

Thirty years of helping needy families



Children can relate to our mascot Robert Bear

THE Roberts Centre has developed a series of children's books that aim to reassure children who are having to deal with difficult situations, such as homelessness or family breakdown. The stories are told through the eyes of a cuddly teddy bear called Robert. Robert Bear is the centre's mascot, and the hope is that by Robert experiencing the same circumstances as the children, it will help them to understand what they are going through. The first three books deal with debt, suddenly moving house and family relationship breakdown, which many children supported by the centre face on a daily basis. The idea of developing the books came from Carole Damper, chief executive of the centre. She said: "I have looked for a number of years for books that we could give to the children that would reflect their lives, but I was unable to find any. "There are many children facing these issues in Portsmouth and around the UK, so although the books are based in Portsmouth, it is hoped they will help children across the UK." Carole was delighted when well-known local children's author Jennifer Lowis and graphic designer Tom McLean, based in Southsea, offered their services for free. The books are available to buy on the centre's website and from the bookshops in both the city's cathedrals.

IT is a unique child-centred charity that has made a massive difference to the lives of thousands of Portsmouth families.

This year the Roberts Centre in Landport celebrates 30 years of helping the poorest families in inner-city Portsmouth. It has offered nursery care, temporary accommodation for the homeless, the chance for vulnerable children to have supervised contact with their parents, and much more. It is marking its 30th anniversary with a series of events and activities during the year, including a service at our cathedral at 3pm on February 19. Bishop Christopher will pay tribute there to its vital work. It was his predecessor as Bishop of Portsmouth who was surprised to receive a bequest from an American citizen, EC Roberts, to help alleviate poverty in the city. That money was spent on creating what we now know as the Roberts Centre.

Based in a humble brick building in Crasswell Street, Landport, it offers a haven for vulnerable families who struggle to escape the cycle of deprivation. Its 62 staff and 60-odd volunteers are currently helping more than 1,000 families.

Mother-of-three Angie Clark, 34, from Buckland, is just one of the parents who has much to thank the Roberts Centre for. She was evicted by her private landlord last October with her children Masie, aged 12, Callum, 10, and Reggie, 2.

"My landlord was selling up, and the council didn't have anywhere for me," she said. "I slept between my mum's and friends' houses. I knew about the Roberts Centre because of the contact sessions. But I didn't know they run temporary accommodation until then.

"They have been amazing for me. They found me a two-bed, furnished flat, which had everything – a kitchen, a TV with freeview, a fridge. If I had to stay there, it would be fine, but it is just temporary. I'll be there until the council find me something.

"They also offered me 10 hours of free nursery care for Reggie, which he loves. His speech has come on so much, he loves playing in the garden and he made so much art and craft before Christmas. It makes a big difference to have that time to go to meetings or sort out other things and not to have to worry about childcare. "And they have been great with my other son, Callum. He was diagnosed with ASD, and he's not in school because they can't manage him. The Roberts Centre woman has come to every meeting that we've had about him, and has been really helpful. She doesn't need to do it, but she goes the extra mile. I haven't got a bad word to say about the Roberts Centre."



Above left: young people are given the chance to try dry-skiing during a trip from the Roberts centre; centre: the nursery children enjoy a visit from the reptile farm; right: the nursery also welcomes animals from Miller's Fram



The centre on Crasswell Street, Landport, and chief executive Carole Damper (left)



The whole ethos of the Roberts Centre is to treat families honestly and with respect, and also to help them to understand the consequences of their actions and decisions – and teach them how to do things differently. They help families tackle the underlying and often complex issues that surround homelessness, giving them the skills to manage their home, their money and their children. They look at issues such as debt, parenting difficulties, co-parenting, mental health, learning

Benefactor has left an amazing legacy

IT was 40 years ago that Ernest Cullen Roberts Jr left a bequest of £250,000 to help feed, care and clothe the poor, orphaned, crippled and blind children of Portsmouth.

He was an American citizen, but the bequest was in memory of his mother Henrietta Jane Roberts, who was born in Portsmouth in 1866 and left for the USA in 1893.

EC Roberts left it to the discretion of the then Bishop of Portsmouth, the Rt Rev Timothy Bavin, as to how to spend the money. After much consultation, it was decided that the best use for the money was to fund a day centre for homeless families.

