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# *Connecting Neighbors*

THE ROLE OF  
SETTLEMENT  
HOUSES  
IN BUILDING  
SOCIAL BONDS  
WITHIN  
COMMUNITIES

A Report Prepared for United Neighborhood Houses of New York

## Acknowledgments

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Prue Brown and Kitty Barnes researched and developed this report collaboratively. Together they visited ten settlement houses in New York City and interviewed select staff and participants. In its style and formatting, *Connecting Neighbors* seeks to reflect the dual process through which its subject material was examined: experience and reflection. The report is written in two distinct voices. In the opening and closing sections of the report, Prue Brown provides the context for examining neighbor-to-neighbor relationships and the analysis of the experiences related in the profiles. The ten profiles were written by Kitty Barnes. They describe the settlement houses and recount the experience of participants in some of the agencies' programs.

## Photographer

**Paul Stetzer, Jr.** After thirty years as an educator, Paul Stetzer now works as a photographer. He does documentary photography that bears witness to people and organizations engaged in social change. He also makes landscapes and portraits.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Project Design .....	7
Neighbor-to-Neighbor Relationships .....	8
Settlement House Program Profiles.....	11
Profiles	
Grand Street Settlement: Grand Coalition of Seniors .....	12
Lenox Hill Neighborhood House: New Horizon Courier Service.....	18
Goddard Riverside Community Center: Family Council .....	24
RENA-COA Multi-Service Center: Parents Helping Parents.....	30
Hudson Guild: Theatre Company .....	36
Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center: Elders At Home .....	44
Supportive Children's Advocacy Network: Family Camping Weekends .....	50
United Community Centers: Farmers' Market.....	56
University Settlement Society of New York: Women as Resources Against Poverty .....	64
Forest Hills Community House: Garden Party .....	72
The Role of the Settlement House in Fostering Relationships among Neighbors.....	79
Conclusion.....	85
Endnotes .....	86
References.....	87
Contact Information .....	88

# Preface

**F**or some time now, social scientists such as Robert Putnam have been saying that Americans are increasingly “bowling alone.” There is certainly evidence that many people are experiencing a growing sense of isolation, that connections among individuals and their communities are fraying. Years of declining voter turnout and the drop-off in participation in many traditional associations and organizations are two oft-cited examples of this trend.

Settlement houses nonetheless continue to be hubs of community-level activity, participation, and relationship-building in neighborhoods across New York City and the nation. Why? What is it about this century-old model of service delivery that continues to connect neighbors with one another in the 21st century?

Since the first settlement house opened its doors 114 years ago, these centers have been warm, welcoming places where community residents from all walks of life, a diversity of ethnic and racial heritages, all along the life span, have participated in and enjoyed cultural and recreational activities; used educational services, child care, employment training, and other programs, and joined with others to address community issues. For more than 81 years, United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) has worked with its member settlement houses to collect the wisdom and experience gained from providing these services, take the case to cause, and to advocate for social justice.

Douglas Nelson, the President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, believed that there would be interest among practitioners in the field of community development in the lessons learned from the decades of relationship building in settlement house communities. This report, written with the generous support of the Casey Foundation, looks at how the atmosphere, programs, and activities at the settlement houses create, foster, and support relationships among individuals participating in the various settlement house services or activities. This growth of fellowship and mutual support—and the social capital created—is a hitherto unexplored aspect of the work done by settlement houses and other community organizations, the kind of work that is often taken for granted.

Unfortunately, it is becoming harder to sustain the integrated approach to programming that fosters relationship building. Public and private funding sources target discrete problems and populations, leaving little flexibility to pursue initiatives that focus on building or reinforcing the strengths of a community, which start with relationships between neighbors.

Increased support for programs that meet service needs *and* foster social capital is critical to strengthening individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

In four earlier monographs, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago has documented the role of settlement houses in community building. Once again, UNH has been extremely fortunate to have the extraordinary skills and sensitivity of Prudence Brown to undertake this unique exercise. Prue has been ably assisted by Kitty Barnes. An advisory committee, chaired by UNH Board member Anne Kubisch, provided guidance to the effort. The gifted photographer, Paul Stetzer, has made the stories of genuine friendships and inspiring mutual support and action come to life.

These stories are but a few of the many that could have been told. They are all the results of the efforts of the boards, staff, and volunteers of the settlement houses to create more and better opportunities for the individuals, families, and communities in New York City. We at UNH are fortunate to be able to work with them.

Emily Menlo Marks  
Executive Director  
United Neighborhood Houses

# Introduction

*"In 1926, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, founder of Greenwich House in 1902, wrote that 'the aim of the settlement or neighborhood house is to bring about a new kind of community life. It is the home of friendly neighbors, and a center of information, organization and service.' . . . It is in the community or neighborhood that people seek and fight for solutions to their concrete, daily, local and immediate problems. Although the community remains the focus of the settlement's attention, it is through the personalized and direct involvement with the individual, in the context of the family—often throughout a lifetime—that the settlement fosters and supports the values of fellowship and mutual support."*<sup>1</sup>

Settlement houses have a long tradition of fostering relationships among neighbors, of being an "extended living room" for residents who come together for fellowship and mutual support. From the settlement's perspective these relationships constitute the primary vehicle through which residents can address the problems facing them, their families, and the communities in which they live.

The Neighbors-to-Neighbors Community-Building Project focuses on how settlement houses act deliberately to establish and deepen these relationships, particularly the ties between and among residents that can provide support, knowledge, and skills and can form the basis for mutual helping, productive inter-group relations, and social action. There may seem to be an inherent paradox in the goal of creating or strengthening natural helping relationships and networks: if they are *natural*, why do we need deliberate strategies for nurturing them and making them more effective? What we have found is that many residents of contemporary urban neighborhoods experience some form of isolation that makes it difficult for them to connect to people and networks that could provide support and opportunity.

Settlement houses strive to reduce this isolation by providing a hospitable space and high quality programs in which people's sense of possibilities, their connections to their neighbors, and their sense of belonging to the larger community are fostered. Settlements view residents as neighbors rather than as clients. This perspective has profound implications for the way in which services are delivered, social connections are formed, and communities are built. In many cases, it means that people do not have to ask for help; the support they need simply comes from being part of ongoing relationships within a settlement house community.

By exploring how settlements promote relationships among participants, the Neighbors-to-Neighbors Community-Building Project aims to illuminate the nature and consequences of these relationships and, in the process, demonstrate their central role in community-based practice. We hope that this report will stimulate our primary audience—administrators, program developers, front-line practitioners, and community volunteers in community-based organizations—to consider how to devote more deliberate attention to building relationships among neighbors in their work and in their organizations. We also hope that funders and policymakers will gain a greater appreciation for the valuable role that these relationships play as an integral part—not just a side benefit—of high quality, sustainable programs.

The report is divided into four sections. The first describes the design of the Neighbors-to-Neighbors Community-Building Project. The second section examines the roles that neighbor-to-neighbor relationships can play in a community—why these relationships are important and what functions they serve, both for the individual and for the community. Next are profiles of ten settlement house programs that illustrate different kinds of neighbor-to-neighbor relationships. The report ends with an examination of the philosophy and values of settlement houses that facilitate these relationships, including some operational lessons about how the settlements translate these values into effective programming.

## PROJECT DESIGN

The Neighbors-to-Neighbors Community-Building Project was developed by United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), the umbrella organization for 37 settlement houses in New York City. Early in 2000, UNH invited its member houses to nominate programs and activities that would help to illustrate a range of approaches to building neighbor-to-neighbor relationships. Because most settlement programs involve relationships of some sort, the invitation noted that UNH was interested in relationships with a particular set of characteristics:

- Relationships among participants, rather than the traditional helping relationship between settlement staff and participants. Relationships may be among peers, across generations, within families, across different racial/ethnic groups, and so forth.
- Relationships that serve a discernible function, such as providing support, knowledge, or skills, and that form the basis for mutual helping, spiritual/cultural enrichment, productive inter-group relations, advocacy and social action, or some other function for the individual, family, or community.

