

LEARNING— WITH LOVE

I miss Karen's tousled blond hair and her habitually dirty face. It would be good to hear her squeaky voice again, singing songs of Jesus' love. She was special to us all.

"Why do you always hold Karen?" asked Terry.

"Because she needs it," was the answer that satisfied.

When Karen came to our one-room, eight-grade school she was a tiny six-year-old wearing a ragged dress and cowboy boots, spewing out words that belonged in a tavern. Big seventh and eighth graders soon learned to fear Karen's pointed boots and long fingernails.

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She was a blur of constant motion due to medication for epilepsy and lunches of soda pop, candy, and Hostess cupcakes.

Karen tried hard to show how tough she was. But sometimes her outer shell crumbled, revealing a loving softness that could melt hearts. Saying, "Here's sumthun' fur you, Mrs. Senier," Karen would plop down on my desk the remains of a scrunched-up Snickers candy bar, then dash out to play.

Her insecurity and maladjustment made learning seem impossible, but she faced the challenge, struggling bravely with words and numbers.

Karen came to us because no other school wanted her.

Her parents called me to their home to discuss enrolling Karen in our school. "She causes everyone trouble," sighed her weary 60-year-old father. "We're not members of your church, but won't you take her anyway?" A tone of plead-

ing entered his voice. His sad eyes, deeply furrowed brow, and well-worn hands gave evidence of years of hard labor.

His wife sighed heavily, "We have to put her somewhere."

Accepting responsibility for a problem student one month into my trouble-riddled first year of teaching seemed impossible. How could I handle this untamed little girl along with precocious Randy, slow-learning Fred, insecure Nancy, and pants-wetting Teddy? Each one of my dozen students seemed to require huge amounts of individualized attention. How could I add another and even greater problem? I tried to find words to suggest they try elsewhere, but the roar of a motorcycle drowned me out.

In stormed their 18-year-old son, Karen hot on his heels. She verbally thrashed him in her squeaky voice, "You promised! You always say you're going to

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take me and then never do it! You're a liar!" She punctuated her scolding with a swift kick to Dan's leg.

Dan turned and, grabbing her roughly, warned, "Karen, you leave me alone or you'll wish you had never lived!"

Unmoved by this outburst, the parents merely looked the other way as they puffed on cigarettes. Dan stomped across the cold linoleum floor and into the kitchen, Karen trailing and reviling him all the way.

The front door opened again, and in came another teenager, this time a slight 16-year-old girl with sad brown eyes and mousy hair.

"Hello," she whispered timidly, trying to make herself invisible as she slipped toward the back of the house.

Returning my attention to the dismal couple across from me I heard myself murmur, "Yes, we'll take Karen."

My legs shook with tension as I climbed into my car. Someone would have to help me with Karen! How many times could I call on the departmental secretary of the conference before he got upset? I hadn't even met the classroom supervisor! Would she be willing to be involved? "God, help me!" I sighed as I turned the ignition key.

Karen's first year at school was anything but ordinary. Her hyperactivity taxed my coping skills. My discipline from biting, kicking, and pinching seemed less effective than some of my older students' more unorthodox solutions. Her constant flow of gutter language continued, though somewhat abated.

But a miracle began the day the other students and I "adopted" Karen as *ours*.

Sandy, my oldest student, showed me the key to Karen—unconditional love. It was one of those days. The lower grades demanded attention as they tried to assemble a model of Noah's ark. At the same time, the upper grades not so quietly waited for me to begin their class. Karen alternately pulled on my skirt and ran up and down the aisles chattering. Suddenly, Sandy grabbed Karen and held her firmly on her lap, rocking back and forth and murmuring in her ear. Karen struggled briefly, then relaxed as she snuggled against Sandy. It was the first time I had seen anyone actively show Karen affection.

Karen had missed her share of love. Her dad was too worn out to give her any attention. Her mother was too busy and

ill, her brother and sister too involved in their own problems. The school children were too intent on defending themselves against Karen's fingernails and cowboy boots to be concerned with her needs. Most people saw her as an obnoxious nuisance. And me? I had worked so diligently at filling her mind that I hadn't noticed her empty heart.

I began a personal "Love Karen" crusade. At first I was the one to hug Karen when she clamped her hand over her mouth to halt an offending word. I patted her on the back when she excelled at a game without cheating, and held her close when she skinned her knee.

But love is contagious. Soon most of the children found ways to show love to Karen. They began to cheer her on as she

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overcame her obstacles—to life and to learning.

When Karen had mastered a few words from her primer, I announced to the class, "Please clear your desks. Karen has a surprise for you!" Karen's smudged face glowed with pride as she began reading her first story.

"Good for you!" "We're proud of you!" the children praised her. The excitement from all the attention and the sugar from the "Congratulations, Karen" cake didn't help her hyperactivity, but it did wonders for her self-esteem.

As the year wore on we established an important tradition—storytime. Just after noon break the children would settle down for a story—the older ones at their desks drawing, carving soap, or just relaxing, the younger ones clustered around my chair. Karen always perched on my lap as I read.

"Karen's asleep," someone would whisper. Looking at her tension-free face and feeling the heaviness of her relaxed body assured me of the value of this tradition. These moments, free from the strain of school and her increasingly ugly home life, gave her a crucial sense of

stability and acceptance.

A year later a more grown-up Karen still occasionally availed herself of my "lap-therapy" when things became especially turbulent at home.

On Saturdays Karen's parents worked. A neighbor looked in on her occasionally. After persistent begging and determined foot-stomping, Karen received permission to walk the block to attend our Sabbath school.

"I serve a risen Saviour. He's in the world today . . ." Her squeaky voice happily sang her favorite song, unaware that a tragedy lay waiting at home.

After church, entering the silent house, Karen found a grisly scene. Her sister lay on the floor, her head partially blown away. Despondent over a shattered romance, she had committed suicide.

This horrible shock, compounded by other emotional traumas, created in Karen a severe anxiety state for which I had no expertise. The following year Karen attended a school for emotionally disturbed children.

While preparing her school records for transfer, I recalled her disruptive introduction to our school and the changes wrought by our acceptance of her. But there hadn't been enough time to complete the metamorphosis.

However, underlying my tangled feelings about unfinished business with Karen was satisfaction with the progress we had made. Love had made a difference. Love had conquered many problems.

Later that summer, I took a course in the psychology of exceptional children. As I read the textbook, a statement brought back memories of Karen. "Theoretically the end goals for emotionally disturbed children are the same as those for normal children. . . . Making the child feel adequate, hopeful, and unafraid in the group teaching experience." These goals may be readily achieved in a classroom that fosters close personal relationships—a loving atmosphere like that of a family.

I returned to my classroom determined to dish out large scoops of love to each of my students. Some of my resolutions and ideas might not work but I knew that "love therapy" would. Truly, as Ellen G. White wrote, "Love . . . is the basis of true education."—*Education*, p. 16. □