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WITH PHOTO

A Wilfrid Laurier University student has discovered that her part-time job in Waterloo both assists her in paying for her education and enriches the lives of some community youngsters, too.

Noreen Kirwin of Chatham, hired under the Ontario work-study program, financed by the provincial government and Ontario universities, is working with blind and visually impaired children through the Waterloo district office of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB).

During the fall term, the third-year music and psychology student worked with 15 visually impaired children, including one borderline autistic child.

It wasn't long before this nine-year-old girl graduated from merely sitting beside Noreen on a piano bench, to sitting in her lap with her hands on Noreen's to feel the music as Noreen played.

"Her mother didn't think she would even sit beside me," Noreen said. "But she really responded to the music and we got along great, right from the start."

Since Noreen is giving serious thought to becoming a music therapist, she was delighted to see how music can help in building bridges for a blind and withdrawn youngster.

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Some of the youngsters she worked with were far from withdrawn, however. One boy that she took Christmas shopping sang carols at the top of his voice.

Two others couldn't contain their delight when they beat her at bowling, even though she could see the pins at the end of the alley and they couldn't.

Noreen also took some of the children swimming, both in the Laurier pool and at the Breithaupt Centre, got involved in craft activities with others, and took another to the city's Santa Claus parade. She persuaded Santa to meet her charge so that she could feel Santa's beard and trace out the laugh lines on his face with her fingers.

"If these activities were a learning experience for the children, they were for me too," the Laurier student said.

"I especially enjoyed the music involvement since it was at least a start on music therapy and that really interests me. And I enjoy working with children."

Her ease and facility in getting along well with others stems to some extent from her large family--she has four brothers. Her father is vice-principal of Tilbury District High School and Noreen said the family is a close and happy one.

Her grandmother recently was registered with the CNIB and Noreen also gained experience working with others when she was in high school and was in a "buddy" program with an underprivileged Chatham girl.

Just before Christmas, Noreen invited all 15 blind children to join her on a hayride to round out her term. With funding (half from the province and half from Laurier) spent, she didn't expect to be able to continue after Christmas. One mother was so disappointed she offered to make up the payments herself if Noreen would carry on.

Horace Braden, director of student awards at Laurier, was so impressed with reports on Noreen's work with the blind youngsters that he persuaded the government to extend its funding with her. The university was happy to pay its share, too.

Philippa A. Pemberton, social worker with the CNIB, said she was extremely pleased with the Laurier student.

"Noreen is a capable, enthusiastic and caring person," she said. "The young people and their parents thoroughly enjoyed her and so have we."

Noreen was one of 50 Laurier students who received on and off-campus jobs through the plan last term.

"This is the first time in the three year period of the plan's operation that off-campus jobs have been introduced," Braden said. He believes Laurier is the first university in the province to place students with off-campus agencies.