- Relationships that are likely to endure or have some consequence beyond the immediate moment, that can be called upon when an individual needs information, assistance, or support, or when neighbors need to band together for a common cause.

A team of Chapin Hall and UNH staff reviewed the nominations and made site visits to finalists to assess their fit with the goals of the project. As a result, ten settlement programs were selected to participate. Resource considerations precluded including numerous other examples of settlement programs that promote neighbor-to-neighbor relations, such as teen mentoring and peer counseling programs, tenant and block club organizing, and neighborhood art projects, to name a few. In fact, most settlement practice is guided by the strong value placed on such relationships. As a consequence, our choice of programs to profile was largely a function of a commitment to achieving a diverse mix of programs and settlements, rather than selecting model programs of a highly unusual nature or even the most exemplary programs of their type (though they may be). Many of the program elements described in the profiles are simply *good practice* that can be found in family support centers, comprehensive employment programs, or neighborhood associations. The profiled programs are distinctive because they reflect typical settlement practice; that is, they operate in a context—the settlement house—that provides the values and supports that contribute in important ways to program effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Data collection at each site involved interviews with the settlement house director or senior staff and program staff, observation of the program or activity, interviews and focus groups with a small number (4-8) of participants, and review of settlement house material about the program and about the settlement itself.<sup>3</sup> The open-ended interviews with participants explored the history of their involvement in the settlement, the nature of their experience in the particular program or activity of interest, and their assessment of this experience and its meaning for them. Interviews with settlement staff inquired about how the settlement contributed to the goal of fostering relationships among neighbors and about what challenges staff encountered in working toward this goal. Most of the interviews were taped so that we could capture in the profiles the experience of participants and staff in their own words. In an effort to give them voice, we have written the profiles in a different style and used photographs to give the reader a graphic sense of the story that is being depicted.

The final section of the report presents a synthesized reflection on the part of the authors, settlement staff, and selected participants about the relationships that are formed in settlement programs and about the impact of these relationships. This reflection is based on the experience described in the ten profiled programs rather than an evaluation or systematic comparative analysis of the settlement programs. We now turn to a summary of what we know about why these relationships are important and what functions they serve for individuals and the communities in which they live.

## NEIGHBOR-TO-NEIGHBOR RELATIONSHIPS

An irony of contemporary urban life is that despite the density of city living, many people feel alone, disconnected from individuals, networks, and institutions that could provide social support and a sense of shared experience and common interest.

This isolation takes many forms and has many causes. It is the mother who moves out of a homeless shelter to start a life in a neighborhood where she knows no one. It is the individual recovering from substance abuse whose old social networks have been frayed beyond repair. It is the older person who has lost friends and family members and is afraid to venture out alone. It is the youth who wants to find a job but has no experience in the labor force and has no idea where to begin. These individuals experience isolation in very different ways, but all share a need to make new connections that can bring them practical help, companionship, and emotional support.

Many forces have led to a weakening of informal social networks and traditional communal supports in urban neighborhoods: increased mobility, family disruption, changing neighborhood demographics, and concern with crime and safety, along with the decline of such mediating institutions as the neighborhood school and church.<sup>4</sup> These forces have particularly negative consequences in poor neighborhoods that suffer from a chronic lack of public and private investment.

In such neighborhoods, economic and political isolation further exacerbates social isolation. The daily stresses of poverty—and the attendant challenges of finding decent housing, paying for food and rent, caring for children and other family members, obtaining good medical care, and dealing with bureaucratic hurdles—can undermine the ability to cope over time. People who are isolated have less opportunity to learn from others about resources and opportunities and about how to access them. In addition, they are typically less likely to see a way to exert control over the larger forces affecting their lives, either alone or collectively with others who share similar circumstances.

### Why are Neighbor-to-Neighbor Relationships Important?

Relationships among neighbors can serve two important functions. First, they can provide social support to the individual and family. Second, they can contribute to the community's store of social capital, networks of social ties that link people to one another and help a community function effectively.

**Social support.** Growing evidence that social relationships are important to health, mental health, and the ability to cope with stress prompted research on social support.<sup>5</sup> People with families, friends, and other social connections that provide psychological and material resources experience more well-being than those with fewer supportive social contacts.<sup>6</sup> Four principal forms of social support can operate separately or together depending on circumstances, availability, and relevance.<sup>7</sup>

- **Instrumental support:** any form of direct assistance or practical help such as child care, transportation, or money
- **Informational support:** the provision of or access to facts, advice, and referrals
- **Affiliative support:** companionship or fellowship with others who share a common interest or place
- **Emotional support:** communication that a person is understood, valued for his or her own worth, and accepted despite any difficulties or shortcomings

Many questions exist about how social supports actually work to buffer the effects of stress and contribute to an overall

sense of well-being. We do not know, for example, how much being embedded in a social network has positive effects because it makes people assess potential stress as less dangerous or overwhelming, it actually improves the way they cope with stress, or it makes their feelings of confidence and efficacy more robust in the face of stress.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, different kinds of relationships are useful for different kinds of support. A close, confiding relationship provides ongoing emotional support but is not required if a person needs help moving into an apartment, advice on how to deal with a sick child, or the companionship of a weekly social group.

Similarly, social networks provide support in different ways depending on who is in the network, how long the network has existed, how strong the ties are among its members, and so forth. A case in point is networks among people who do not have close ties. These networks do not typically provide much emotional support, but they may be better at connecting an individual or family to broader resources and opportunities. One study found, for example, that job seekers were most likely to have first learned about the jobs that they eventually secured through people with whom they had only weak ties.<sup>9</sup> Isolated individuals, such as an unemployed young person or a tenant living in a deteriorated building, may find socializing and modest practical support in a network composed of people who share their plight. But what they also need in order to take the steps required to change their circumstances are ties to people outside of their network—people, for example, in diverse employment networks or on the boards of tenants' rights organizations.

Another way to think about how social relationships contribute to well-being focuses on the *need to belong* as a fundamental human motivation. Existing research supports the notion that human beings have a powerful drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of positive interpersonal relationships.<sup>10</sup> The need to belong has two main features. First, people need some threshold level of ongoing interaction with the other person(s) whether that be informal, such as with extended families, neighbors, or co-workers, or more formal, through participation in a faith community, cultural organization, or sports team. Second, people need to feel that the other person or the group cares about their welfare; this is in part what differentiates a sense of belonging or social attachment from an interaction with a stranger or casual acquaintance.

To provide support, social relationships do not require deep mutual caring or intimate friendship, although such feelings sometimes develop. These relationships do, however, depend on what researchers have called a "temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare."<sup>11</sup> In other words, the need to belong requires some regular social contact with those to whom one feels some positive connection.

An additional perspective on social support comes from the experience of mutual aid and self-help groups. Here, people who share some common status or need (e.g., recovering substance abusers, parents with disabled children, women who have experienced domestic violence) come together on a regular basis for mutual support and problem solving. One of the lessons from these groups is the essential role of reciprocity in supportive relationships. Viewing oneself as a resource and potential helpgiver, as well as someone receiving help, can bestow special benefits—learning about self, feeling competent and socially useful, and experiencing the satisfactions of caring about another person, as well as being cared for.<sup>12</sup>

**Social capital and community building.** When people form relationships that are characterized by trust, reciprocity, and respect, they produce a resource called social capital.<sup>13</sup> Although researchers emphasize different components of social capital, and operationalize the concept in somewhat different ways, the social capital produced by networks of neighborhood-based relationships has been associated with positive consequences both for the individual and for the neighborhood as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Neighborhoods work better when there are rich ties among residents, associations, and organizations that facilitate trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared interest.<sup>15</sup> In addition to providing instrumental benefits for the individual, these ties can generate the following outcomes for the community:

- Contribute to a sense of community, identity, spirit, and pride that can be the foundation for participation in community life<sup>16</sup>
- Build understanding and personal connections among people of different ages, classes, and racial/ethnic groups that can act as an antidote to fear and mistrust<sup>17</sup>
- Help to develop and strengthen positive social norms and exert social control over anti-social behavior<sup>18</sup>
- Form the basis for identifying shared interests and taking action to promote these interests and collective goals<sup>19</sup>
- Connect the neighborhood to outside resources and opportunities<sup>20</sup>

Social capital is often invoked in community-building efforts that aim to reweave social fabric and enhance civic participation in the service of community improvement. Although research on the links between community building and social capital is still very much in development, whether and how social capital can be built deliberately is the focus of a number of comprehensive community initiatives and surveys.<sup>21</sup>

## SETTLEMENT HOUSE PROGRAM PROFILES

We have seen that neighbor-to-neighbor relationships have important potential to improve both individual and community well-being. They can provide social support that helps individuals feel less isolated and better able to cope, and they can build the social capital that helps the community function effectively. The following program profiles provide ten concrete illustrations of how settlements nurture relationships among often isolated neighbors. The profiles depict the different kinds of social support these relationships provide participants and what this support means for the individuals and the communities in which they live.

