

Sitting on a chair designed for two year olds next to a large cardboard box that (this week) serves as a bakery in a child's imagination, Geraldine Fritchman of Easton feels right at home. In fact, there's no place she'd rather be than in the church basement that has been turned into an early learning center. After all, she's worked hard to get there.

It wasn't that long ago when Geraldine and her son, David, now 9, were getting by solely on Geraldine's wit, food stamps, and \$158 in welfare every 19 days. Six years later, 48-year-old Geraldine is dedicating her life to empowering children and parents who find themselves in a similar situation.

Geraldine works for ProJeCt of Easton Inc. teaching English as a Second Language to children in the Even Start program. Her greatest moment as a teacher came about a week ago when a little boy, who took months to utter his first words in English ("No Cleanup!"), slipped on a hand puppet and performed a short play with his teacher. The play ended with the boy's puppet telling Geraldine's puppet, "I love you."

Founded in 1993, and based on a federal program with the same name, Even Start is commonly referred to as a family literacy program, but it does more than just teach people how to read. "Even Start empowers families through comprehensive education," explains



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Janice D. Komisor, director of literacy for ProJeCt of Easton. "We aim to empower our participants to achieve their goals and develop their knowledge and potential so they may carry out their responsibilities as parents and family members, citizens and community members and workers."

ProJeCt is a United Way agency. United Way applauds all efforts to provide quality early-childhood education. United Way runs its own Program with the same goal called "Launching One Voice For Excellence."

"Launching One Voice for Excellence" involves the collaboration of 11 local

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organizations in a project funded by an \$88,000 grant from the Lucent Technologies Foundation, the charitable arm of Lucent Technologies, which awarded \$1 million in grants as part of a nationwide initiative to improve preschools in 2001. At the program's center is a belief that all children up to age 8 have a right to quality early-childhood learning experiences.

Geraldine came to Even Start in 1995 with the goal of earning a GED. While she was in class, half concentrating on her work and half worried about leaving her son, David, he learned how to play with others. His teachers also supported his emergent literacy skills. It must have worked, Geraldine reasons. David is now a fourth grader taking gifted classes at Forks Elementary School. She credits the Even Start Program, which she stuck with for her son's sake.

"I wanted him to know that there was more than that, I wanted to set a good example. I wanted my son to be proud of me," she said.

Through classes and home visits the Even Start program helps parents improve basic education skills, learn English, earn a GED, and enter college or the workforce. Even Start teaches parents to help their children succeed in school. Children become ready to learn by developing their cognitive, physical, and social skills. "School readiness begins with parent involvement," Komisor said.

Research suggests that 80 percent of the nation's children are spending up to 50 hours a week in poor or mediocre childcare or preschool programs. At the same time, brain research is confirming the important link between children's earliest experiences and their future educational success. A 1999 study described the formative preschool years as a "narrow window in time when the foundations for children's adult personalities and capabilities are laid down."

Meanwhile, each dollar spent on a quality pre-school education for one child saves \$7.16 in future taxpayers' money, including the cost of welfare and the justice system, according to the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation of Ypsilanti, Michigan, a nonprofit educational research organization.

About 70 percent of children whose mothers were college graduates were read aloud to every day in 1999, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Only 38 percent of children whose mothers did not complete high school were read to every day, the NCES said.

Geraldine's life experience supports these statistics.

Geraldine, one of nine children, grew up in downtown Easton during the 1950s and 1960s, in a home affected by divorce and poverty. Both of Geraldine's parents were bright, she said, but were forced to go to work to support their family. She said her father had an eighth grade education and her mother a sixth, or vice versa, she can't quite remember. But she can remember that there were no books or magazines around the house she grew up in, only newspapers that comprised the skin of her dolls.

Geraldine left school after the eighth grade to work in a Laundromat for \$1.40 per hour. "Back then, that's what people did," she deadpanned.

Geraldine later found a job as a waitress, which would pay her more in three nights than her peers made all week working in soot-filled factories.

When David was born she decided to quit waitressing in order to spend every waking minute with her child. They survived on the \$158 allowances until 1995, when a local welfare worker told her about ProJeCt of Easton's Even Start program and urged her to apply.

"To this day, I can tell you that I initially had no intention of completing the program," said Fritchman, who noted that low self-esteem was her main stumbling block. "But when I entered the program, they made me feel good about myself and showed me that I really can do this." And she did.

Geraldine knew, however, that the GED would not bring her much on its own. She realized the importance of further education and with ProJeCt's help, enrolled at a local community college.

Motivated to help parents who struggle as she did, Geraldine studied Early Childhood Education and Science. 3 1/2 years later, she had her degree.

"I wanted to give back," said Geraldine, "and I wanted to show others that they, too, can change their lives."

When ProJeCt advertised to hire an Early Childhood Teacher, Geraldine didn't hesitate to apply. She was hired as the lead teacher in Even Start's English as a Second Language Child Education Center. In this role, Geraldine dedicates her mornings to the children and her afternoons to visiting them and their parents at home.

Many of the children she teaches and mothers she meets remind Geraldine of her and her son before their participation in Even Start. Many of them, she feels, need the same lift she once did and she welcomes the opportunity to provide it. "When they're in a slump," she said, "I tell them about how I used to be in this program. This way they know that this is something that can be accomplished."