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First Presbyterian Church preschool director Becky Pfenninger laughs as she tells about her excitement of the church's preschool opening set for Jan. 13.

First Presbyterian adds classes to day care line-up

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

Color and sunlight fill the east-facing classroom at First Presbyterian Church. Color, sunlight — and bears.

“I just took down all my Christmas decorations,” said teacher Rose Ramirez. “Now, I’m getting out all the bear stuff.” In one corner of the room, a miniature tent houses a cuddly pink bear, while three other stuffed creatures wait outside. At the room’s midpoint, a library rack holds a plethora of bear titles: “Goldilocks,” “Brown Bear, Brown Bear,” and more. A panda poster

adorns the wall.

All that's missing, said Ramirez, is the students.

That's because First Presbyterian Church Childcare Center, open just a few months, will add preschool to its programs starting Jan. 13.

"We're still getting the word out," said director Becky Pfenninger. "We'll be able to sign up 14 children for each session, and we're really hoping parents will get involved."

Pfenninger and Ramirez are excited to add the last component to the childcare center, which transplanted from its former location when First Baptist Church decided to close its preschool and childcare program in August 2013.



"We've had people continuously calling to ask about preschool," said Pfenninger, who added that "getting everything up and running took some time, so this was really the earliest we could get things in place. We've been looking forward to that."

No one has been more excited than Ramirez, a former Head Start preschool teacher who said watching the earliest learners get the hang of basic skills is her passion.

“A lot of people, they say it takes too much patience with these children,” she said. “They’re learning everything from the start. Colors, alphabet, how to hold scissors and cut things. It’s all new to them. That’s what I love to see, the way they grow. It makes me happy.”

Though her former Head Start students are middle-school-age, Ramirez said she often meets them at the store.

“They’ll call me, ‘Miss Rose! Miss Rose!’ and I have to think really hard: Do I know them? But they remember me, and it lets me know, wow, teachers make a big impact.”

Pfenninger said she, too, enjoys the learning side of early childhood.

“It’s really a joy to see how young children learn,” she said. “I’m amazed, every year when we participate in training workshops, to learn new ideas of what to teach and how to teach, ways to use household materials and ordinary things in a new way. It’s exciting.”

Less enjoyable was the administrative set-up that came along with adding preschool to the day care. Pfenninger said the main challenge in the next two weeks will be getting forms and permission slips completed as new students enroll. Even so, Pfenninger said the licensure process was not burdensome.

“It’s actually very similar to day care requirements,” she said. “Basically, we’re just asked to demonstrate that we can ensure the safety and health of these children, and that we are able to work with them correctly.”

The preschool will help fill a gap in Liberal’s early-childhood services, noted Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, a member of the USD 480 board of education, member of First Presbyterian Church, and grandmother of one of its preschool students. In an interview conducted prior to the opening of the childcare center, she looked forward to the addition of preschool classes.

“We need preschools in Liberal, since First Baptist closed its preschool,” she said. “There are more than 100 children on the waiting list for Head Start, and there are also families who don’t meet the requirements for that program. They want preschool but there are no options for them. I’m really excited that this church has stepped up to help provide services the community needs.”

First Presbyterian CCC will offer two sessions of preschool each week: 9 to 11:30 a.m., and noon to 2:30 p.m. Each session will provide children with a snack, as required by law.

“We try to keep it small, simply and healthy,” Pfenninger said. “Usually it’s something like bananas or grapes, maybe crackers with peanut butter, things like that.”

Classes run Monday through Thursday, which allows teachers time to prepare the next week’s lessons. Some children may opt to participate in day care during days or times when preschool is not available, Pfenninger said.

Cost for the preschool sessions is \$160 per month. For more information, parents may contact Pfenninger or Ramirez at 624-1616.

For now, the preschool room remains empty, just 10 days before preschool officially begins. Pfenninger said she knows the need is real, but she’s still a little nervous.

“We need to get people involved, and make sure the community knows we’re here,” she said. “We still have a few families to contact.”

Until then, she added, “I’m just making sure my teachers are ready.”

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