

Little Way School gives freedom to learn

By Trevor McNaboe
Staff Writer

Tucked away deep in Tiger along winding Bridge Creek Road sits Little Way School.

Nestled in a peaceful spot on the grounds of Camp Covecrest, with a wooden fence lining the playground, Little Way School is comprised of two buildings, one housing children from 3 years old to kindergarten in the Montessori program and the other for elementary school children.

"I fell in love with Montessori when my son went to school. I realized as a mom that I was always a different kind of mom. I always followed my child and helped him learn what he wanted to learn," said Gabriela Perez, director of Little Way School.

After her son finished Montessori, she went into training and became a teacher.

Perez decided to open up Little Way School nine years ago. She started by seeking out churches to allow her to use a classroom so that she could offer education at a lower price.

"Montessori is extremely expensive and it broke my heart that only the privileged could afford it," Perez said.

One misconception Perez said she's encountered about Montessori schools is that it's an

education free-for-all. However, Perez believes children have the freedom to choose what to work on, but it is a freedom within limits.

"Just like the banks of a river, if the banks are too loose, the river overflows and if it is too tight, it also overflows," Perez said.

Traditional schooling comes from a uniform approach that's held up to standards, which Perez believes limits children. Instead, she allows children to choose what to work on from the lesson plans she develops.

Emily Neidle leads the instruction next door at the elementary school. Neidle is in her first year as a teacher, something she has enjoyed.

"It's really neat to see how three grades can be in the same classroom together and learn from each other," Neidle said.

She is certified to teach children from first to fifth grade, however, she never thought she would be teaching three grades at once.

One of the issues she overcame was how to incorporate things for a wide array of students. The answer — lesson rotation.

"While I'm teaching one group, the others will be participating in free-choice activities such as games for math that will reinforce what they previously learned," Neidle said.



Trevor McNaboe/The Clayton Tribune

Little Way Elementary School Teacher Emily Neidle teaches her class of 12 students ranging from first to fourth grade. The Little Way School is located off of Bridge Creek Road.

The first year teacher said a normal day can be described as busy with the rotation between lessons and reinforcement of the lessons with activities. Nonetheless, it is something that gives her great joy.

Every week there are challenges for Neidle in trying to put together a lesson plan for the students who have different educational requirements for their different grades.

"There is some connection between the grades, so I try and find that connection," Neidle said. "This week we're talking

about civil rights so all three grades talk about one person involved in civil rights. So I'm just combining them all."

Before coming to teach at Little Way School, Neidle graduated from Loyola University in Maryland with a degree in elementary education and a minor in special education.

Education was something she had a passion for growing up as her mother taught for more than 30 years. Following graduation, she was a missionary in Tiger with Life Teen at Camp Covecrest and worked with

retreat groups. That's how she connected with Perez.

"It's a very personal school. I have the opportunity to really look at my students needs and meet them," Neidle said.

There are a total of 30 students — 18 in the Montessori school and 12 in the elementary school.

While many schools seek to lower the number of students per teacher, Perez said the more, the better. Her approach to individual lessons includes having students helping one another.

"Children remember better what they have learned by teaching it rather than learning it first hand. So they practice and practice and practice and eventually teach it," Perez said.

In the nine years the school has been opened, there has been a steady increase in enrollment, which started out with just three students.

Both Perez and Neidle thoroughly enjoy the job and the impact they have made on their students.

Perez said when their students are ready to leave, they try to steer them to Tallulah Falls School and Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School due to similar ideologies.

For more information on Little Way School, visit its website at littlewayschool.com.