

Carrie's Heart

Local organization brings new hope to children with special needs - at home and abroad

Written by Lorrie Crow Kimble | Select Photography by Adam Richards

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During a trip to the Houston Zoo as a teen, Carrie Conn experienced something that changed her life forever. She was a summer camp counselor for children with disabilities. "For the first time in my life, I experienced the stares of strangers as we enjoyed the zoo with our campers," she says. "I knew the campers were kids just like me, so it hurt my feelings seeing people's reactions."

Carrie continued to work with adults and children with disabilities in a variety of settings, specializing in working with children who are multiply disabled. She has worked as a special education teacher in Katy ISD for the past 14 years. In 2009, Carrie was given the opportunity to open a secondary program, Carrie's Heart, for medically fragile students. Carrie's Heart cares for children and families in the greater Houston area, and in Mexico, providing them with guidance, counseling, and other support.

It Takes a Village

Leading a program like Carrie's Heart is not done alone. "It requires a team approach involving teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, therapists, and families," Carrie acknowledges. One team member, Paige Siemers, is a parent of a child with special needs. Her 11-year-old daughter, Anna Kate, has cerebral palsy due to an injury at birth.

Siemers is the parent liaison and community relations board member for Carrie's Heart. She relates to other mothers who are also on this journey of raising a child with a disability. "We have a special bond that helps us get through things like

feeding tubes, breathing treatments, hours of therapy, scary hospital stays, and new medication," she says.

Phyllis Bell, another member of the "village," is a registered nurse with Katy ISD and serves as the co-chair of the medical advisory board. Bell recently returned from a mission trip to the Carrie's Casita Corazon (House of the Heart) in Mexico, where she assessed the medical condition of the children. "Having a nursing background helps me in assisting staff and volunteers and also working with the children and their families," she notes.

Joselito's Story

Although she cares for all of her children, Carrie says the ones in unstable homes are the ones who keep her up at night. "Pictures of Joselito were sent to me almost eight years ago," says Carrie. "I went to meet him and fell in love with a boy who has lived a life that we cannot even imagine."

Joselito was born with spina bifida, a condition that sometimes causes a portion of the spinal sac to protrude outside of the body. Joselito is paralyzed from the waist down and has limited use of his hands. "It is a miracle he did not die of infection," Carrie says. "His breathing and swallowing are compromised, but he talks and is aware."

When Joselito was 7 years old, his mother died, and Joselito was left to fend for himself. He lived alone for years in an old chicken coop, lying without clothes on a piece of



Katy ISD teacher and Carrie's Heart board member Nora Nasr works with Joselito



Carrie's Heart works with adults and children who have disabilities

Carrie Conn has worked as a special education teacher in Katy ISD for the past 14 years. Her organization cares for children and families in the greater Houston area, and in Mexico, by providing them with guidance, counseling, and support.



Carrie Conn with Valerie, who served as the inspiration for establishing Carrie's Heart

cardboard. Today, Joselito goes to Carrie's Casita three days a week for activities and therapy. "We also provide him with an in-home caregiver so that we know he is bathed and fed throughout the week," says Carrie. During her mission trips, Carrie says her favorite time is when Joselito sleeps over and always wants to sleep in her room. "We stay up late just talking," she says. "He is an amazing human being."

No Turning Back

Finding time is probably the toughest part of volunteering, Siemers admits, especially since her own daughter has had more physical challenges in the past few years. "When I'm away from [volunteering] for too long, I don't feel like myself," she says. "I start to have dreams about the Carrie's Heart kids because I worry about them."

Carrie is able to balance her career as a special education teacher with leadership in Carrie's Heart because each role inspires the other. "I am blessed to work in a school and in a district that has been super-supportive of the work that I do with my students," she says. "With that support, I am

able to provide my students with the care that they deserve." Besides, she says, "The look of joy on a child's face and tears of happiness from a mother who feels for the first time that she is surrounded by support and love makes it all worth it."

Bell adds, "You just make time! When you see children and their parents working so hard and facing such obstacles, your heart responds. Plus, once I met Carrie, I wasn't turning back." **KM**



LORRIE CROW KIMBLE was extremely touched by the compassion of Carrie's Heart. She plans to donate to the organization.



carriesheart.org

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