

## **Forum Oakmont**

*By Yvonne Frauenfelder*

### **Labor of love**

For 34 years a largely invisible but extraordinary successful and unique effort has taken place at Oakmont.

Around sixty ladies congregate faithfully two hours a week on Monday morning from 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM at the West Recreation Center. They gather to construct visual aids to assist blind, visually impaired, and otherwise challenged children to define, distinguish, and slowly master everyday concepts that for the seeing are taken for granted.

On a crisp Monday morning I found myself in the middle of an arts and crafts workshop. At long rectangular tables sat dozens and dozens of busy ladies cutting, pasting and adorning pre-addressed pages of heavy paper. Each leaf, both imprinted in Braille and correspondingly and lovingly hand lettered, features a different learning experience for the young students.

I was fascinated by the expansive and varied application of symbols to impart knowledge about the world and the fields of learning through the aid of tactile elements.

From alphabet cards comparing our Arabic letters to the shorthand of Braille, to the discernment of geometric shapes, and the distinction of big versus little, long versus short, wide against narrow and smooth against rough, both concrete and abstract elements were represented.

The more difficult concepts ask the student to define what is the meaning of above and below, curved or straight, few and many, off or on, inside and outside, twice as tall, and up or down.

Math and geometry were represented by numerical and sequential order, with the functions of adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing plus fractions, circles, triangles, squares and rectangles.

The creativity with which the touchable pieces are chosen was wonderful.

There were animals to trace and fish, flowers inside and outside of flowerpots, cones with and without ice cream, leaves and stars and hearts, all in different fabrics such as granular versus smooth, knit versus woven. From seersucker, to felt, to silk and leather, the artisans made sure that the greatest variety of textures and shapes would help with the discrimination and memory skills of the blind children.

Once all the pages are filled they are gathered in booklets of six to seven pages. The book covers are made from cardboard lined with remnants of

wallpapers, obtained from paint and wallpaper shops. Cloth remnants are seldom in short supply, with the members of the workshop cleaning out their closets periodically.

Fern Harger, the indefatigable co-chair and member of 28(!) years explained to me that the Visual Aids workshop was the creation of Winifred Thiltgen, who conceived of the idea from a visiting artist in Oakmont three decades ago. She then visited schools for the blind and inquired about ways and means to assist them. Winifred passed away only two years ago, at the biblical age of 101.

Her work lives on and is now distributed to teachers of the blind across five continents. Oakmont's labor of love is singular around the globe. To everybody's understanding, the local effort is the only one in existence.

Although there is a website today, initially it was through word of mouth and teachers' conventions that the information spread around the world.

Booklets are sent to places as far flung as Tajikistan in the former Soviet Union, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Australia and Africa, and, naturally, all over the United States.

Recipient teacher can order any number of booklets (80,000 have been sent so far) which they receive free of charge. No postage needs to be paid since there exists an international agreement for free shipping of such humanitarian efforts.

Even though all the booklets are handmade, the art of brailleing (writing in Braille via special typewriter) was mastered by three ladies of the workshop, one of them even being certified by the Library of Congress. Moving with the times, there are now computer programs which facilitate the transcriptions.

But no technological advances will ever be able to replicated what this dedicated group of ladies has been doing by hand for the last 34 years.

As I close my eyes and trail my fingertips over the constructs, shapes and textures of the images, I think of the thousands of visually and otherwise impaired children for whom these booklets have become windows to the world. A world they cannot see, but, as most of us agree, feel that much more intimately.

Thanks to the ladies (and some husbands) of Oakmont's Visual Aids Workshop, thousands and thousands more will be the beneficiaries.