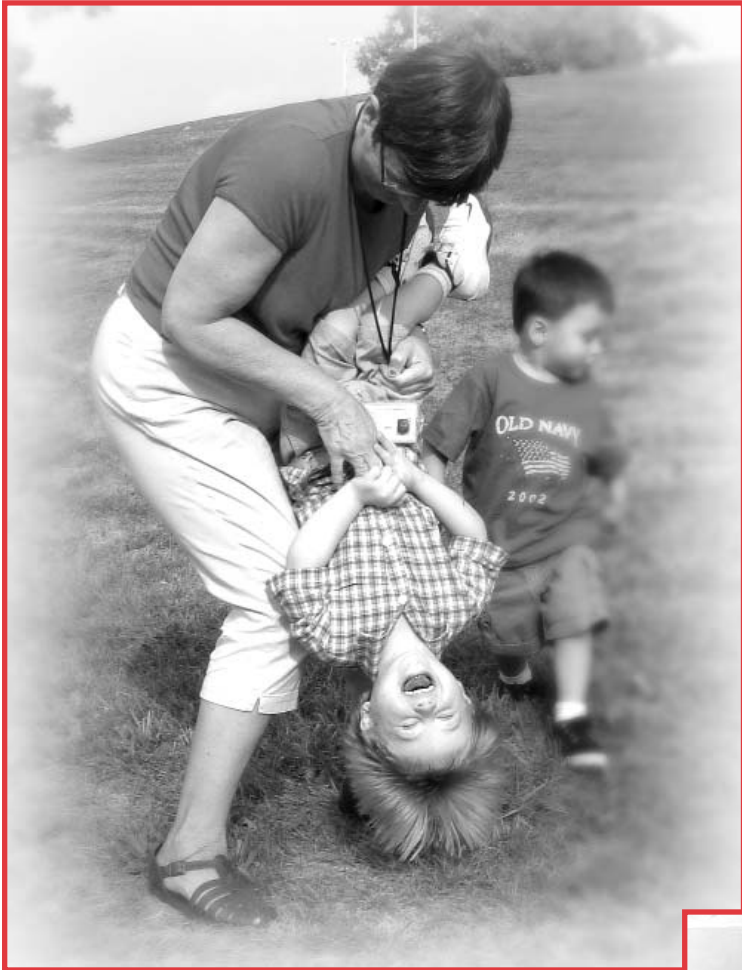


# In The SP TLIGHT



Above: Mary Jane with her grandson, Ethan Ernst, one of the eight children she teaches at St. Rita's LOFT program

Mary Jane grew up in Covington, Kentucky and was able to hear until she contracted spinal meningitis at age five. She spent a number of days in a coma and when she regained consciousness she had

severe memory and hearing loss. When she was unable to communicate because of her hearing loss doctors thought her illness had caused mental retardation. She had to learn everything over again, even how to walk. With her hearing gone, it was extremely difficult for her to learn at the local school. She didn't know sign language and there weren't any interpreters or other deaf students to whom she could relate. She had to rely on lip reading and felt very lonely not being able to communicate. Her aunt knew that she was unhappy and gathered all the information she could about St. Rita School for the Deaf. At age ten Mary Jane was introduced to a new world at St. Rita school, a world where there were kids just like her. It was the first time she had ever been around other deaf kids and the first time she saw people using sign language. In just two weeks Mary Jane learned enough sign language to communicate with her new friends.

The summer before Mary Jane's senior year, while she was busy making plans for her future, fate stepped in and introduced one reserved seminarian to one free-thinking lady (Mary Jane). That seminarian was none other than St. Rita's current Executive Director, Greg Ernst. It wasn't very easy for the two of them to get together. She was still a student and he was thinking about becoming a priest. Students leaving campus to go out on dates was frowned upon, so the two had to rely on a little divine intervention. The principal at the time, who was a priest, arranged a secret date for the two of them to meet. It was an innocent dinner and a movie. After a couple years of friendship, a year at NTID

(National Technical Institute for the Deaf) for Mary Jane, and a decision by Greg to leave the seminary, their ship finally came in. They were both working at St. Rita School when they got engaged. While subbing for a class Mary Jane saw Greg at the door. She stepped outside into the hallway and he asked her to marry him. Today they have eight kids of their own and this May they will have been married for thirty years.



Anyone who knows Mary Jane Ernst knows she LOVES kids. For the past five years she has shared her love with all the young children in St. Rita's LOFT program. She has strong ties to St. Rita School for the Deaf. A 1970 St. Rita graduate, Mary Jane's free-spirited nature is as strong today as it was when she was a young student here. Most people aren't surprised by her aspiration to do the unordinary. Like the time she decided her class of one-year olds needed to experience an indoor mud pit. The curious toddlers sat in the mud and rubbed it all over their bodies as they explored their senses. And then there was the "Day at the Beach". Just picture toddlers stripped down to their diapers playing in buckets of sand and water. They threw water and sand everywhere trying to create their own perfect beach. Her lesson on farm animals is right up there too as one of the most outrageous activities she ever planned. Mary Jane made a barn out of an oversized cardboard box and placed dishes of paint around the barn. The idea was to get the kids to practice their colors and paint the barn. One could only guess who started the fun, but the kids ended up painting each

other and Mary Jane instead. There are many more stories just like these. All examples of how Mary Jane Ernst inspires others to be kids at heart, have fun, and not worry about the small stuff.



Looking and acting silly with kids is one of Mary Jane's favorite pastimes. Here she poses with Joshua Hardesty.



Mary Jane and her husband of almost thirty years, St. Rita's Executive Director Gregory Ernst.