

Bethlehem Center Marl

By PAT BORDEN GUBBINS
Staff Writer

The staff at Bethlehem Center gets regular insight into the richness of the human spirit, even amid poverty and loss.

Jean Willis, a staff member at the United Methodist Church mission off Remount Road, recalled a bad day she had not long ago.

"I live this privileged life, and I was feeling down," she said. "Then I overheard one of our seniors praying with the Sunshine Club, the group for the blind that meets here.

"He was saying, 'Lord, a lot of us can't walk. Some of us can't hear. Some of us can't do much of anything. None of us can see. But we can all speak and praise Your name.'"

Hearing that prayer put Willis' own problems in perspective.

Today, Bethlehem Center celebrates its 50th anniversary of tending human needs as well as bolstering the human spirit.

Although the center primarily serves residents in the Southside, Brookhill and Wilmore neighborhoods, people of all ages from around the county benefit, including the 384 children enrolled in the Head Start program based there.

Willis has coordinated three celebratory events — a Sept. 15 community picnic attended by several hundred people, a Sept. 30 open house for United Methodist churches in the Charlotte area and tonight's banquet at the Grady Cole Center. About 400 or 500 invited guests are expected to attend.

The guest speaker will be Lucy Gist, director of the Bethlehem Center for 16 years. She left 11 years ago for New York, where she oversees about 70 Bethlehem Centers around the country.

The cheerful, bustling day-care center at the Charlotte mission bears her name. It is a place where up to 60 children — most of them from single-parent homes — can stay from 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., receiving love, attention and learning.

Jackie Conley serves as church-agency coordinator. She sees regular evidence of Bethlehem Center's influence.

But this summer, as a counselor for children in the first through third grades at Camp Good Shepherd in Asheboro, she was even more deeply impressed.

"These were children who had



Boyd



Willis

never been out of the inner city,"



Conley

she said. "They had never seen a mountain before. They were ecstatic. They talked to me about how peaceful it was, how they'd like to bring their families and live there, where it is so quiet and there

are no gunshots at night."

Doug Boyd, director at Bethlehem Center since 1978, sees the mission providing the resources people need to help themselves. "Community self-help and involvement," he said. "I think there is a true spirit of that here."

Bethlehem Center began in Charlotte's former Brooklyn neighborhood, started by a group of Methodist women in 1940. The original building was on North Caldwell Street. When Brooklyn was razed and its people displaced by urban renewal, Bethlehem Center moved, too.

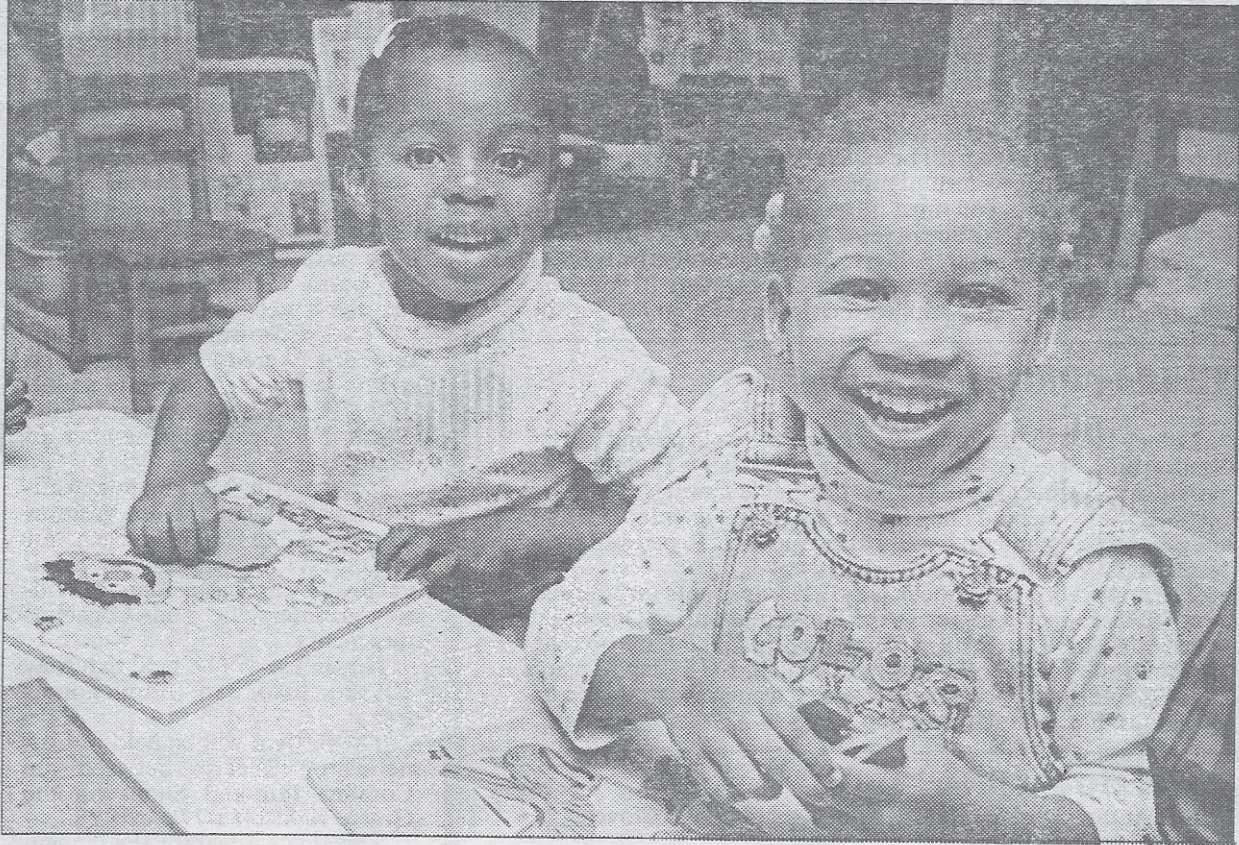
The present two-story brick building went up at 2705 Baltimore Ave. in 1957.

Since then, Bethlehem Center's programs have expanded to include an after-school tutorial



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ks 50 Years Of Caring For Others



TOM FRANKLIN/Staff

Brittany Peoples, 4, (left) and Latravia Love, 3, work with puzzles at the Bethlehem Center.

and enrichment program; summer camp for the young and old; an alcohol education and prevention program aimed at minority women; neighborhood improvement programs; monthly luncheons for human service agency members; and emergency assistance programs for the elderly, disabled and families with young children.

"We find the resources," said Boyd. "We teach someone how to improve their quality of life. I attribute a lot to the board, to the

staff and to the great spirit of Charlotte.

"There are a lot of those in Charlotte who want to share and make sure the quality of others' lives go up with theirs. They don't just pray about it on Sundays — they give resources and manpower."

As part of the 50th anniversary celebration, the board of directors in February established a goal of raising \$50,000 for an endowment so the center's programs will continue.

See the Notable Neighbors pages for a profile of Bethlehem Center volunteer Jim Evans.

Want To Donate?

To contribute to the Bethlehem Center Endowment Fund, send checks made out to the fund to the Foundation for the Carolinas, 301 S. Brevard St., Charlotte, N.C. 28202.