

Agape Academy gives children head start on learning

By Jessica Sindel

Agape Academy and Child Development Center, a private school that teaches children from 1 year old to eighth grade, has seen a lot of changes since it's inception in 1973. "We began in a church basement," said Yvonne Griffin, who runs the school with her husband, Kenneth. "Six years ago we moved into a building of our own, and now we're in the process of installing a new computer mainframe with a 500,000 technological grant we received. Needless to say, we've grown a lot over the years. Agape Academy is located at 7400 Olive Blvd in University City.

The school's founder, Patricia Whitelock, created Agape to help minority students receive a more personalized, specialized elementary education. She believed a strong beginning laid the groundwork for future success. The Griffins took over in 1989 and remained dedicated to Agape's founding creed, "We believe that if you start teaching children at an early age, it makes education easier as the students grow up," Yvonne said. "We want our students to be able to succeed at any school after graduating from Agape." Griffin heads a staff of 52 teachers who oversee about 350 students, the majority of whom are African American. Students come from 38 different zip codes in the St. Louis area. Many of the students have had difficulty with their public schools. "Sometimes the kids are having trouble with peer pressure or the way classes are run," said Griffin. "We try to give our children an advantage with our small classrooms, and a variety of subjects to learn about and activities to participate in."

Agape emphasizes mathematics, science and foreign languages early in the curriculum. Griffin said that the most students can read by the time they are 4 years old. All are required to participate in extracurricular activities, whether that means taking dance classes or playing for the school basketball team. "We often find that low academic levels are the result of low self-esteem, so we try to give each child a chance to spotlight their interests and special abilities," she said, "If they have the 'I can and I will succeed' attitude, they can and will succeed." Agape has been affiliated with the Suburban Journals' Old Newsboys Day for the last seven years and Griffin credits the charity with helping to inspire fund-raising efforts among the students' parents.

"It's just a wonderful charity," she said. "The money we get from Old Newsboys has established scholarships for families that need financial help. Reduced tuition often makes the difference as to whether or not a student can attend our school." Griffin said he also appreciates the fact that the donation is monetary. "Plenty of charities donate toys or books, but few will actually help you with the educational process the way that Old Newsboys does," she said. This year's Old Newsboys Day will take place Nov. 21. For more information on donating or to volunteer, call Karen McKay at (314) 821-1100.