The isolation the residents in these profiles experience comes from many sources—being single parents, elderly or homebound, formerly homeless, economically marginal, troubled by substance abuse or mental health problems, or unable to influence important forces affecting their lives and their neighborhoods. What these residents share is the desire for fellowship, support, and common cause. What the settlements share is a set of core values that guide their approach to engaging neighborhood residents and connecting them to each other as well as to resources and opportunities in the neighborhood and beyond. ●

“W

hat is love?”

The question is certainly appropriate to the occasion. Here, in the main activity room of the Grand Street Settlement, about 150 senior citizens have gathered to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of Luis and Elena Baez. On the tables are vases filled with fresh-cut daisies and marigolds. Blue and white paper flowers, handmade by the seniors’ arts and crafts group, decorate the walls and curl, in garlands, around the wire bower under which the couple will stand to renew their wedding vows.

For months, the Grand Coalition of Seniors has been preparing for this event, honoring two of its members. The seniors helped plan the menu and choose the music. They hand-wrapped the confetti favors and tied and pinned the commemorative boutonnières worn by each of the guests. One of the seniors, Mariela Gutierrez, even made the dress worn by the bride.

Obviously, this is not a group that enjoys down time. So while they wait for the Baez family to make their appearance, several members of the coalition attempt to answer the question one of them has posed.

“Love is what puts enthusiasm in your life. It makes you happy to get out of bed in the morning.”

“I know what love is not. It’s not easy. But it’s worth the trouble.”

“Love is, like they say in the wedding vows, staying together in sickness and health, for richer or poorer.”

As the others talk, one man writes rapidly on a small sheet of paper, then stands up and says, “For Elena and Luis, here’s what love is: 50 years, 600 months, 18,250 days, 438,000 hours, 26,280,000 minutes, and—if they only kissed once in the morning and once in the evening all their life together—36,500 kisses.”

The Grand Coalition is composed of Spanish-, English-, and Chinese-speaking members. So with each answer, there has been a flurry of translation from one of these languages to another. But everyone seems to have understood this last response, and it gets a round of applause, followed by a tri-lingual cheer: “Amor,” “Ai,” “Love.”

That is the chorus that greets the Baez family as they enter the crowded hall a few at a time: the two grown children with their spouses, five grandchildren, the sister of the bride, and finally Elena and Luis. The anniversary couple walks slowly to the flower-covered arch, and the ceremony begins.

## Grand Street Settlement

G R A N D  
C O A L I T I O N  
O F S E N I O R S



“Like many activities of the Grand Coalition, this wonderful celebration was created not only for seniors, but by seniors,” says Carolina Grynbal, Grand Street’s chief program officer. “The settlement house provides a place and resources for most activities, and the staff helps to provide structure and support. But the seniors really take leadership in developing the program—and ownership.

“For many years, the coalition was almost entirely Latino,” Grynbal continues. “Those seniors seem to have a deep personal connection to one another. Culturally, their boundaries are very open, from the family to the neighbors to the coalition members. They created a culture here that is very close, very warm and supportive. And now as many Chinese and other ethnic groups are joining the seniors’ program, they are being welcomed into that culture, and the new members seem to be bonding with older members in that same strong, connected way. I really think what promotes this powerful sense of community here is



that participants in the coalition, as in most of our programs, have the opportunity to take the initiative in shaping the program and in helping one another. That's the philosophy of Grand Street and it's a philosophy on which all our groups, including the seniors, seem to thrive."

Grand Street, founded in 1916, is located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a neighborhood traditionally occupied by new immigrants to the United States. The agency's programs

aim to promote self-sufficiency by providing relevant and culturally sensitive social services. Currently, Grand Street serves 5,000 Latino-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Jewish-American community members annually through programs in the following areas: early childhood, younger children, youth development, school-based services, a Beacon center, employment services, and senior services.

About 160 seniors participate in the agency's Grand Coalition of Seniors activities every day, five days a week. The program typically opens at seven in the morning and begins with a physical workout, either walking or a highly competitive basketball game, men versus women. (At present, the women have a lead of several games; participants keep score of each game, and of the long-term count, with an avid intensity.) After a light breakfast of rolls and coffee, members join organized group activities including arts and crafts, dancing, yoga, and beauty culture. Many mornings, there are lectures on subjects from nutrition to elder law. The center also provides various free health screenings several mornings each month; bimonthly hypertension screenings are provided by specially trained member volunteers.

At lunch time, the seniors socialize widely at first, but tend to end up eating alongside their closest companions at the same tables every day—a phenomenon they have turned to the common advantage of all. Each day a self-appointed "captain" checks attendance at her or his own table. If any regular lunch mates are missing, the captain informs a volunteer senior group called the Friendly Visitors. The Visitors contact the missing seniors to make sure everything is okay. If it turns out that the absentee member is sick or in need of some kind of help, Visitors will get them support or spend time with them at home or in the hospital.

Afternoon activities at the senior center are more loosely organized. Members may set up a game of bingo or dominoes or take a walk together or just sit and talk with one another.



"I HELP OUT.  
I DO WHATEVER NEEDS  
TO BE DONE. I OWE A  
LOT TO THIS GROUP, AND I  
LIKE TO BE ABLE TO GIVE  
BACK IN ANY WAY I CAN."

"It's a full day, but that's the way the members plan it, and that's the way they like it," says Luz Lavin, senior center director. "We have a staff of three who work on the seniors' program, but it's really the members themselves who guide and run the coalition. Members serve on the advisory council, which has a lot to say about the general direction of the program and what our activities will be. Various committees of the advisory council perform critical functions, like welcoming new members and helping to integrate them into the group and handling disputes and grievances among participants. Members developed and run Friendly Visitors as well as Grandfriends, an inter-generational program in which our seniors work with children at the local elementary school, and the Sunshine Club, in which members visit the homebound. And member volunteers do much of the work of operating the coalition, everything from running errands to running activities. We literally could not run the program without them."

One of the most active member volunteers is Israel Santiago. It was Santiago who shopped for the materials used in making the decorations for the Baez anniversary celebration. That was one of dozens of small tasks he performed to make the event a success, and one of hundreds of small errands he has run for the coalition since he joined the group in 1997.

"I help out in the office; I deliver messages and packages; I set up and take down tables in the main hall, preparing for different activities; I do whatever needs to be done," says Santiago. "I owe a lot to this group, and I like to be able to give back in any way I can."

For most of his life, Santiago had worked long

hours in maintenance and delivery services jobs, supporting his wife and five children. He says he had not made many friends until he found his way to Grand Street after he retired and separated from his wife of 44 years. "I never had a lot of time for socializing," says Santiago. "And my wife was very jealous, very possessive. She didn't like me to be spending time with other people. So when we separated, I got very lonely and very depressed. I was drinking too much. I didn't think I could do anything right. I was afraid to meet people, and when I had to go out, like when I was called for jury duty, I was so scared I was actually shaking.



"What turned me around, it sounds funny, is matchboxes," Santiago continues. "I came to Grand Street and the first week the director suggested I try arts and crafts. They were decorating matchboxes. So I worked in the back of the room, trying to be invisible. And when I was finished with my matchbox, one of the other seniors said, 'Look, that's really beautiful what he made.' And everyone came over to look. They were so appreciative. I said to myself, 'Maybe I have some value; maybe I'm worth something.'

