

Cats... Prayers for and Others

Debra G. Ball-Kilbourne

Since 1999, Sidewalk Sunday School has been a creative, life-changing summer project for poor and marginalized children in several cities of North Dakota. On a given weekday afternoon or evening, a brightly painted 6x12 foot enclosed trailer pulls into a public park or neighborhood and the music begins. A fold-down stage, measuring 6x10 feet is a part of the trailer.

Platform leaders and Sidewalk Shepherds welcome arriving children. Children gather on plastic tarps—but they don't sit for long! Once the SWSS program has begun, children know they will play games, participate in wacky skits, learn Bible verses and stories, make crafts, pray and grow in their Christian faith. The prayers of children—many of whom have never been a part of a church before—are remark-

able! They pray for everything and everyone—hurt cats, dying grandparents, or parents. Recently, a child quietly shared that he was worried about his dad because “we don't know where he is; he said he'd call, but we haven't heard. . .” Prayer teams pray for the children and their requests outside of the presentation. SWSS is a vital program, designed to meet the kids in their comfort zones, in their neighborhood, and on their “turf.”

The Dakotas Conference SWSS ministry began as the dream of a single District Superintendent, Dwight Meier, who had learned of the impact SWSS had made in Indiana. Billie Fidlin, a strong advocate of SWSS nation-wide, trained a pool of volunteers—our first SWSS shepherds, prayer teams, and two platform leaders. Initial funds came from six participating churches and limited district programming funds. Christian educators and pastors drove to trailer courts and low-income housing units during peak “kid time” and chose SWSS sites. Initial sites included a school playground, a local park, and a grassy area near a community swimming pool. Because the vast majority of children walk or bike to SWSS, we determined that a four-block radius around the site was our “market area.” Visitation teams walked the SWSS areas many times during the course of a sum-

mer, inviting children and becoming familiar with their families.

And what happened after that first summer? SWSS became a “baby that walked before we were ready!” Communities quickly grasped the impact SWSS could have and clamored for SWSS to be a part of their community's summertime ministries. During our second summer, SWSS expanded to include 7 communities and many sites. A second trailer was created for use in the western part of North Dakota and additional platform presenters joined the staff. United Methodist Women groups supported the SWSS ministry and began saving craft supplies and donating money for school kits and t-shirts.

To manage our rapid growth, a SWSS Coordinator was needed. Shirley Boom, a newly retired elementary school principal and passionate leader of children came to our rescue. For two years, Shirley has promoted SWSS during the winter months. She enlists, trains and supports platform presenters and shepherds, and manages the rapid growth of SWSS so that quality will not be sacrificed.

What began as a dream has blossomed into reality, bringing the story of Jesus into the lives of children. □

INTERESTED IN BEGINNING A SIDEWALK SUNDAY SCHOOL?

You may wish to contact one of the following:

Ms. Shirley E. Boom,
Dakotas Conference SWSS Coordinator
C/O Friendship UMC
3910 25th St. South, Fargo, ND 58104

Ms. Billie Fidlin
Desert Southwest Conference SWSS
1550 East Meadowbrook Ave. Phoenix, AZ 85014



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