

## **Celebrating 'dream job'**

**John Willard | Posted: Thursday, November 30, 2006**

Laurel S. "Laurie" Walker was surprised the other day to find that her office had been transformed into a veritable museum for Skip-A-Long Child Development Services.

On display were Skip-A-Long tote bags, wearing apparel and logos used over the years along with other mementoes. Her staff had gathered the items to celebrate her 30 years with the Moline-based child-care organization.

"It's hard to believe that 30 years have gone by," the chief executive officer of Skip-A-Long said as she perused the scrapbooks, minutes of meetings and other materials. "It is a dream job and a dream team. And there is always something more to be done."

Walker has done a lot since she joined Skip-A-Long in 1976 as a newly minted Augustana College graduate. The executive director since 1978, she has fostered the growth of the agency from its infancy — serving 75 children at a single site — to its current four sites with a home network and a consulting division serving 900 children daily.

A leader in the field of early care and education, she has served on numerous State of Illinois councils and committees and spearheaded legislation affecting early care and education. With the opening of Skip-A-Long's Davenport campus in 2003, she has become an Iowa early-care and education advocate.

Her admirers include Gene Blanc, the chairman and chief executive officer of Midland Information Resources, Davenport. His company — along with Alcoa, Deere & Co. and Trinity Regional Health System — partnered to provide assistance to help Skip-A-Long build its 16,000-square foot center just north of the Trinity at Terrace Park site on Utica Ridge Road.

The Davenport campus serves families of all economic levels and is critical to the needs of working families, Blanc said. It allows parents to pursue opportunities in the workplace while giving them assurance that their pre-kindergarten-age children are receiving quality care.

"Laurie is the most dedicated person I know in providing affordable child care," he said.

Walker, 52, grew up in the Chicago area and moved as a high school student to Paris, Ill., with her father, a personnel manager with TRW automotive safety systems, and her mother, who operated a church day-care center. Working at the center as a high school student nurtured her interest in early childhood development.

She took child development courses and majored in sociology and Spanish at Augustana, where she was selected for the Phi Beta Kappa academic honor society. While job hunting after graduation, she found work as a part-time social worker at Skip-A-Long, which had been founded in 1970 by a group of citizens seeing the need for a not-for-profit, community-based child-care organization.

Walker led the move to the agency's headquarters campus at 4800 60th St., Moline, which was completed in 1989. She also oversaw the establishment of the Skip-A-Long at 4th Street and 16th Avenue in Rock Island and the Trinity Employees Child Care Center at 2122 25th Ave., Rock Island, which Skip-A-Along operates for Trinity Regional Health System.

Skip-A-Long's programs recently were awarded national accreditation by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs for the third time.

Walker and her husband, Mark, live in Moline with their son, Jon, 8. They also have a daughter, Sarah Buss, of Peoria, Ill. Walker's professional affiliations include the past presidency of the Action for Children of Illinois and serving on the Quality Committee of the Governor's Early Learning Council. She is president of the United Way Agency Directors Association.

Walker especially enjoys meeting parents of children she cared for years ago and learning how well they are doing.

"My job is to know what families need in order to be successful. It has been a wonderful career. I couldn't ask for anything more meaningful," she said.