"In a little while, I was talking to people and feeling better. And listening to other people. When I heard some other people's stories I realized I wasn't the only person in the world with problems. I love the feeling when I help other people here, like when we visit members who are sick at home or in the hospital. I feel so positive here. Before I came to Grand Street, my legs were so stiff, I hardly could walk. Now every chance I get, I'm dancing."

In fact, Santiago was one of the first out onto the dance floor at the anniversary celebration.

The settlement house offers many services to seniors, including professional psychological counseling. And coalition participants do avail themselves of those services. But many seniors claim that it is their peers in the program who understand them best and who are most helpful to them in times of need.

Leonor Colon, a coalition member since 1990, explains. "When I see people here who are depressed, I can relate to them," says Colon. "I was very depressed myself when I first came here. I'd been divorced for a long time. My son was grown and married and living with his family, which is good. After I retired, my brother came to live with me. He was more like a father than a brother to me. Then he died, and I got very down. I knew about depression from my old job, so I knew I had to do something to help myself."

Colon had worked as a financial investigator at Beth Israel Hospital for 23 years before retiring in 1990. For the last 44 years,

she has lived in the same apartment on the Lower East Side, where she seems to know nearly everyone in the neighborhood. In fact, it was a neighbor who told her about the Grand Street Coalition.

"I know that it makes me feel better to help others," says Colon. "When I came here, I wanted to be useful. One of the first group meetings I went to, I was shocked to hear a couple of women say that they had no home of their own. They stayed sometimes with a friend, sometimes with neighbors. At that time there was new low-income housing being built in the neighborhood, and I knew the woman processing applications for apartments there. I told the homeless women in our group to apply, and then I asked my friend in the applications department couldn't they have priority because of their circumstances. Well, they got the apartments. And when they moved in, I said, 'God have mercy, life is beautiful, and so are these apartments.' I was so happy. I think I was even happier than the women who got the new apartments."

Colon is often this resourceful and effective in her efforts to help her friends in the coalition. Several times a year, she gathers together a small group of what she calls "stressed seniors," piles them into her car, and brings them up to her small house on Long Island for a weekend of relaxation. She organizes group dinners at her apartment or at an inexpensive local restaurant as well as informal walking expeditions in the neighborhood. An expert seamstress, she worked for many days on the favors and flowers for the Baez anniversary celebration, and she helped to embroider the pillow used by the ring-bearer.

"These happy events bring people out of themselves and together with others," says Colon. "When I see people depressed, I say, 'Come over and talk to me, join in with us.' I have a neighbor who's always getting migraines. I know what would make her feel better—to come here and talk to us. We laugh and joke, sometimes clean jokes, sometimes dirty. And we talk about our problems. Here there are lots of different kinds of people. But everyone, no matter whether Puerto Rican or Dominican or African-American or Chinese, everyone has problems and everyone wants to feel good about themselves. Here we can all share our troubles and we can all laugh, too. If you want to feel better, this is the place."

The settlement house has no income or residence requirements for admission into the Grand Coalition of Seniors. All participants are 60 years of age or older, but they are otherwise quite diverse, especially in their ethnic backgrounds. Members seem to enjoy these differences among themselves, and to use them as a source of personal enrichment.

"Everyone has different things to teach and to learn," says Robert Chung, a coalition member for more than three years. "Many things in Chinese culture I think seemed strange to others, just as their cultures were not familiar to us. But we talked about these things, and we taught one another. At first, tai chi classes here were all filled with Chinese people, but now many Latinos have joined. And many Chinese people are now going to salsa classes. This learning, this sharing with others, is what keeps people young. This is a senior group, but it is a very young group of seniors."

As Chung finishes talking, the dance music comes on full blast. And while he listens to the subtle but irresistible beat of "Besame Mucho," Chung begins to practice a discreet merengue, first with his feet alone, and then with his hips and shoulders as well.

Luz Lavin, the center director, watches as seniors pair up on the dance floor to salsa—Latino and Chinese, some robust and others frail, all smiling. "In the next few months, we're hoping to start a cross-cultural program," says Lavin. "But as you can see, the seniors are already way ahead of us." ●

## Lenox Hill Neighborhood House

N E W  
H O R I Z O N  
C O U R I E R  
S E R V I C E

**A**t four o'clock on a summer afternoon, as the rest of New York City begins to wind down, the headquarters office of New Horizon Courier Service is bustling with activity. The phone is ringing, two messengers wait at the front desk for the dispatcher to check their delivery orders, and a bookkeeper reviews staffing charts while pouring a round of freshly brewed coffees.

At a large table in the middle of the room, the office manager, Eddie Mendez, is describing the agency to a potential client. "We're different, but maybe not for the reason you think," says Mendez. "New Horizon is a messenger service operated by homeless and formerly homeless people. But that's not what sets us apart. How we're different is that we try harder and we work better than our competition. We take this work very seriously and personally, because we're not just building a business here, we're building lives.

"This is a well-run business, reliable and efficient, and our prices are competitive," Mendez continues, "But that's not all there is to us. I didn't get involved with New Horizon Courier Service because of the money. Especially at the beginning, the money was not good. I got involved because I love the concept of helping people to help themselves."

Eddie Mendez is not alone. The concept of helping people to help themselves has proven to be a powerfully attractive force to just about everyone connected with New Horizon. It was the organizing principle in the thinking of Lenox Hill Neighborhood House staff members who helped establish the program. It has been an effective tool for recruiting employees, like Mendez, and for keeping them engaged in and enthusiastic about their work. It is a consistently strong selling point in marketing the business to clients. And perhaps most important, over time this simple concept has become an enduring bond, transforming the diverse groups of people who create, provide, and use the program's services into a caring community.

One reason New Horizon has been so successful in cultivating and promoting self-sufficiency is that the organization was well designed from the start. The courier service began informally in 1993, as part of a pre-vocational training program for residents of Casa Mutua, an SRO facility, operated by Lenox Hill, that provides permanent housing for formerly homeless, mentally ill adults. At first, Casa Mutua residents simply carried letters and packages back and forth between their residence and the settlement house. Participants liked the work because it was



socially integrating and it offered flexible hours. After a while, the popular program expanded, employing homeless and formerly homeless participants from outside Casa Mutua and recruiting a few additional nonprofit agencies as clients. In 1997, with support from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant, Lenox Hill launched New Horizon as a business whose goal was to become fully self-sufficient and worker-owned. The fledgling enterprise moved from the basement of Casa Mutua to its present location on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan's Spanish Harlem in January 1998.

"This program grew from a homeless program with a focus on vocational training to a business that thrives on mutual help and caring," says Lynn Appelbaum, associate executive director for organizational and strategic planning at Lenox Hill. "Our vision at first was to create a program that addressed both job creation and case management. We were interested in promoting independence among

homeless and formerly homeless people. Our overall mission at Lenox Hill is to help individuals strengthen themselves and strengthen our community. You could say our business is creating a strong community." Founded in 1894, Lenox Hill has been helping to create a strong community, assisting those in need, and improving the quality of life for residents of Manhattan's East Side for more than a century. The oldest and largest settlement house in the neighborhood, Lenox Hill serves more than 20,000 people annually through a range of programs in five areas: youth and family services, older adult services, community services and education, recreation and fitness, and homeless services.

Lenox Hill places great faith in the power of individuals. "We believe that people have the capacity for self-direction and growth," reads the agency's mission statement. "Helping people to become or remain as independent as possible is central to each of our programs."

James Conley, who helped develop New Horizon courier service and who served as its project manager for nearly three years, thinks that the emphasis on individual empowerment was critical to the successful growth of the project. "Every step of the way, Lenox Hill engaged New Horizon workers in making the decisions that shaped the business," says Conley. "We actively solicited their participation from the beginning, putting up flyers at Casa Mutua that said, 'Anyone interested in carrying the messenger service to a new level, please come to meetings.' I served as a facilitator and guide, but it was the workers who developed the business plan and crafted the mission statement and shaped the culture of New Horizon. They even named the business. And it's important to mention that they did all this in a highly collaborative manner, working in teams and relying on one another for different skills that were needed, like leadership, salesmanship, organizational know-how, communications, expertise with bookkeeping or with handling personnel issues."

