

Center marks two centuries of helping

State's oldest charity has given thousands of underprivileged children priceless memories

BY JERRY BARCA
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Newark Day Center returned to its roots yesterday to celebrate 200 years of providing service to underprivileged children and families.

Nearly 300 congregants, elected officials and volunteers gathered at the Old First Church to celebrate the bicentennial of New Jersey's oldest charitable organization.

"It's humbling to know we are a part of history," Trisha Morris-Yamba, executive director of the day center since 1981, said.

In January 1803, a call came from the pulpit at the church to help the needy help themselves. In the same year the United States doubled in size with the Louisiana Purchase, a dozen women formed the Newark Female Charitable Society.

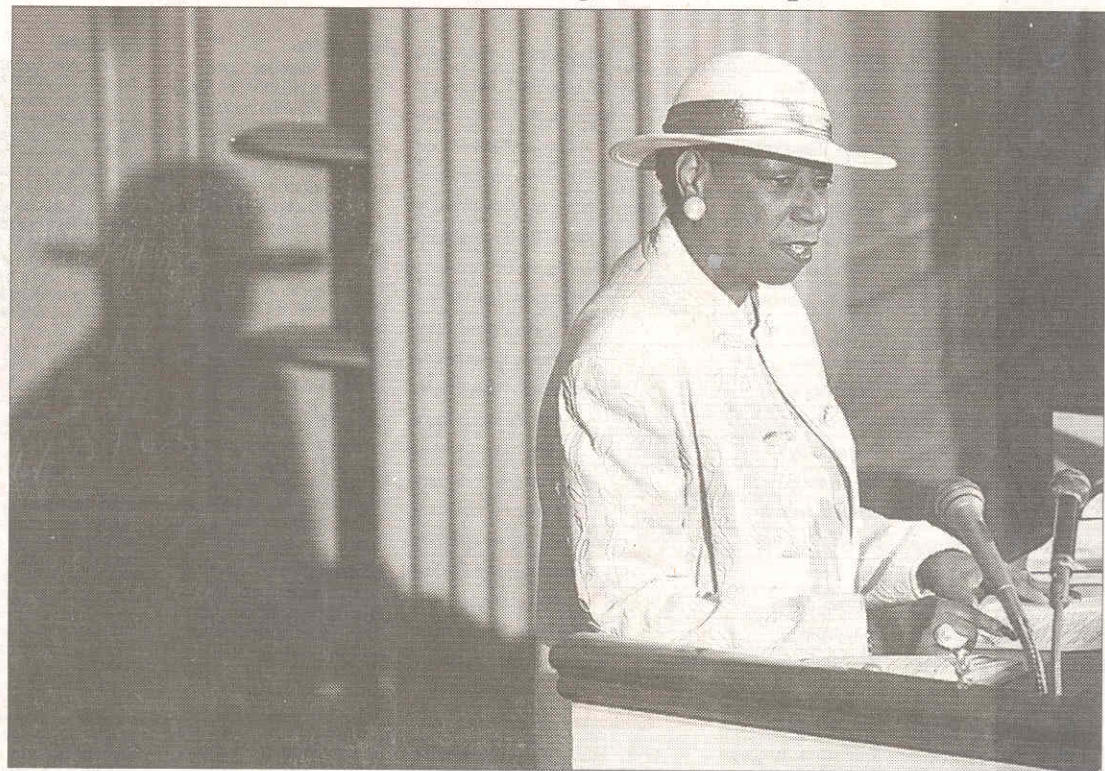
"It was 12 strong women who provided the leadership then. Today we reap the benefits," Gov. James E. McGreevey said at the ceremony yesterday.

The civic-minded charitable society blossomed into the Newark Day Center. It is the third oldest charity in the country. The agency runs a preschool for 200 children, serves 50 daily meals to senior citizens and offers counseling to 175 parents out of the Halsey Street offices.

The center also runs the Fresh Air Fund, which sends inner-city children to rural summer camps. Since 1882, when the fund began, more than 60,000 children have been given the opportunity to leave the urban asphalt behind and experience nature.

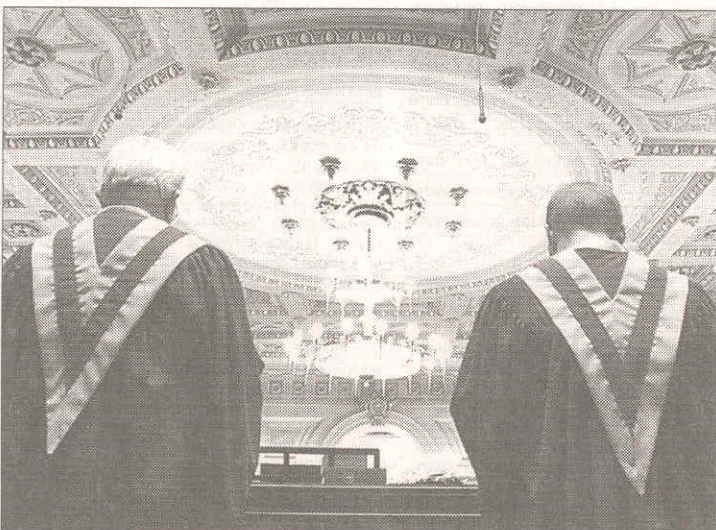
From the 1960s through the 1980s, Mildred Damiano, a congregant at Old First Church, volunteered at the center by recruiting children to attend summer camp.

"The point is to help everybody and to assure them there is a better life. There were a lot of young people in Newark, underprivileged people, who would have never seen grass," Damiano said.



Trisha Morris-Yamba, executive director of Newark Day Center, gives remarks during a service at the Old First Presbyterian Church in Newark yesterday.

PHOTOS BY SCOTT LITUCHY/THE STAR-LEDGER



The church choir sings during a service celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Newark Day Center, which is known for starting the Fresh Air Fund.

Seven-year-old Rasheedah Harper is one of the children who benefited from the camp.

Rasheedah went to camp for the first time this past summer. She learned to swim and she went on nature walks. The 96-acre camp

ground in Pottersville was about 40 miles from her Newark home, but it might as well have been a world away. "It was very different because there were a lot of trees around," she said.

Rasheedah's mother, Irma

Branch, is grateful for her daughter's time at camp. "I never had those experiences when I was growing up. Hearing her stories and seeing her face when she got off the bus each day was great," Branch said.

Margaret Kinner started volunteering in 1944. The 89-year-old Newark resident hasn't stopped. She used to help out with the children at the center. Now she serves lunch to the senior citizens. She doubts she'll ever stop. If she does, the seniors she serves will be lonely, she said.

While the center's rich history was celebrated yesterday, "there's still work to be done," Morris-Yamba said.

The agency wants to raise another \$1 million through its capital campaign to renovate six preschool classrooms, the cafeteria and install an elevator.

"This will be another step in the journey of the Newark Day Center," she said.