

The Planting of An Orchard

By Therese Marszalek

Twelve busses puff in the parking lot, waiting to be filled with children. The secretary at central station hangs up the phone only to have it ring again. One mother calls to request a ride for her son. Another needs prayer for a sick child. Linda Sharkey, known as "Miss Linda," darts around, coffee in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other. She moves quickly, notifying drivers of last minute bus route changes. Gathering up her captains and helpers, she gives them their assignments for the morning run. It's Saturday morning at Spokane Christian Center in Spokane, Washington. The church buzzes with activity as preparations are made to gather children from all over Spokane for Saturday Sunday school.

In the early 1990s, Miss Linda, wife of minister Rick Sharkey, and a dedicated group of volunteers launched a program that is changing the adolescent face of Spokane. Today, more than 10 years after the birth of the program, Saturday Sunday school operates 13 busses and reaches more than 1,200 children.

Sputtering yellow school busses ramble down Spokane streets, collecting children from every social and economic background, including the shelter for abused women and the Salvation Army. No child is denied the opportunity to attend Saturday Sunday school, a place where love abounds.

Over 70 committed volunteers sacrifice their time filling various needs in the program. Fully committed to positively impacting the children of Spokane, bus drivers and helpers fondly refer to the kids on their routes as "my kids." Miss Linda credits much of the success of the program to her faithful team of volunteers.

Changing Lives

Miss Linda takes advantage of each moment as she ministers to the families involved in Saturday Sunday school. She's visited with families on

Thursday evening who have moved without notice by Saturday morning when she

comes by to pick up the children. Some kids have been placed in shelters to protect them from physical abuse. Others have been removed from their homes due to drug abuse. Some have been abandoned. Miss Linda offers a welcome hug when these missing children show up months later in another part of town.

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Miss Linda recalls seeing the headline news of a child who was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. When the

mother discovered the abuse, the boyfriend broke into a rage and beat her to death with a baseball bat. The child who witnessed this horrific scene was one of Miss Linda's Saturday Sunday school girls.

Saturday Sunday School offered loving comfort to this emotionally bruised girl and gave her a place of

refuge. When Miss Linda sees her kids harmed by the affects of physical abuse or drugs, she's prepared to bring the warmth of

healing love.

Drivers often face unusual circumstances as they make their way through their Saturday morning bus route. It's not uncommon for drivers to find children asleep when they arrive to pick them up. Many haven't eaten breakfast, some have uncombed hair, and others have obviously slept in their tattered and wrinkled clothes. Willing hands offer to tie shoes or to slip a snack into the hands of a child with a hungry tummy.

After the morning bus run, children pour into the church auditorium as the program moves into full swing. Lively music invites participation as the atmosphere of joy spreads, enticing the often hurting children to leave the cares of life behind for a time of refreshing.

Practical and Spiritual Keys

Through competitive games, kids learn to excel and reach beyond their self-made limitations. Prizes are common during game time, creating an opportunity for Miss Linda to emphasize the truth that if they're happy when someone else is blessed, they in turn will be blessed. If a child wins a prize, Miss Linda instructs everyone to point at the winner and shout, "I'm glad you won the prize!"

Although the core of Saturday Sunday school is to

Spokane



teach faith in Jesus Christ, Miss Linda touches the practical aspects of life and teaches basic morals some children have never learned. In a lighthearted yet meaningful way, she talks about honoring and obeying parents, honesty, and loving their neighbors.

The program never ends without inviting children to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Miss Linda says, "It's great when they invite Jesus into their lives because it shows they want more of God."

Miss Linda wants these children to fulfill their dreams of having a good home, a prosperous family, and a happy life. Miss Linda reinforces the reality that kids can fulfill their dreams if they're grounded in Jesus Christ and his Word.

Making A Difference

Kyle, who's struggled with drastic behavior difficulties since age three, started attending Saturday Sunday school at age five. When Kyle missed several Saturday programs, Miss Linda learned he'd been



admitted to a behavioral center for treatment. Although doctors suspected Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Kyle was diagnosed as bipolar. Kyle's mounting anger outbursts were caused by a chemical imbalance.

Kyle's mother says, "The support I received from Miss Linda and the Saturday Sunday school staff made a big difference in our lives." She warmly adds, "Kyle was once hospitalized for two months. During his stay, Miss Linda went out-of-her way to visit him at an out of state hospital. She sacrificed her personal time to stay in touch with Kyle and to encourage me during a very difficult time."

Through Saturday Sunday school, Kyle experienced God's love. Kyle's mother says, "Kyle talks non-stop about Saturday Sunday school. He loves the music and tries to teach the songs to me. The music makes him feel happy." With the help of his mother, teachers, correctional centers, and

Saturday Sunday school, Kyle's life is being transformed.

Five-year-old Samantha started coming to Saturday Sunday school with her older sister at age two. Diagnosed with leukemia, she faced medical struggles that required daily chemotherapy and 20 blood transfusions a week. Samantha's mother says Saturday Sunday school helped Samantha build her faith and trust Jesus as her healer. She says, "Saturday Sunday school brought a sense of normalcy to Samantha's life and has been a place of comfort for her."

Jesus Loves the Little Children

Miss Linda is passionate about her desire for children to know they're loved. Linda explains, "Many children don't know Jesus loves them and they need to know." She smiles as she continues, "These kids will impact future generations. These are the kids who won't have to go to the principal's office.

They're the ones who will say 'no' to drugs and immorality. They'll make a difference in our city."

What reward does Miss Linda receive from the endless hours she invests in the children? "My greatest reward is when children ask me to pray for them," she says. "These kids really do want God to work in their lives."

Miss Linda is rewarded with letters from children who attend Saturday Sunday school. When

asked about the letters, she opens her desk and pulls out a folder overflowing with food-stained letters, often written with barely legible crayon. The smudged, crumpled, and hard-to-read letters are part of Miss Linda's greatest treasure.

What is the future of Saturday Sunday school? Miss Linda says they could have 50 busses in 10 years. But she's quick to add, "If we only have the same 13 busses, I'll still be here." What keeps the program going? Love.

Jesus said, "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). As Miss Linda and her Saturday Sunday school team continue to welcome the little children in his name, the seeds planted in their hearts will grow and produce fruit that ministers hope and a future for generations to come. ■

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