In less than three years of operation, New Horizon has employed 42 homeless or formerly homeless people, 10 of whom have held their jobs for more than a year. At present, the program has 15 workers: 11 messengers and four office staff. Despite rapid growth and the constant turnover characteristic of the industry, the approach employed at the beginning of the business has persisted to the present day. Lenox Hill staff still provides structure, guidance, and support, and the New Horizon workers shape the evolution of the business, develop and implement operations procedures, establish and maintain the corporate culture.

A strong part of that culture is team-building. Workers have high expectations of one another, and they have created a highly supportive environment to help fulfill those expectations. Veteran workers act as mentors to new hires, not only showing them the ropes, but also keeping a sharp eye out for the special abilities or special needs that rookies bring to the job.

Richard West, one of the long-time workers at New Horizon, describes his training methods: "You need to know the business and you need to know how to get around the city, but you need patience most of all," says West. "This is a very slow process, and you have to take your time. Before I take someone out, I tell them the job is really simple: all you have to do is know how to travel. That's the first thing I say to them. You have to know mass transit. Get from Point A to Point B. I give them a little quiz. How do you get from the New Horizon office at 102nd Street and Lexington Avenue to 110th Street and Broadway? One guy might say, 'I'd take the Number 6 train to 96th Street, take the crosstown bus, then take the train up.' But I'm waiting for him to give me another response, so I say, 'Any way you might get there quicker?' And then he gives me the right answer, which is, 'Take the Number 4 bus on Madison Avenue that takes you across town on 110th Street and you're right there.' Then there's the question of



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the right exit. Let's say you're going to take the train to go to Carnegie Hall from this office. You have to be in the third car of the Number 6 downtown, because then you're going to come out exactly where the exit is to go to the R train to transfer. This is so important. I stress this not to flip people out, but because this is what saves time, and time is money.

"But money is not the most important thing," West continues. "I want workers to be efficient and to be agile. But most important is that they gain confidence and that they not have so much stress that they give up. If I see someone getting a little panicky, I say, 'Don't stress yourself, because then you'll lose your way and forget what to do. If you feel over-stressed, sit down and gather your thoughts. Give yourself five minutes. And you've always got a phone nearby; use it. Call the office. You're not alone. I'm here. The dispatcher is here. We'll guide you through it. This is a very sympathetic environment.'"

Navigating New York City's public transit system is a fine craft, difficult to master. So are strategic planning, scheduling and routing messengers, marketing services, managing personnel. New Horizon workers are learning all these crafts with meticulous care. They need these skills to build the business.

Mastering these difficult aspects of the business is also a source of individual pride and a bond of fellowship and community at New Horizon. Workers understand the transformative power of their accomplishments.

"You start making changes in yourself, and a little while later you look around and everything is changed," says Mendez. "When I first joined New Horizon, I didn't really need to work. I had welfare and I was comfortable sleeping all day, taking my medicine, and going to my therapy. But I was really interested in the concept of bringing people off welfare and into self-sufficiency. So when I was asked to help start the business, I said yes.

"I began as a part-time messenger. The first day I did dispatching I was scared out of my mind. It was really busy, and I didn't think I could do it. But I learned. And then I decided to give up my welfare and my food stamps. I was hard pressed for a couple of months. But I stuck with it. I became the first person at New Horizon to become independent.

"It is the same with the business," Mendez continues. "When we first started, we would make eight runs on a good day, at \$8 per run. We celebrated the first day we did 10 runs. Now we average about 35 runs every day. How? We got on the telephone and started making calls to get new clients. We made mistakes, but we learned from them, and each time we learned we got better. In the beginning we didn't have a table to work on or proper equipment. So we reached out and got help—a table, a copier, a desk, sheet rock and a new paint job for the walls.

"Before we moved in here, this place was a night club that sold drugs. The music was blaring all night, the door was banging. It finally got closed when someone was killed here. Now this is a business office. We changed it, and the neighbors changed their attitude towards us. We used to be the loonies, the crazies. People would walk down the other side of the sidewalk to avoid us. When they learned what we were doing, they got a lot of respect for us. They come in, they want to know what we're all about. The concept that we are helping ourselves, they like."

Most of the workers share a personal history that includes spells of homelessness, bouts of emotional and physical illness, dependence on public support. They understand, as others cannot, how difficult these obstacles are to overcome; and they respect and support one another's achievements. Many New Horizon workers have become good friends and spend



time together outside the office. The bonds are strong, and they seem to last even after some workers move on to other jobs.

Carlos Maneiro worked with New Horizon for more than two years. He came to the agency from a Manhattan veterans' residence, where he finally found shelter following nearly 14 years of homelessness after serving in the army in Vietnam. He says he gained enough confidence from his work at New Horizon to look for a higher-paying full-time job. In 1999, he was hired as a porter with Lenox Hill, a union job with benefits. Maneiro thinks the work at New Horizon turned his life around. "New York is hard for a person not working," says Maneiro. "You are alone, you are out of touch, and then you are lost. When I went to work at New Horizon, everyone was very supportive. They gave me something to aim for. I looked at the other workers and saw that they could do it, and it helped me to believe that I could too. They really took the job seriously. And they

respected you for doing the work. We had a lot in common. We understood each other. Now I've left, but I still see my friends at New Horizon all the time. We go out for coffee or just for a walk. Sometimes when I don't feel well, they call or come over. In New York you need someone to worry about you once in a while. We look out for one another."

New Horizon inspires that kind of protective concern in clients as well as workers. The agency has several dozen regular clients, including both citywide organizations and local groups, like St. Francis De Sales Church on Manhattan's East Side. Carmen Ramos-Cruz, the receptionist at St. Francis, has used New Horizon's services ever since the program was first established. "We were one of their first customers," says Ramos-Cruz. "And I am one of their most enthusiastic supporters. They are reliable and trustworthy. The messengers are friendly and nice, no attitude. I consider many of them to be friends. When my daughter got a job at Union Settlement community services agency, I told her to try New Horizon, and she did, and now they're a regular customer, too. I really encourage everyone to use them. In fact, St. Francis is opening a residence for the elderly, and I am going to make sure they use New Horizon. I'm for them, you know. They want a better life, and they're working for it. I count on them, and they always deliver. So I think they should be able to count on me for help when I can give it."

The courier business is built on trust. A client places a letter, or package, or check in the hands of a messenger and trusts that it will arrive at its intended destination. Of the thousands of deliveries New Horizon contracted to make since it opened for business, only two have failed to arrive—an exceptional record for this industry. By building trust with each new delivery, New Horizon is building a business, and so building lives and building community.

In the words of Renée Holloway, New Horizon dispatcher and bookkeeper, "Everyone loves to see the messenger arrive. That's true whether you're just bringing a memo from the boss or, like I did once, getting the wedding dress to the bride just before the wedding. They're happy to see you. And it makes you feel really good about yourself to make other people happy like that. You share that with your co-workers, that happiness at providing a good service. I like training new workers and I like bringing in new customers. When the business grows, that good feeling grows with it." ●

C

arlos Cordero is highly articulate, well informed, and deeply interested in public policy, especially issues concerning youth. Now in the 11th grade at the Professional Performing Arts School in Manhattan, Cordero is also a talented pianist, used to performing in public. But still he was nervous about getting up to speak as an advocate for youth programs before the Goddard Riverside Family Council.

“Earlier in the year, I had learned about the city’s proposal to cut funding for the Summer Youth Employment Program through some of the staff at Goddard Riverside,” says Cordero. “I’m a member of the Goddard Riverside Youth Council, and agency staff keep us informed about policies that affect young people. I would have been directly affected by the new policy, because the previous summer I had an SYEP job and I was hoping to get that job again this summer. So I was really motivated to organize opposition to the cuts. I tried talking up the issue with my peers, but their attitude was, ‘Whatever.’ They didn’t seem to listen or to care.

