



THE ONLINE COMMUNITY SERVING FALCON HEIGHTS, LAUDERDALE, LITTLE CANADA & ROSEVILLE, MN

RosevilleReview.com

Wednesday, July 15, 2009

Northern Voices celebrates 10 years

George Fairbanks
news editor

Wednesday, July 15, 2009



photos by Kate Garlock/Bulletin
Amanda Tocko asks her students (left to right) Ester Olakunle, Jameson Williams and Frank Schaffer to name a picture on the card, then asks them to speak sentences about the picture.

When Northern Voices opened its doors 10 years ago, a mere 10 hard of hearing children made up the student body. However, fast forward a decade and the nonprofit school is now bursting at the seams, with 50 flourishing students.

The school, which leases space from St. Michael's Lutheran Church on County Road B in Roseville, youngsters with hearing loss are taught to thrive in the hearing world by using spoken language.

Kristina Blaiser, the school's executive director, explained Northern Voices serves children from birth to age 5 with mild to profound hearing loss. It's the only non-profit school of its kind in the metro area.

"Families come from North Dakota and Wisconsin just for this school," Blaiser said.

The school, according to Blaiser, typically starts working with children when they're just three-months-old and by the time they leave Northern Voices roughly five years later, their language skills are often advanced beyond those of children of the same age without hearing issues.

When parents arrive at the school with a child just a few months old, the shock and sadness over a hard of hearing diagnoses is still apparent.

"There's definitely a grieving component," Blaiser said. "They're very unsure of what's going to happen."

She added parents are often crying when they come through the door and after a tour of the school where they see the children going about their normal routines they often ask their tour guide when they get to see the students with hearing loss, never suspecting they're already seeing those very students.

"They're really surprised," Blaiser noted.

Up until about 18 months, parents are on-hand with their children and the school's staff help the parents learn how to work with their children using plenty of talking and singing. These exercises, Blaiser said, help the parents realize their children will be able to function in the world as well as a child without hearing issues.

About 90 percent of the students at Northern Voices come from families without a person with hearing loss. Additionally, about 70 percent of the student body is considered profoundly deaf and most of those students use a cochlear implant, a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a person with hearing loss with a sense of sound.

Blaiser explained since Northern Voices opened its doors 10 years ago, technology in the hearing loss field has become rapidly more sophisticated, increasing the options for people with hearing loss and their families. Those advances in technology, Blaiser added, are part of the reason the school has been able to expand its enrollment.

Another reason for the growth, Blaiser said, is the fact that since July 2007 the state has mandated comprehensive hearing screening for all newborns.

"Now there's a much more consistent process," Blaiser noted.

The school plans to keep growing to meet expanding need, Blaiser said, in fact when the school recently set a three-year projection plan, it exceeded that goal in just 18 months.

Christine Ross, the school's director of development, explained Northern Voices meets its funding needs through a combination of grants, donations and a large annual golf tournament and silent auction at Bunker Hills. The school district also lent support.

"That's been very helpful," Ross said.

Like many nonprofits, the school has been hurt by the current economic downturn.

"We've seen a little bit of a decline in giving," she explained. "But we have a really good individual donor list."

Those donors are often people with a link to the school through one of its students.

As the school grows, Ross thinks its name and mission is starting to spread across the area.

"I think it's starting to do that," she said. "Word is getting out there."

To celebrate 10 years, Ross explained the school will hold a celebratory picnic on July 30 from 5 to 8 p.m. at the Foundation Pavilion in Roseville's