At that time, in 1986, there were around 600 families living in temporary accommodation with no place to prepare meals, give children play space, do laundry

or maintain family life. With Portsmouth having one of the densest populations outside London, the idea was to release families from isolation and encourage closer neighbourhood integration.

So it was in November 1986 that Bishop Timothy decided to spend the money on creating a centre that could help. In June 1990, Diana, Princess of Wales, laid the foundation stone of the Roberts Centre building. And by 1998, the EC Roberts Centre became a separate charity.

It introduced supervised contact and weekly supported contact for

parents in 1999, and opened a day nursery for under-fives in 2000. Its temporary accommodation service also began in 2000, and its family tenancy support service two years later.

In 2003, after £400,000-worth of improvements to the centre in Crasswell Street, it opened its 44-place nursery. In 2007, it launched supervised contact services in Chichester and Aldershot. It now has centres in Havant and Gosport as well as its Portsmouth headquarters.

And as the centre prepared for its 30th anniversary, staff discovered more about their benefactor EC



Ernest Cullen Roberts Jr

Roberts.

They wrote to his local newspaper in Hoboken, New Jersey, to see if he had any surviving relatives, and a local genealogist discovered he had a nephew, Thomas Cullen Roberts Jr, who was living in Virginia.

Centre staff discovered that EC Roberts' mother Henrietta had lived in the High Street in Old Portsmouth and also had connections with the Royal Navy. They also received the first photograph of Ernest Cullen Roberts Junior they had ever seen – which is reproduced here.

Now Thomas Cullen Roberts Jr and members of his family are preparing to come to Portsmouth for the first time, to attend one of the anniversary events. He'll discover the amazing legacy of his uncle's generosity.

difficulties and low educational attainment. Among the 14 different projects that they run are a contact centre, where children who don't live with one of their parents can meet him or her in a safe, supervised environment, surrounded by toys, games and books.

The Roberts Centre has offered this service for 21 years now, because the research suggests that children get on better if they can meet the parent they are separated from. Trained staff and volunteers help to make sure the contact is positive. Last year they provided 168 separate contact sessions for 90 families.

Its nursery provides a safe, stimulating environment for up to 150 under-fives, 51 weeks a year. It includes a secure garden and a multi-purpose sensory room. Committed staff provide engaging and stimulating activities, nutritious snacks, and positive support for parents. And its various accommodation services help those who need temporary homes, support parents where their children's anti-social behaviour has put their home at risk, and support young people in care or who are about to leave care to improve their living skills.

Among the other events to mark the anniversary are a summer picnic for families, which will feature the centre's mascot Robert Bear, as well as the mascots for Pompey FC, the Rowans Hospice and *The News*.

There'll also be a service for the Methodist circuit of churches, a photo competition and a series of Robert Bear cartoons in *The News*, and a black tie dinner at the Guildhall. The charity will benefit from collections and donations at the Goodwood Festival of Speed this summer.

Chief executive Carole Damper, who has previously spoken at our Diocesan Synod about deprivation in Portsmouth, said: "Church people are the backbone of our volunteers. We couldn't do it without them. But we always need new volunteers.

"We have kept all 14 of our projects running, even though the recession has made

things difficult. In some cases, they are just smaller. But what the Roberts Centre provides is needed even more than it ever was over the past 30 years.

"There is something about a local charity that has been created because of local need that is very different from a charity that has come into a city just because they have won a tender.

"I believe we are more rooted in the local community as a result. And what matters to us is that we are constantly changing to meet the ever-changing needs of our community.

"I do believe what Mother Theresa said, which is that if everybody looked after the people who lived around them, the whole world would be cared for. And that actually ties in very well with the Christian message."

For more information, see www.robertscentre.org.uk or ring 023-9229 6929.

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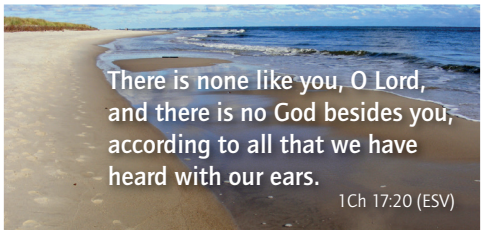


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There is none like you, O Lord,
and there is no God besides you,
according to all that we have
heard with our ears.

1Ch 17:20 (ESV)