Tell me about it.
RiteCare Spotlight on the Orient of Maryland

"Ms. Chrissy" works with her patient as he practices his language skills on an iPad.

Photography courtesy the Scottish Rite Orient of Maryland.

Alyssa Weiner
Planned Giving Coordinator

"Will you say that again, Ms. Chrissy?" Noah asks with a meek smile. At the Hilgenberg Scottish Rite Childhood Speech and Language Center in Baltimore, Maryland, the children practice their listening skills using Ms. Chrissy's instructions to color big pumpkins orange and small owls brown. It is the Tuesday before Halloween, and the activities for the day are chock full of the usual sights: ghosts, pumpkins, witches, and, thanks to the Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) working at the Hilgenberg Center, smiling and talkative children.

From the observation room, Noah's mother tells me that when she first brought him to the Baltimore RiteCare Center, he was three years old and unable to communicate with his family. He was nonverbal and palpably frustrated by his inability to convey his basic needs. That was three years ago. Now a six-year-old boy with shining eyes and an infectious energy, he practices his "Trick or Treat!" for us with a youthful enthusiasm that I always took for granted before my first visit to a RiteCare clinic.

When I first arrived at the Hilgenberg Center, Sarah Spicer, Speech-Language Pathologist Clinical Fellow, took me on a brief tour of the facilities. She proudly pointed out the framed hand-drawn pictures on the walls—drawn by the children during sessions and the abundance of play and learning materials donated by the Maryland Scottish Rite Women's Club. Once Ms. Chrissy was done wrapping up a session, she sat down with me to speak about the Hilgenberg Center and the kids she treats.

Whether using iPads—or pumpkins—clinicians at the Hilgenberg Scottish Rite Childhood Speech and Language Center strive to help Baltimore-area children communicate.
The Hilgenberg Center in Baltimore is funded entirely by the Scottish Rite Orient of Maryland, from paying clinicians' salaries to providing learning and play materials for the children.

"Ms. Chrissy," also known as Christine (Chrissy) Wandishin, M.S., CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist, has been working for Baltimore RiteCare for the last ten years. The clinicians who work at the Hilgenberg Center—two full-time, a few part-time, and one currently on maternity leave—are employed by the Hearing and Speech Agency, a local non-profit providing vital communication services to those with speech-language disabilities. The Hilgenberg Center is funded entirely by the Scottish Rite Orient of Maryland, from paying clinicians' salaries to providing learning and play materials for the children. The Hilgenberg Center is connected to the beautiful Scottish Rite Masonic Center on Charles Street, and it is clear that the Maryland Scottish Rite proudly plays an active role in supporting the Baltimore RiteCare Center.

The Hilgenberg Center is quite active year-round in its surrounding community. Its SLPs spend four mornings a week partnering with local schools to provide treatment and conduct speech and language screenings, while holding private sessions in the afternoons at the RiteCare Center. In all, the SLPs see about 60 kids per week. They often open their doors for observation studies with local universities, such as with neighboring Towson University.

This past summer, the Baltimore RiteCare Center held its first summer camp, a six-week pre-literacy camp called "Plant the Seed... Before They Read." This inaugural camp focused on comprehension, vocabulary building, rhyming, and other vital lessons for beginning readers and rising kindergartners. More information on this summer camp can be found at the Hearing and Speech Agency's website: http://www.hasa.org/stories/summer-programs.

The children who utilize Baltimore's RiteCare Center range in age from 15 months to 21 years, though the average is in both the Center and the schools are elementary-school age children, or 5-10 years old. The focus of the treatment is articulation, language, and pre-literacy. Treatment length varies for individual clients as well as their diagnoses: for example, a child who needs help with articulation may take 3 months to a year depending on the child's age and the sounds being worked on.

Yet, not at all children start on the same playing field when they enter into Ms. Chrissy's care. In the past five years, Chrissy has seen a rise in demand to treat severely autistic children, many of whom are nonverbal. The Hearing and Speech Agency, which has a special school called the Gateway School for children with speech, hearing or language impairments, has itself seen its numbers expand to accommodate this rising trend. Chrissy says that a child with severe autism may take several years, since there are more skills to address.

Chrissy has been treating children at the Baltimore RiteCare Center for many years, and, while still using her tried-and-true methods to tackle speech and language impairments, has adapted her techniques to take advantage of modern technology. She effectively treats both her nonverbal and verbal patient's using games and applications on an iPad, where children practice pronunciation, articulation, rhyming, and comprehension. She uses the application Proloquo2Go, a communications tool that uses pictures and sound bites to help her nonverbal patients begin to speak, help her patients with speech impairments focus on articulation through tongue placement, and help with language development and literacy for the more advanced communicators.

In visiting the Baltimore RiteCare Center, it is absolutely clear that Ms. Chrissy and the SLPs working alongside her are doing a wonderful job with the resources they have, working through the clinic as well as seeking contracts with local schools to amplify their ability to help children in need. The 2016 RiteCare Conference will be held in Denver, CO, October 13–15, 2016.