

Coast Guard a lifeline for Cape May Elementary

A school's best friend

■ A declining number of local children almost doomed the school to closure until more Coast Guard families arrived.

By RICHARD DEGENER
Staff Writer

CAPE MAY — Training Center Cape May, the Coast Guard's only boot camp in the nation, churns out thousands of graduates a year, but it isn't exactly the only local school the service maintains.

The other one doesn't feature seamen recruits going through eight grueling weeks of basic training. The students at this school are quite a bit younger.

Their teachers are more likely to wipe their dripping noses than make them do push-ups for not marching correctly. Instead of graduating to an assignment on a boat, they graduate to, well, seventh grade.

Cape May Elementary School, which for decades served the youth of this city, is now surviving due to the large number of Coast Guard children.

"I remember a couple of years ago we had 25 kids from Cape May," Chief School Administrator Victoria Zelenak said.

It's pretty hard to run a school from prekindergarten through sixth grade with just 25 students. While there was talk back then of merging with West Cape May Elementary or reducing the staff as local enrollment declined, the Coast Guard came to the rescue with a steady increase of students as Training Center Cape May started expanding after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Zelenak said that in recent years the Coast Guard has supplied as much as 65 percent of the student body. This year, it is hovering at just over half, with



Staff photos by Dale Gerhard

Kindergartner Reagan Milligan, front, and fourth-grader Abby Simcox play on the swings at Cape May Elementary School. The playground was built by 25 Coast Guard volunteers.

74 of the 144 students coming from the base.

The school historically had around 300 students before property values in town skyrocketed, making it too pricey for young families. Back then, the Coast Guard children were a much smaller part of the student body.

Mayor Ed Mahaney said the constant stream of young families at the Coast Guard base has helped save the school.

Without the Coast Guard children, Mahaney said, the school at the very least would be hard-pressed to offer the programs it can now offer.

"The school is highly accredited. To offer the array of educa-

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Capt. William Kelly, left, commander of U.S. Coast Guard Training Center Cape May, and Board of Education member Brandon Trinidad watch a slideshow of the playground construction.



Staff photo by Dale Gerhard

Cape May schools Superintendent Victoria Zelenak leads students Thursday to the playground that Coast Guard volunteers helped build at the Cape May Elementary School. 'The first day we opened it, the kids just shrieked,' Zelenak says. 'It was a great thing to see.'

School

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tional programs, the subject matter, the quality of the curriculum, you must have a certain number of students. The Coast Guard allows us to do that," Mahaney said.

At worst, the school would close without the Coast Guard, and a facility the town uses constantly would cease to exist.

Mahaney said taxpayers get a good return from having the school remain open, as many use the pool, gym, classrooms, library and computer lab.

"The playground is used by numerous organizations. The Dellas (Little League) Field sits on school property. The environmentally pristine Cape Island Creek nature area runs behind the school," Mahaney said.

What has always been a symbiotic relationship has grown downright cozy under current TRACEN commander Capt. William Kelly. Last year, the Coast Guard officially adopted the school, something it has only done in two other towns, Kelly said — in Petaluma, Calif., and Kodiak, Alaska.

One offshoot of the program is naming a Partnership in Education coordinator, Lt. Cmdr. Scott Rae, who brings in volunteers for many events.

"We've been in the school a lot. I'd say between 600 and

1,000 hours in the last two and a half years," Rae said.

Core school events the Coast Guard is involved with include a triathlon, a field day/picnic at the end of each school year, participation in a national art contest, a homework club every Thursday, a cardboard boat-building contest, reading to the children and supplying support staff for graduation.

Starry the Bear is yet another Coast Guard program. The small teddy bear is introduced each year to third-graders. Starry is then enrolled in boot camp and deployed with Coast Guard units around the world. Each week, the Coast Guard — usually Rae — arrives with an update, including photos and video, of Starry's travels. The students all go to the base for Starry's graduation from boot camp.

Last week, the school dedicated a new playground that 25 Coast Guard volunteers helped build. Special Agent Brandon Trinidad of Coast Guard Investigative Services, a former member of the local Board of Education and parent of two students here, felt honored to be asked to coordinate the effort.

"Thank you for calling on me to serve this great community and great school," Trinidad said at the dedication.

The school had a playground for grades 3 through 6 but never had one for the younger children, Business

Administrator John Thomas said. The school had \$40,000 to spend and got designs for a small playground and a large one. Thomas said with volunteers doing the construction, including mixing 250 bags of concrete, they were able to pick the large one.

"The first day we opened it, the kids just shrieked," Zelenak said. "It was a great thing to see. Technology has changed everything, but one thing that hasn't changed is playing on the playground. We thank the Coast Guard volunteers who helped build the playground for the joy of all of us."

Kelly said the playground project highlights what has become a great partnership that benefits the base and the city, essentially making them one.

The Coast Guard contributes about \$700,000 in aid to the school each year to defray costs. The Coast Guard pays its own busing costs from the base. City taxpayers spend less than \$1.5 million to fund the school, which residents also use for town meetings, candidate debates, recreational and social programs and other community events.

Mahaney said the costs are well worth maintaining a school.

"With a school, you have a full community," Mahaney said.

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