“When some of the Goddard Riverside staff asked me to make a presentation about the program cuts before the Family Council, I didn’t want to do it, because I thought, why would they care if my own friends didn’t? But I spoke anyway, and I’m really glad I did. The council members were very receptive and very appreciative. Many of them volunteered to help, and some even demonstrated with us at a UNH-sponsored rally on Wall Street the following week. I was so encouraged by their response that I offered to speak at the Wall Street rally myself. I composed a rap presentation and performed it in front of this huge crowd. I don’t think I would have had been able to do that without the positive experience of speaking to the Family Council.

“The rally and other protests were successful,” Cordero continues. “We raised public awareness about the proposed cuts, and as a result many SYEP programs remained in place this year, including at Goddard Riverside, where I got a job this summer as a junior counselor. The Family Council showed me how powerful it is when people with different backgrounds and different concerns come together to work for a single purpose.”

That is exactly what the Family Council was intended to do. Established in 1995, the council was designed to bring together staff and participants from all of the settlement’s various programs to promote a strong sense of community within the organization and to create a powerful voice for that community in the public forum.

## Goddard Riverside Community Center

F A M I L Y  
C O U N C I L



Goddard Riverside is located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and serves a geographic area with a large population of extraordinary racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. Participants in the agency’s programs are mostly low-income and represent a variety of household types and age groups. Goddard Riverside offers them a wide range of activities and services including permanent housing, housing preservation, and homelessness prevention; outreach, day programs, and employment-readiness programs for homeless and formerly homeless people; career awareness and college counseling; pre-school, afterschool, evening, summer camp, and school-based programs for children and youth; arts, recreation, and social services for older adults.

These diverse programs are all governed by the same operating principles, which have been published by the agency and posted throughout the center: “At Goddard Riverside Community Center we believe in people’s ability to shape their environment and the character of their soci-

ety," the statement reads. "We seek to involve the people of our community in defining common problems and encourage maximum participation in developing solutions to those problems."

In accordance with these principles, Goddard Riverside staff began holding conferences and roundtable discussions in the early 1990s to help improve communication and create a sense of common purpose among its various internal programs and to engage program staff and participants in addressing public issues of common concern. In the mid-1990s, when severe cuts in the city's budget began to threaten many critical social programs, Goddard Riverside responded with a more ambitious effort at social advocacy. The agency held a "town hall" meeting in February 1995, attended by about 300 local residents, program participants, and staff members, to protest the cuts. That was the first Family Council meeting. Since then, the diverse, dedicated group has convened monthly to share information and to organize activities including meeting with local elected representatives, testifying at hearings, and attending rallies and demonstrations. The council has also collaborated widely with other community groups to advance an array of shared causes.

The Family Council has had remarkable success in meeting its immediate goal of influencing the public budget process. In 1999 the group participated in a UNH-organized citywide protest against massive funding cuts proposed for New York's youth programs. As a result, not only were the proposed reductions withdrawn but additional monies were added to the budget for youth programs that year.

Today, about 50 people attend council meetings every month. Much of the group's work is accomplished through standing committees that address issues like voter registration and legislative lobbying. The council is guided by advisory/consumer groups composed of participants from the agency's many and varied programs. Agency staff originally played a leadership role in the council; now they serve more of a supportive function. And according to the agency's Family Council organizer, Larry Wood, that is an important part of the council's success.

"The Family Council is really shaped and led by participants themselves," says Wood, "and that is one of its greatest strengths. Everyone knows that Goddard Riverside has a passionate interest in policy issues that affect our constituents. But that doesn't mean participants are used like troops to be marshaled at someone's command, like fodder for demonstrations. Sometimes advocate agencies get so caught up in advocacy, they don't have time for relationships or relationship-building. We think strong relationships are the key to strong communities, and strong communities make very effective advocates."

"Family Council can be described as a process through which participants inform themselves about important issues, help inform the larger community about those issues, make decisions about how to address those issues, and then take action. Throughout that process, we are always reaching out, trying to include and involve as many participants as we can. We represent a very diverse community, so we try hard to reach out to all the different groups within our community. We do that in a number of ways: by gathering and disseminating information, by strengthening relationships within our own programs, by collaborating with other organizations, and by promoting intergenerational relationships."

The information imparted at Family Council meetings comes from many sources: from guest speakers, including elected offi-



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cials, policy-makers, experts in issues like health or housing, representatives of government or nonprofit organizations; from council members, especially committee chairs; and from members of other agency programs, such as the Youth Council. Participants in the Family Council make it their business to share the information they learn at meetings with other community residents.

"Information is power," says Julio Melendez. "And it's my mission to be a power source for my community." Melendez has been a member of Family Council for the past four years. He has become increasingly active in the past two years, since he retired from his work in the office of union local District 65 of the United Auto Workers.

"I carry information both ways," Melendez continues. "I take information from the council meetings and bring it to the community, especially to the other tenants in my building. And the information I get as a public housing resident leader, as a retired union member, as an active member of the community, I bring that to the attention of the council."

"I got involved because I like to help people. I always knew my community had problems—with homelessness, with health care and Social Security. Even just loneliness is a problem. But Family Council helps me to do something about these things—organize, register people to vote, demonstrate. I meet a lot of people being active like this, and I made some new friends. It's not always easy for me to keep up with people socially, because I need to be home as much as I can to take care of my mother, who's very old and not well. But by being active in the Family Council, I get to spend time with friends and acquaintances, and to spend it productively. And I get to meet new people too. At Goddard Riverside, I believe they try to help everyone, not just through Family Council, but in all their programs. I'm very happy to be part of that."

With its “birth-to-death” programming, Goddard Riverside attracts participants representing a broad range of ages, cultures, and races. The Family Council draws its membership from this large and diverse group of program participants, bringing them together to address public issues that affect them all. Some members find the greater awareness and responsibility that comes with being part of Family Council to be empowering. And they say it creates a special bond among council members.

“For me, Goddard Riverside was a happy accident,” says Evelyn Lloyd. “I sort of wandered into the center one day about five years ago, just after I retired. I was running an errand, and I just stopped in on an impulse. I learned that they had art classes, and I had always had an interest in painting, but I’d never before seriously pursued it.” Lloyd signed up for classes at the center and cultivated her talent rigorously, and with great success. A one-woman exhibition of her acrylic paintings was mounted in the center in spring 2000.

With her gregarious nature and high energy, Lloyd quickly became involved in many programs at Goddard Riverside, and was an early recruit for Family Council.

“One thing I’ll say about Goddard Riverside, they really make an effort to bring people together,” says Lloyd. “In the classes I’ve taken, at lunch every day, there’s a real feeling of family. If you don’t see someone for a day or two, you know something’s up, and you call to see if they are okay. Some programs are especially designed to bring together groups of people who might not ordinarily meet—like the intergenerational choir, which I joined several years ago. It gave me a wonderful way to meet young people and spend time with them very enjoyably.

“I made many friends through Goddard Riverside, especially through Family Council. You get to know people very well there, and they are mostly very active and interesting. We share with one another. I love music and art and travel, and I like to share those things with my friends on the council. If I have tickets for a concert or plans to go to a museum, I invite them along. I’ve even taken trips with a friend from Family Council. We went to the Alpine countries; we saw the Passion Play at Oberammergau. I think I’ve converted her into a real traveler. I think when you find something good, you ought to share it. I’m always trying to get friends who don’t know about Goddard Riverside to come spend time there. I say, ‘Don’t sit at home doing nothing. Join the Family Council and get involved with new people and new organizations in a way that’s good for you and good for our community.’ ”

The Family Council has always worked in a highly collaborative fashion to promote its advocacy agenda. In five years of operation, the group has partnered with scores of community organizations on issues like health care, education, and housing. Council members have enlisted friends in other organizations to participate in various advocacy efforts. And members have taken advantage of programs offered at other agencies to enhance their own skills as community organizers and leaders.

