

TRIBUNE ALLIED HEALTH

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Allied Health Profile

Therapy for mind and body —from the heart

By Katherine Seigenthaler

Sixteen-month-old Kelsey Cafyn walks and tumbles about in a playroom at the Pathways Center for Children recently, looking for all the world like any tireless, exuberant toddler practicing a newfound skill.

But for the PTs, OTs and STs at Pathways, every ball Kelsey grabs with her right hand or kicks with her right foot, and every word she utters using muscles on the right side of her face represent hours of painstaking work and care. For Kelsey's parents, who learned definitively that she had cerebral palsy affecting the right side of her body shortly before the child's first birthday, every step she takes is a minor miracle.

"The staff here is phenomenal," her mother, Leslie, says of the therapists at Pathways—9,000 square feet of space in a Glenview office building dedicated to helping children with neurological, sensory-motor, learning or communication disorders reach their maximum potential. "When I first brought Kelsey here, her right hand was as hard and lifeless as a rock. They've done wonders with her."

A non-profit rehabilitation center that opened its doors in 1985, Pathways is considered a special place by all affiliated with it.

Gay Girolami, MS, PT, who has been the director of Pathways since it opened, attributes the center's success and sterling reputation to a number of important factors.

First and foremost, she says, "is the caliber of the staff. We've done a great job of hiring people. Even though we've hired many directly out of school, it was because we recognized that they had enthusiasm, a team approach and initiative."

Pathways' 15 therapists also work diligently with the families of the children they treat, and rarely conduct a therapy session with a child unless at least one parent is present, says Girolami, 43.

Additionally, the therapists and support staff continually crusade to educate parents and physicians about early warning signs that a child might have a neuro-developmental disorder.

"The sooner we can get a child into therapy," Girolami says, "the less we have to worry about unlearning bad movement habits—and the better chance that child has of becoming as functional as possible."

Indeed, a video recently produced by the Pathways Awareness Foundation called "Is My Baby OK?" (see review below) urges parents to trust their instincts if they think something might be wrong, and physicians to observe children more carefully during routine examinations.

Pathways' goal is to prevent the sort of frustrating experience that Glenview resident Cafyn, 30, went through before Kelsey was diagnosed.

"When I told her pediatrician that I was concerned



Tribune photo by Charles Oppold

Pathways' Director Gay Girolami (left) works with Ryan Testa and his mother, Kathy.

Kelsey wasn't using the right side of her body, he fuffed it off and said she was just going to be a lefty," Cafyn says. "Months passed, and she started crawling awkwardly, and her right shoulder was drooping. But at 10½ months, he was still telling me Kelsey was going to be a lefty. Finally, I took her to see a neurologist, and within five minutes he told me she had cerebral palsy."

But, today, thanks to PT Rich Conti and others who work with Kelsey, her future looks as bright as possible.

We treat each child as an individual," says Conti, 36, as he helps Kelsey put on her shoes and socks. "Everyone has their own particular problems and personalities, so we watch what they're interested in, what they want to play with, and work the therapy around that."

Pathways treats about 175 children weekly, from infants to teenagers living throughout the Chicago area, and an additional 25 on a more irregular basis, Girolami says.

"We've never had to refuse anyone, regardless of ability to pay, and we've never had a waiting list," Girolami says. "We've just hired more therapists."

The center receives some state funding, according to business manager Anne Hogan, but is primarily supported by its founders, Patrick and Shirley Ryan, and other private donors.

Three years ago, several parents of children at Pathways started Family Fest, now an annual picnic held every August. Though primarily a social event, it also has evolved into a fundraiser for the center.

Northbrook resident Diane DiBenedetto, one of the fest's originators, has a 4-year-old son Michael, who has cerebral palsy.

"I have so much respect for the therapists here," says DiBenedetto, 36, explaining one of the reasons she has become so involved with Pathways. "Yes, they do the jobs they are paid to do, and they do them well. But nobody pays them to love your