



VENICE Gondolier Sun

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Kids find ‘buddies,’ fun while caregivers take a break

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The children sat on the floor, surrounding the special guest, watching him get dressed in his clown costume.

They were captivated when he applied his makeup, one color at a time, and then put on a large, red nose. Chuck Sidlow knew he had his audience in the palm of his hand.

“He is just wonderful with the children,” said Jean McAdam, a Venice resident and one of the program coordinators at Venice Presbyterian Church. “He really knows how to capture and hold the interest of the children.”

While his wife, Noriko, played the piano, the retired professional clown continued to entertain the children for almost an hour. Chuck and his wife are from Circus Sarasota.

It’s not unusual for a clown to entertain children, but this audience was a special one. Once a month, caregivers of kids with special needs can get a break from their responsibilities. The children spend three hours finding new friends, playing games, learning new crafts, creating



PHOTO COURTESY OF VENICE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Circus Sarasota Clown, Chuck Sidlow, entertains Jenna Lowenstein during the Buddy Break program at Venice Presbyterian Church.

music and listening to special guests like Chuck Sidlow, circus clown.

This program, called “Buddy Break,” meets one Saturday a month, with “Buddies,” adult

volunteers from the church who have had special training. Each Buddy is assigned one child, called VIP (Very Important Person). The children have special needs which include any

physical, cognitive, medical or hidden disability, chronic or life-threatening illness, or those who are medically fragile. The VIPs and their siblings (who may also participate in the program) range in age from 3 to 16 years.

The people who are special guests at the Buddy Break program are from the community. Sherry Jenkins, a teacher and a Venice resident, performed as a magician under the name of “Red, White, and Blue, Miss Susy Q.” Four firemen from the Venice Fire Department drove in two trucks to talk to the children about safety and then let the children climb in the fire trucks. Mother Goose, JoAnn Lize, from the Venice Library intrigued the children with old-time stories. Lois Weeks, a Venice Presbyterian Church member, played her harp one day, and then let the children play with the strings.

The guests are different each month, but there is one thing that remains constant: Individual rooms that are filled with fascinating things. The children can visit the rooms and stay as long as they want. For example, there is one room

called the “Wanna Be Room,” which is where the children can dress up in costumes, hats, accessories and pretend to be whoever they “wanna be” that day. One of the Buddies, Charlotte Warner, made many of the costumes.

Another room is called the “Movement Room,” where there are balls, balloons, jump ropes, parachute play, and a large, long, red tunnel to crawl through. “The Joyful Musicmakers Room” is where the children can explore all kinds of musical instruments. Then there is the “Crafting Room” where there are many supplies to make special projects. There is even a “Quiet Room” where a child can have down time with a Buddy.

Buddy Break started at Venice Presbyterian Church last May with five children. Today there are 18. Similar programs can be found at churches in Tampa and Orlando.

“We welcome everyone telling their friends and neighbors about our program,” said Rev. Chris Romig, pastor of the church. “Children with special needs and their siblings are all welcome.”