“I joined the Family Council in 1996 because I care about my community and I care about the issues that affect residents here,” says Julia Morrison. “Through the council I’ve become more effective as an advocate for social conditions that need attention.”

Morrison serves on the council as liaison with the Joint Public Action Committee, a coalition of representatives from more than 200 senior centers, community groups, and labor unions in the five boroughs of New York City. Though JPAC, Morrison attended a 10-week leadership training course at the committee’s Institute for Senior Action.

“The training was thorough and extremely useful,” says Morrison. “They taught us everything from public speaking to how to run an effective meeting to how to contact elected officials. It enhanced my skills, so I feel I can contribute even more to the Family Council in areas like housing, patients’ rights, voter registration, and local safety problems.



“The council has done a lot about big issues that affect our community,” Morrison continues. “But it’s also made a great difference in the personal lives of many people, including me. At meetings, I’ve become friendly with a variety of people. We often exchange practical information—about which stores in the neighborhood have the best prices, for instance. At the leadership training I made a friend who’s a serious

speed walker, like me. We walk together quite often now. She’s been an activist for a while, so I convinced her to join the Family Council. We council members are always reaching out to try to involve others in this work, because the more we convince people to participate, the more effective we’ll be.”

Notable among the council’s outreach efforts is the use of youth and intergenerational programs to recruit young participants, including the Intergenerational Choir, Community Arts, and Mentoring programs, and the Youth Council. Many council members are senior citizens, and they regard the effort to involve young people in community building as some of the most important work they do. Murray Rothman, an 89-year-old council member and chairman of the center’s public issues committee, is among them.

“I know how important it is for people to take action, to work together to make life better,” says Rothman. “I’ve been an activist for almost 70 years. We fought for many things young people now take for granted, like Social Security and workers’ rights. I still go to many demonstrations, and one of the reasons I do it is to show young people that you need to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

“I try to tell young people about my experiences. When a young man named Carlos from the Youth Council came to speak before the Family Council, I stood up and encouraged him. I said, ‘Don’t be afraid and don’t be shy. I used to be shy, but I just kept speaking up anyway, because what I had to say was important, and eventually I got good at it.’ I said to him, ‘Speak from your heart. Share your heart with us. You will convince us because of your passion and your message.’

“I learned from those who went before me. Actually, when I was young I learned a lot in settlement houses just like Goddard Riverside. Now I’m older, and I want this work to continue. I sometimes think of these young people as my children. They will carry on this work when I’m not here to do it any more. The council gives me a way to work with them, to teach them what’s most important in life, which is this work, the work to improve not only your condition, but the condition of all people.”

Members of the Youth Council and the Family Council work together often now, and they also relax and enjoy each other’s company in many of the center’s intergenerational programs. Some members of each council were on stage together at a recent performance of the Intergenerational Choir at the Goddard Riverside center. They reprised hits from the 1930s to the 1990s, and then they ended with a rousing version of “Lean on Me” that got the entire audience, a packed assembly room, into the act. “Lean on me, lean on me,” the audience and senior singers chanted, while a chorus of young voices sang in soaring descant, “Everybody needs somebody, needs somebody to lean on.” ●



About 45 children ages 6 to 11 participate in the RENA-COA Multi-Service Center After School Education Program. Much of their time in ASEP is spent improving their homework skills, particularly in reading, spelling, and mathematics. But the work is sweetened by a raft of complementary recreational activities offered through the program, from arts and crafts to supervised sports to cultural enrichment.

ASEP is very popular with the children of Washington Heights, the neighborhood on the far Upper West Side of Manhattan served by RENA-COA. The large open space in the center's basement, where the program is held, is filled to capacity every weekday afternoon, from three to six. At the request of participating families, the program was extended to the weekend. Now, from noon to 5:00 pm every week, "Sassy Saturday" draws a very large group of children, ASEP members as well as other neighborhood youngsters. The Saturday program features literacy and recreation activities, with an emphasis on the performing arts, especially dancing.

Parents seem to appreciate ASEP as much as their children. And they are deeply involved in every aspect of its operation. That is in part a result of the program's design: parents enrolling their children in RENA-COA afterschool must commit to active participation in monthly meetings of the Parents Association. At those meetings, the parents—almost entirely mothers, most of them heads of the household—share ideas about how to improve the program and how to help their children succeed academically.

Over the months that they attended the mandatory meetings, parents became more familiar with one another and began to open up and share more of their lives with one another. Soon a core group began meeting every Saturday. They called themselves Parents Helping Parents, and that sums up the group's function well. At the weekly meetings, they speak to one another freely and easily about personal issues. They gather a variety of useful information and disseminate it within the group and throughout the wider community. And invariably, at some point in every meeting, they turn the conversation back to their children—how they are doing in school, what they have accomplished recently, issues they are struggling with now, dreams for their future.

After meeting for more than two years, the participants in Parents Helping Parents have formed a strong group identity, which many express in remarkably similar terms.

"Everyone gets along like one big family," says Sonia Scott.

"It's like we're one big family," says Michele Powell.

## RENA-COA Multi-Service Center

P A R E N T S  
H E L P I N G  
P A R E N T S



"A group of parents talking about their children and themselves, all under one roof, you turn into family," says Eula Harrison.

"We're from different backgrounds, but we can talk to one another and help one another like family," says Lilieth Bryan.

If Parents Helping Parents is a family, the head of the household is Francine Conde, RENA-COA director of youth and family services. Conde heads the afterschool program and acts as facilitator at the mandatory monthly parents meetings and at the weekly gathering of Parents Helping Parents. She is also the mother of a six-year-old daughter currently enrolled in ASEP.

"Being a parent is a great joy and a great responsibility," says Conde. "And being a responsible parent is hard work, even harder if you're a single parent. It's 24 hours a day every day, exhausting. And it can be isolating. Sometimes you're so immersed in the immediate needs of your child, you never have the time to step

back and look at the bigger picture, look at how education policies might be affecting your child's performance and interest in school, or how neighborhood conditions could affect your child's behavior or self-image. And you seldom have time to really attend to your own needs, even for basic things like information or peer support. That's why we created Parents Helping Parents, to help meet some of those needs.

"I dedicate my whole mind and heart to this program," Conde continues, "because I know how important it is to have support in your life. I have been very blessed. I come from a wonderful family, a very supportive family. And I try to create that same atmosphere in this group.

"At first, parents were a little reserved with one another. Some had even had disagreements with one another previously. But we all have something very important in common—love for our children and a will to do our best to help them. That is a good foundation. We built on that.

"RENA-COA is a very family-oriented organization," Conde concludes. "Our services are addressed to all community residents, from the very young to the very old. But the agency thinks of, and treats, the entire community like a large family."

Founded in 1969 by the Community Church of New York's Community Outreach Alliance and Riverside Edgecombe Neighborhood Association, RENA-COA provides recreational, cultural, educational, and social services to more than 2,000 low-income residents in Washington Heights and upper West Harlem each year. Those services include support for the homebound elderly; assistance with government entitlement programs; translation services for immigrants and refugees; supervised homework, recreation, sports, and counseling for youth; pregnancy prevention services for teenagers; intergenerational activities; tutorial and summer programs for elementary school students; and a senior citizens club.

All of these services are meant to fulfill the agency's stated mission: "to improve the quality of life for community residents by helping them utilize their strengths and talents, reach their full potential, and achieve self-sufficiency." According to members of Parents Helping Parents, that is also the mission of their group, and of the RENA-COA staff who work with the group.

"They encourage us to take charge," says Sonia Scott. "They want us to decide what the group should do. They are always asking for our suggestions about topics and activities."

Scott joined Parents Helping Parents two years ago, not long after the death of her son's father. Her boy was only six years old at the time. She claims the group's supportive and positive attitude helped her through a very rough period in her life. "I was worried about a lot of things, especially about my son who was very depressed about his father," says Scott. "In the afterschool program, they made my son feel loved, and that made me feel good. In the parents program, everyone was very friendly and kind to me, too. I didn't feel so alone. This is the kind of place where they could see the stress on my face, and I could tell them everything. They said, 'Don't give up. Finish school and move forward with your life.'"

