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NEWS RELEASE

UD PARTNERSHIP WITH ERMA'S HOUSE MARKS THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF SUCCESS

DAYTON, Ohio — It epitomizes the phrase "win-win."

For three years, a volunteer/service learning partnership between the University of Dayton and the Erma's House Family Visitation Center has generated enormous benefits to UD students as well as thousands of family members in the Miami Valley, according to program coordinators.

And as the program heads into its fourth year, UD's Sandy Taylor, assistant professor of social work, and Peggy Seboldt, program manager at Erma's House, are enthusiastic about the promise of continued success.

The program works by providing students — most of whom come from Taylor's "Child Abuse and Neglect" social work course — with a service learning opportunity for academic credit by volunteering at the center. Erma's House, which opened in October 1997 to provide a comfortable and cordial atmosphere for supervised visitation between children and their noncustodial parents, relies heavily on the volunteers who serve as visit monitors and in clerical and other capacities.

"If not for the University of Dayton students, we would not be able to provide services to some of our families who need them," said Seboldt, who recently conducted a daylong volunteer training class for 27 students at the family visitation center, located at 1024 Brown St. in Dayton. "They've been wonderful. They're very open, willing and committed to learning, and they're very compassionate and enthusiastic. We've been very pleased with their commitment to the program."

Training for students and other volunteers includes the basics, such as tours of the house and becoming familiar with the house rules for families, but there are also lessons in psychology and social work.

"We teach our volunteers that they have to be objective, because it's hard to stay neutral when you're dealing with some of these issues — especially those involving domestic violence,"

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Seboldt said. "There is no strict set of guidelines that defines what makes a good parent.

"Volunteers also need to be sensitive to and understanding of the differences in the families we serve, so we give them time to become familiar with the backgrounds of our families and understand how people get into the social services system."

Erma's House facilitates an average of 35 to 40 visits each week, and client referrals come from the Montgomery County Children Services Board, from juvenile and domestic relations courts in Montgomery County and from other counties which don't have a similar facility.

Seboldt said very few student volunteer candidates opt out of the program after training. Of those who do, the reasons typically fall into one of two very diverse categories — some decide the program won't adequately meet their learning needs, others are sometimes confronted by painful personal issues similar to those discussed during training.

For those who decide to become visit monitors, training also includes several hours observing other monitors in visitation sessions. When they are ready, volunteers are assigned to specific families — keeping the same monitor with the same family contributes to the feeling of consistency and comfort for the clients, Seboldt said.

"Our experience with UD has been very rich and we truly appreciate our relationship," Seboldt added, explaining that even before the center opened, University student and faculty members volunteered for a variety of tasks from housepainting to helping create a computerized monitoring report system.

Taylor said she has been equally pleased with the service learning program because of the benefits to her students. While participation is not mandatory, 33 percent of her 75 students taking "Child Abuse and Neglect" this semester volunteered for the program.

"It's such a great experience for them, and it fits so tightly with their course work," Taylor said. "This is real world stuff, and the staff at Erma's House is absolutely wonderful because they provide the training, they provide security and they make themselves accessible to our students. This is our only service learning site, and we couldn't ask for a better situation."

Erma's House was created as a result of a task force on child welfare developed by Montgomery County commissioners and led by Brother Raymond Fitz, S.M., president of the University, Taylor said.

Erma Bombeck, a 1949 graduate of UD, was beloved as one of the most popular columnists of all time. Her syndicated column, which chronicled the joys and challenges of family life, was carried in 700 newspapers prior to her death of kidney disease in 1996.