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SALIDA, COLORADO — WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021 • VOLUME 40, NUMBER 37

Son Shine Inn preschool educators retire

by **Arlene Shovald**
Special to The Mail

Thirty five years ago, the late Betty Blackwell saw a need for a Christian day care and preschool in the community and Temple Baptist Church established Son Shine.

Karen Swaro was hired as a teacher in November of 1989 and Sheryl Knight-Lee was hired as a teacher in September of 1994.

When Blackwell announced she was retiring in 1998 Swaro became the director and a year later Knight-Lee followed as co-director.

Now with 31 years at Son Shine Inn for Swaro and 27 years for Knight-Lee, the two are retiring. Their last day is May 31, when the school year ends.

“We’ve grown into a close friendship over the years and even recently there are people who thought we were sisters,” Swaro laughed. “Some people have called Son Shine Inn the “two sisters day care.”

Son Son Inn is a Christian academic based preschool, serving children from age 2½ to 12 and hosting as many as 30 kids at a time.

“Our primary goal is to introduce Jesus to them and it has been a blessing to be able to do that,” Swaro said.

The two soon-to-be retirees are now working with their second generation in some families. Things have changed a lot since Swaro and Knight-Lee began their

careers with Son Shine Inn. The biggest change has been technology.

“Everything seems to be technology driven now and we like to encourage creativity and imagination,” Swaro said.

“One of my favorite things has been teaching Spanish,” Knight-Lee said. “And we have both loved that “aha” moment when the kids got whatever it was we are trying to get across.”

Working with hundreds of kids over 30 years, there have naturally been some funny incidents.

One year the students couldn’t get the teachers names straight and instead of addressing them as teachers Karen and Sheryl they were called teachers Sharon and Carol.

“We finally gave up trying to correct them,” Knight-Lee laughed.

Another funny incident was when one of the students asked how old Knight-Lee was in dog years. That evolved into a math problem.

Special moments have included Christmas plays and graduation when the preschoolers moved on to kindergarten.

Both agreed that work has been a joy.

“Coming to work with the kids just makes you smile,” they said.

State regulations have also changed since Son Shine Inn opened and COVID-19 restrictions have affected them as well.



Photo by Arlene Shovald

Sheryl Knight-Lee, left, and Karen Swaro, co-directors of Son Shine Inn preschool and day care, are retiring at the end of the school year.

“By 10:15 a.m. we’ve already washed the kids’ hands five times,” Knight-Lee said. “Our hands are raw. Taking temperatures is also required and every night we have to clean all the toys including the ones outdoors.”

Transporting children ended this year, there has been limited interaction with parents and the two-to three -year-olds are kept separate from the four- and five-year-olds.

In spite of the COVID-19 induced changes in the past year, though, upcoming retirement is bittersweet for “Teacher Karen and Teacher Sheryl.”

Swaro plans to enjoy gardening and travel, particularly visiting their son and grandchildren they haven’t seen for a year because of COVID-19.

Knight-Lee has no plans other than “I don’t want to sit.”

They thanked the church for trusting them and are pleased that Betty Blackwell had the foresight 35 years ago to see the need for Christian day care.

“It’s bittersweet, to be sure,” said Temple Baptist Pastor John Myers. “I’m excited for Karen and her retirement but sad we are losing such an excellent director. It’s always hard

to replace such fine people as Sheryl and Karen but we will and the school will continue with the same standards of excellence as it has always had under Karen.

“Thirty-five years ago when the school started, Betty Blackwell recognized the need for preschool and daycare in Salida and that need is as great now as it was then, if not more so. We are in the process of receiving resumes for the director position. If anyone desires to send a resume regarding that position they can send information to Temple Baptist Church, 509 F Street, Salida, CO 81201.”

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