

The American Museum of Natural History

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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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RETURN TO:

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
SPONSORS HOSPITAL AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Miss Catharine E. Barry, a supervising instructor in the Department of Education at The American Museum of Natural History, visited 175 hospitals and special schools in 1968-69 to bring a special kind of therapy to 7000 mentally and physically handicapped children. She has filled this assignment of the department's Hospital and Special Schools Program for eight years.

Regular classes for grade school and junior high students are held at the Museum during the school year. There also are special classes for handicapped children. But since many of the handicapped are hospitalized and cannot be brought to the Museum, a bit of the Museum is brought to them.

These children are orthopedically handicapped, emotionally disturbed or suffering from minimal brain dysfunction. Many are confined to hospitals for two or more years, some with advanced stages of malignant diseases. Among the hospitals and schools visited are the Institute of Muscle Diseases, St. Barnabas Hospital for Chronic Diseases, Memorial Hospital for Cancer and Allied Diseases, Babies Hospital of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, the Hospital for Special Surgery (for orthopedic cases) and the Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine of New York University Medical Center, all in New York City; also the Hillcrest School, Bedford Hills, N.Y., and the Astor Home (for emotionally disturbed), Rhinebeck, N.Y.

"It is thrilling and meaningful to these children to be able to greet you with a few words in the native tongue of an Eskimo, a folk song of the Pacific Islands or in the sign language of a specific tribe," said Miss Barry. "Because of these visits the children can gain a better understanding of how others live. As the child's knowledge of the world about him is expanded, he accepts the fact that although there are many differences among us, there are many more likenesses."

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Topics selected for the Hospital and Special Schools Program are listed under the headings, Social Studies, Natural History and Astronomy. The subject matter is handled informally to encourage student participation.

Basic tools, materials and clothing are used along with the Museum specimens for Social Studies to give a rounded impression of peoples like North American Indians, Latin-American neighbors, reindeer-herding Lapps and people of India.

"When possible, the children are dressed in the native costumes and are encouraged to demonstrate the use of the specific tools of an area," said Miss Barry. "The feeling of accomplishment must be indescribable to the child born with one hand when he uses the stump which terminates his other arm to steady and work a pump drill, the tool the Indian uses to make fire.

"Likewise, the Rain Dance of the Hopi Indians, performed by a boy in heavy leg braces while supported by crutches, must have imbued him with a feeling of 'supernatural power' because his dance pattern brought results within 24 hours."

At one school for emotionally disturbed children there was a girl about six years old who had not spoken for eleven months. Miss Barry had brought Eskimo clothes and artifacts to the school and was able to dress the girl in one of the costumes, much to the surprise of the school's faculty.

Miss Barry said to the girl, "You look beautiful in your costume, but I don't believe you told me your name." The girl spoke her name, and the mental block was broken.

Natural History is presented to the handicapped children in two parts: Animal Life Today and Prehistoric Life. The first serves as an introduction to the study of biology or as an advanced study of the principles of animal and plant ecology. It is illustrated by mounted specimens of mammals, insects, reptiles and birds. The second, which shows the progressive change and development of life, is illustrated by fossils from the Museum's collection.

The excitement of the space age plays an important part in the discussion of Astronomy. Among the subjects are Our Earth in Space, The Solar Family (Planets), Color in the Sky, The Ever-Changing Moon, Comets and Meteors, Stars and Their Stories and Apollo II.

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Some topics are intended for the junior high level, others for the elementary school. Since the inception of the program, which was made possible through an Avalon Foundation grant, thousands of children have enjoyed and benefited from the visits of Museum instructors.

"We learned through the responses that our visits became part of the therapy so badly needed by these unfortunate children," said Miss Barry. "They couldn't be persuaded to handle hospital therapeutic equipment because it was too much like taking medicine, but they were happy to use the Museum's tools that might have been touched by Indians or Eskimos.

"Thousands more children need to be given this opportunity. This is possible only if the fund is replenished from time to time to cover expenses. More teachers of special education could be added to the Museum staff and thus provide not just one, but as many visits each day as there are teachers."

Miss Barry is a native New Yorker who grew up in Wellesley, Mass. She took courses in fields of specialization at Columbia University. One in particular was in the field of education for the deaf-blind. She came to the Museum in 1942 as one of 25 teachers of special classes for public school children.

The curriculum is called The World We Live In, and it is conducted five days a week during the school year. The classes highlight the student's unit of work at his school and consist of three periods. Because of the number of schools involved, no class is allowed more than two visits to the Museum in an academic year.

One of the most popular subjects is the American Indian. During the first period the children meet in the Indian Halls, then in halls with mammals that Indians hunted. After lunch there is a demonstration in a classroom, as the children relive a day of the Indian on the reservation. The mother grinds corn; the hunter is portrayed with bow and arrow; the fire-maker works his pump drill, and the day ends with a ceremonial dance.

The handicapped children that Miss Barry visits at hospitals and special schools receive a generous segment of this regular Museum program. She loves children, and she has a special feeling for the handicapped ones. As she puts it, "I know I can get them in the palm of my hand."

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Photographs are available on request at the Office of Public Relations--EXT. 311.