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## Decades of dedication

Maddy Malis has dedicated her entire life to working with kids.



Pride of the neighborhood: Maddy Malis has worked at the Federation Early Learning Services at 10700 Jamison Ave. for the past 45 years. On May 25, she was honored for her near half-century of service.

LOGAN KRUM / TIMES PHOTO

A few weeks ago, a woman from Pakistan approached Maddy Malis. She told Malis how she discovered her family had been up for execution, and that they were barely able to escape to the United States.

Now, that woman's son is a child at Federation Early Learning Services, of which Malis is the president. She wanted to thank Malis for what the organization had done for her and her family.

"I feel like Lassin [one of the FELS centers] saved our lives," she told Malis. "I have no relatives here. Lassin is my family."

It's moments like these that reaffirm Malis's passion for her work.

She

has worked with FELS for 45 years, an accomplishment that was recently celebrated by the organization, based at 10700 Jamison Ave.

She started as a teacher when she graduated from Temple University, and gradually worked her way up the administrative chain.

"I had no desire to leave the classroom," Malis said, but she kept getting handed more administrative responsibilities until it felt like a natural step. She held numerous positions before finally taking over as the organization's president in 1999.

It's hard to define exactly what FELS is, because there's nothing else quite like it.

It functions almost as a pre-pre K school for infants through 5-year olds. To call it a daycare center would be too simple — the Lassin campus is equipped with two buildings worth of classrooms where kids can learn and play, a cafeteria and a playground.

Malis describes it as early childhood education, but said it goes far beyond that.

She recalled an incident where the center was looking after an infant just a few months old who wasn't turning over or crawling properly.

When concerns were raised to the parents, they responded with anger, withdrawing the child from the center.

"They were in denial," Malis said.

About a year later, the parents returned to the center to thank them for their care. Their child had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

"We don't service just the kid, but the whole family," Malis said. "I believe strongly that if we intervene early, we can change the life of a child forever."

Forty-five years doesn't begin to cover how long she's been dedicated to children, though. Malis ran her own daycare at just 12 years old.

She "would pick kids up around the block" and look after them for a few hours, she said.

Malis would plan a few hours' worth of activities each day to keep the kids occupied. Each day would begin with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by various activities such as singing or sports.

She would return the kids to their homes around noon.

"I guess I was a pretty trusted kid," she said with a laugh.

On May 25, Malis was honored for her near half-century of service to the organization at its annual meeting. Malis said listening to the speakers was the first surreal experience she's ever had.

"I felt like they were talking about someone else, but then it hit me, they're talking about me," she said.

FELS is proud to look after children representing 24 different countries.

"In this time of hate speech, we stand proud helping our children learn tolerance of all communities," Malis said.

Though she joked about not planning to be at the organization for 30 more years (her father has worked for the same company for over 70 years), she doesn't seem to have any plans to leave, either.

"Kids are here from infancy to the age of 5," she said. "When you think about all the development the brain does in the first three years, we have an onerous responsibility to get it right.

"Being part of an organization that has its heart and soul committed to that is amazing." ●●