

Doug Krikorian:

Long Beach woman, 94, still helping people speak out

By Doug Krikorian, Staff Columnist
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The sounds of kids, teenagers and young adults can be heard in the background, and it's a symphony that Aleen Agranowitz has been listening to for more than 50 years.

She is an alert, spry 94-year-old woman from Long Beach who co-founded the Speech and Language Development Center in Buena Park, and she is seated at a table in a conference room in the school's main office.

She looks at her watch, smiles softly, and says, "Gotta depart at 1:30. Have an aphasia class to teach to adults."

In an era when it has become common practice for people to retire in their mid 50s, or early 60s, Aleen Agranowitz remains sternly in defiance of the aging process and still is doing what she has done for so much of her saintly life.

And that is working with those who have aphasia, an acquired communications disorder that impairs a person's ability to speak and understand others, with most of those who have it also experiencing difficulties in reading and writing.

Five days a week, at least eight hours a day, Agranowitz can be found at the 14-acre site of the old Mira Linda Elementary School at 8699 Holder Street near Lincoln Ave. where her Speech and Language Development Center has been ensconced since 1979 and where more than 350 students, some from as far away as Ireland, are enrolled.

The place is a maze of more than 25 classrooms offering speech, behavioral, physical, educational and various other training programs.

It's a magical kingdom where the teachers and therapists and aides give nurturing hope and tender assistance to those in need of it.

"It's an amazing place that does amazing work,



Aleen Agranowitz, 94, of Long Beach, co-founded the Speech and Language Development Center in Buena Park. She still works there 5 days a week at least 8 hours a day.

(Stephen Carr/Staff Photographer)

and Aleen Agranowitz is an amazing person who's the one most responsible for its existence," says Milka Lowe, wife of the prominent family physician, Dr. Franklin Lowe, whose 9-year-old daughter Maja attends the school. "Those who work on its staff are so caring and patient and sensitive.

"I can't say enough good things about Aleen and for the people who work at her school. They've all created an atmosphere of gladness and joy that I'm sure is responsible for the incredible developmental success they've had with so many students across the years ..."

After moving out to Southern California in the late 1940s and going to work at the old Van Nuys Veteran Hospital, where she wound up marrying one of its patients, Aaron Agranowitz, an aviation mechanic, Aleen Agranowitz moved to Long Beach in 1952 and took over the aphasia ward at the VA outlet on Bellflower Blvd.

Three kids come along

She would depart there for a time to start a family - she would have three children - but in 1955 she and a colleague, Gladys Gleason,

opened the original Speech and Language Development Center.

It was a modest undertaking, with Agranowitz's Long Beach living room serving as a ward for the three parents that showed up with children in need of special care.

"We were helping out people who weren't getting any help in the public sector," says Agranowitz, a Boston area native who was in the Waves during World War II and worked at Bethesda Navy Hospital.

But word got out, more parents started showing up with more children, a room was built in Agranowitz's backyard to house the overflow, the SLDC soon gained non-profit status because of its community service, and a Board of Directors was formed.

The SLDC would undergo various incarnations in subsequent years, as it would wind up in a suite of offices in a medical building in Anaheim, and then in a large home in the city with five other facilities used to meet the needs of an expanding enrollment.

"We just kept getting bigger and bigger," says Agranowitz.

They wound up at their present site 30 years ago where they have flourished and done so much good for so many people.

"When we first came here, a lot of people thought the facility was too big and we'd have a lot of empty rooms," says Muff Elstran, the SLDC director of public relations. "That certainly hasn't been the case. We're bursting at the seams now."

And this is a glowing testimony to the irrepressible Aleen Agranowitz, who's written books on aphasia and even received a doctorate degree in organizational leadership from the University of La Verne at age 82.

She also has received an outpouring of gratitude from countless parents over the decades, as well as from some of her students who went on to overcome their challenges to

become successful in the work place.

"Aleen recently received a thank-you card from a Yale graduate who was appreciative of the help he got from her school," relates Milka Lowe.

Everyone gets help

Of course, not all the students ascend to such heights, but all are assigned aides who assist in teaching duties and carefully monitor the students' activities.

Aleen Agranowitz's alert eyes glow when you ask her what inspires her to continue her life-long work at an age when her contemporaries long have been retired.

"It's what I do, and what I love doing," she says. "And it's always been a two-way street for me. I learn as much from the children as they do from me."

Well, they'll be staging the 31st annual SLDC Golf Tournament Wednesday at the Alta Vista Country Club in Placentia. Proceeds from it will go to the SLDC, an organization that does astounding work created by an astounding lady. doug.krikorian@presstelegram.com