

Dr. Waldraut Merhej

By Nada Awar

I was led to the "Diagnostic Center for Special children" by pure coincidence. Being there, I was touched by the sincerity, humanity, devotion and awareness of the women collaborating to form a successful working team. Dr. Vallie (short for Waldraut) Merhej, the owner of the Center, is an Austrian physician and child psychiatrist. She is also a professor at the Department of Education of the American University of Beirut. This active and motivated lady arrived to Beirut in 1967 and volunteered to work in the German Hospital of Beirut for six months. Afterwards, her destiny was to marry a Lebanese man and settle in Lebanon. Unfortunately, her first husband passed away leaving her with three children to support: Yasmine, Omar and Reem. Dr. Vallie faced her problems by creating a job which would combine her professional and personal life. Hence, in 1974, the Diagnostic Center which includes a special nursery was founded. Lebanon was in grave shortage and need for such specialized institutions. The services of the Diagnostic Center include speech therapy, physio-therapy, IQ testing, and parent counseling. The aim of the Center is to help children overcome their problems as early as possible and offers early childhood education.

Dr. Vallie Merhej is also a member of "The Friends of the Handicapped Association." Members of this association have performed a pioneering effort and outstanding services for the handicapped in Lebanon. They were also among the first in the country to arouse public awareness towards handicapped and special children. Dr. Merhej feels that "this institution would be able to operate in full



capacity and accommodate more children if peace is established in Lebanon." She continues that "an official law for mandatory education for special children is a must in the country. Every child has the right to go to school regardless of his/her condition. Children with an IQ below 100 should be given the right to participate and to be accepted in society. Special children should be protected and put on the right track."

About her experience as a professor at the American University of Beirut, Dr. Merhej says: "When I faced my students for the first time, I was afraid." Consequently, I decided to sit in for one of her classes. There were thirteen fully attentive female students in the class, who were each given a chance to participate in the discussion. "Every semester is a new experience for me." Dr. Merhej says "At the beginning of the semester, each student is alienated and unaware of the importance and issue of special children. However, at the end of the semester, they become very involved and enthusiastically participate in helping

the handicapped. My job as a teacher is to make them understand what a physically handicapped is. I tell them not to treat them as if they were perfectly healthy nor as if their condition was a horrible drama. People should help a handicapped whenever the latter asks for help. A mentally retarded person is not crazy. Special people need special education in order to become independent and productive. The goal of the course is to show the needs for special education and how to integrate a handicapped in society."

After the interview, Dr. Merhej invited me to attend the Christmas party of the nursery in the Diagnostic Center. The show performed by the special children was very touching. They were all dressed in white and wore white crowns on their heads. They played the role of snow flakes to one of Fairouz's Christmas carols "Talj Talj (Snow Snow), after which Santa Claus came in and distributed his gifts to the young human "snow flakes". But Santa forgot to give a real gift of admiration to Vallie •