward the end of the evening, the same question was asked, which has been asked over the years by the Regina Coeli Board, "Is it good for children?" After determining that the answer was "Yes", the Board voted to approve an application for the funds to provide Early Head Start services in Ascension Parish. The new facility located on Fontana Drive in Donaldsonville was opened in 2005 and is serving all of Ascension Parish through both center-based and home-based services.

We at Regina Coeli owe a debt of gratitude to those forward thinking people in Covington in 1969; to the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic; to all of the churches, ministers, doctors, dentists, nurses, psychologists who have given their time; to the many community groups and volunteers who have supported us over the years; to the local school boards and their staff who work with us daily to dually serve children with disabilities; and to the parents who have trusted their children to us year after year. Regina Coeli would like to thank these dedicated volunteers for their prayers, their volunteer time and services, their financial support when needed, their words of encouragement, and their untiring assistance. This great community support not only helped the program get started but made it possible to celebrate many years of providing quality services to children and families.

But the greatest thank you goes to those who have served voluntarily on the Regina Coeli Board of Directors over the years. Your untiring efforts, endless volunteer hours, and selfless commitment to making life better for poor children and families have not gone unnoticed. You are the reason that the Regina Coeli program continues to be cited by federal review teams as one of the best in the country. This is your history, and you may take great pride in it because you made this history possible.

This history is dedicated to the memory of Charter Board Member, Helen Frick. She served on the Regina Coeli Board from its inception in 1969 until her death in 1995.

Note: The history of the program through 1994 was dictated by Helen Frick for the 25th Anniversary celebration. The history from 1994 to the present was provided by Judy Loyde.

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