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Activist's life left children in the light

In the foyer of the immaculate child-care center is a bronze bust of Mary Tyler Freeman Cheek McClenahan, the local activist for whom the center is named.

Near her likeness are a black doll and a white doll, several figurines of angels, and stacks of "Free Hug" coupons. On a nearby wall is a photo of McClenahan surrounded by more than

two dozen children, wearing the brightest smile in the group.

But the defining quality of the facility, which opened in June 1990, is its airiness.

Light floods the building, from the win-

dows that line the hallways to the cathedral skylights in each classroom.

"She always felt the children should be in light," said Malinda C. Nicholson, the center's coordinator. "The building is full of glass because she felt no children should be in the dark."

Nicholson said McClenahan gave the center more than her name. She would occasionally join the children for juice and cookies or call Nicholson to see how they were doing.

One year, she called to ask Nicholson how many employees were at the center. What followed were 26 Christmas cards, each stuffed with a crisp \$50 bill.

McClenahan died Jan. 16. The daughter of the late Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman, longtime editor of *The Richmond News Leader* and a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, she shed the cloak of privilege and used her influence to chisel away at race and class barriers.

She was a co-founder of the Richmond Better Housing Coalition, the private, nonprofit affordable-housing organization that financed the \$2.3 million child-care center in Winchester Green on Jefferson Davis Highway.

"It's really in recognition of her service to the coalition and the community, and really, her interest in children," said John C. Purnell Jr., executive director of the Friends Association for Children, which runs the center and three similar ones in the area.

The center is a link in a chain of compassion that stretches from a former slave to this daughter of the distinguished.

Friends Association for Children was the brainchild of Lucy Goode Brooks, a former Richmond slave who had lost one of her children to the slave trade.

Concerned about the number of black children in Richmond left abandoned after the Civil War, she fashioned a partnership between her Jackson Ward-based Ladies Sewing Circle for Charitable Works and the local Quaker Society of Friends to provide housing for these youngsters.

Today, the McClenahan Childcare Center serves a diverse mix. But according to statistics from fiscal 2004, 100 of the center's 228 households served had an income of \$19,000 or less.

"Since 1871, the association has been fighting a relentless war against our nation's greatest enemy, the neglect of children," McClenahan said at the Friends Association for Children's annual meeting last year. "Today, it must fight harder than ever against a materialistic society that ignores the crippling disadvantages of those at the bottom of the economic ladder."

Nicholson, for one, plans to continue that fight.

"I say to Mrs. McClenahan, 'Thank you, your job is done. It's up to us to continue your work,'" she said.

"Her death has really inspired me to do more, and better, to help these children get what they need."

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point of view