Scott took their advice. She is back in school, and, with help from Francine Conde, she found a job. Another RENA-COA



staff member helped her to find a suitable and affordable apartment for her family. She continues to rely on the group for companionship as well as emotional and practical support.

"I'm friends with the other parents," she says. "We go out together sometimes. We pick up each other's kids sometimes. I wanted a night off once, and another parent looked after my children. If there's anything I need, I feel comfortable asking the other parents for help."

Scott is quick to give assistance as well. She recently helped Michele Powell, a neighbor and working mother, to enroll her 10-year-old daughter in ASEP and to join Parents Helping Parents.

"It's made a big difference in my life," says Powell. "I've got some practical information from the group. I have asthma. I knew some things about how to deal

with my condition, but the group gave me some new pointers that were very helpful. It's a constant thing the way we help one another. We pick up one another's children. We go shopping together or take our kids to the park or just have dinner together. Not just as part of the program, but on our own.

"The staff are very helpful, but we do things for one another that even staff can't do. Like this—Sonia needs to learn computer skills for school. She's become like a little sister to me. I have a computer at home. Sometimes she'll come over and use the computer, or she'll bring her child over to help him learn how to use it. I have a computer so that's what I can do. And I can make dinner for all of us, and the kids can do their homework together. So it's good for all of us."

Several participants describe Parents Helping Parents as being "good" for them. And one of the benefits all of them mention is access to practical information. At some parents' meetings, guest speakers give presentations on issues including where to get health insurance, what are the effects of lead poisoning and how to test for lead paint in your home, how the city's water system works. Parents also share information among themselves—about everything from neighborhood events to political issues that affect themselves and their community. And many of them make a point of taking information they've learned in the meetings and bringing it to friends and neighbors in the larger community.

According to Eula Harrison, "We exchange a lot of information, especially about jobs and job training." Harrison joined the group two years ago, after assuming care for her granddaughter, Cherae, who was then six years old. She enrolled Cherae in ASEP and immediately after became very active in the parents group.

"When I first joined, I was working in home care, often ten or twelve hours a day," says Harrison. "It was very hard to keep up with things. But in the parents group we let loose and talk about anything and everything. We talk about what's happening in

the neighborhood, like free events in the park. And then sometimes we get together and go to things like that with one another. And we get the benefit of one another's experience with different agencies and programs, like what day care programs are good. We try to help one another make improvements in our lives, so when we hear about good education or job training programs, we always share that. One member of the group got into a good job training program because she heard about it in our parents meeting.

"But it's not just that we share information. It's how we share. We have a family feeling in the group. So everyone feels comfortable and supported. If you want to create a family kind of environment, you have to have that people attitude, that giving kind of attitude. And we have that."

Many members of Parents Helping Parents agree. They say group members bond easily when they work together in behalf of a common cause: to help another individual, to improve conditions in their neighborhood, and especially to support the afterschool program.

ASEP relies on parents for more than guidance and advice. Parents also reach out to their neighbors to enroll new children and to encourage the participation of their families in the afterschool program. And parents help raise money to support and improve ASEP—to pay for special trips or special treats for the children, to fund additional hourly staff members for the summer program.

Lilieth Bryan is very active in every aspect of ASEP. She first heard about the program three years ago, from a neighbor whose own child was a participant. Bryan was waiting for her son, then eight years old, to be dropped off after school. The bus stop is located in front of P.S. 28, just opposite the RENA-COA center.

"I always talk with other parents while I'm waiting," says Bryan. "And at that time I was looking for someplace for my son to go after school, because sometimes I have to work in those afterschool hours. I'm a home attendant, and I work long hours. I didn't want my son home sitting in front of the TV. Another parent recommended RENA-COA's afterschool very highly. Her own daughter went there and was very happy with the program."

Soon after, Bryan enrolled her son in ASEP and immediately began volunteering her time to work with the children after school. She also became deeply engaged in the parents program. "I spend more time here than at my home," says Bryan. "I tell people, if you can't find me at home, just check up here and you'll find me."

Bryan appreciates the variety of activities ASEP offers children, and she is willing to work hard to support those activities. She has contributed to and helped to organize several bake sales and fish fries to help raise money for the summer school program, for occasional outings, and for materials for cultural activities like the puppet shows and dance performances staged by the children.

"These things, like the bake sale and the fish fry, they bring people together," says Bryan. "I've lived in my same building for thirteen years, and I haven't met any people there. But working on this fund-raising, you really get to know people. Some cook, some outreach and advertise, some serve the food, some deliver, some clean up. Everybody helps a different way. You get to see what are people's skills, what are they good at.



“YOU START OUT  
TALKING ABOUT THE  
CHILDREN, THEN WORK-  
ING TO HELP THE  
CHILDREN, THEN YOU  
ARE WORKING  
TOGETHER TO HELP THE  
ENTIRE COMMUNITY  
WHERE THE CHILDREN  
ARE GROWING UP.”

"These sales have been very successful," Bryan continues. "At the last bake sale, we raised almost three hundred dollars. That's very satisfying. It makes you feel good and it gives you confidence about what you can achieve working together. It makes you willing to try other things together to improve your community, make things better for you and your children."

One of the things the families have done together is to plant trees in the playground across the street from the RENA-COA center. "We heard a presentation from the Parks Department, and they said they could get us free saplings if we would plant and care for them," says Bryan. "And in April, we did. Parents were out there, and children, and some teenagers in the neighborhood who heard what we were doing. There must have been thirty people. We worked together in the rain, with mud upon our shoes, digging holes, putting trees down in them, packing the dirt on top. It looks so pretty now—the green sprouting and the trees getting big and strong.

"Nothing for getting people together like talking about the children," says Bryan. "You start out talking about the children, then working to help the children, then you are working together to help the entire community where the children are growing up. You learn to do what you have to do in the process. And you learn to depend on one another to make things happen."

Last May, about a month after the planting in the school yard of P.S. 28, heavy rains damaged a few of the trees. Some members of Parents Helping Parents called the Parks Department and got stakes and ties to help keep the saplings upright. Today, all the trees are tall and straight, with leafy green crowns. Onto the wires steadying the tree trunks, some children have tied small, colorful paper flags decorated with pictures they've drawn—of rainbows, flowers, hearts, and of a very large family standing together in front of a brick building (which looks a lot like the RENA-COA center) holding hands and smiling. ●

yü tóh pee uh: a place, state, or condition of ideal perfection, especially in laws, government, or social conditions (from the Greek, ou topos, meaning no place)

**F**or eight weeks, twenty members of the Hudson Guild Theatre Company studied a variety of Utopias, most of them literary. They started with the simple dictionary definition of the word, then worked their way through some of the world's most famous proposals for creating an ideal society, including Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, the essays of Thoreau and Emerson, the poems of Walt Whitman, and the Constitution of the United States.

The group was in the workshop phase of a new theatrical production. They met for about three hours, three times a week. Each meeting began with a series of exercises, including memorization training, relaxation techniques, and vocalization. Then they read and discussed selections from the works under consideration.

All that was in preparation for the first rehearsals of *The Land of Oz*. This original musical play is based on the L. Frank Baum Oz series of books, published in the early 20th century, which many consider an American Utopia. There have, of course, been many re-workings of the Oz story, the most famous being the 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Members of the Hudson Guild company wrote this newest version themselves, along with their director, Jim Furlong, director of theatre, gallery, and video for the agency. The new play incorporates the visions of several Utopian writers. And it includes roles for every member of the group, despite wide differences in members' theatrical experience and talent.

"When we started the company in 1994, the idea was to make theatre open to anyone, regardless of experience," says Furlong. "It's not necessary to have any theatrical experience in order to try out for or join the group. I wanted to avoid the common competitive model of having people audition. Instead, we tried to open the doors and say, 'Come in.' Then, when we got a sense of who was in the group, we could create material around the individual members. This company is not about achieving the highest artistic standards, although we do care about the art of the theatre and we are always working to improve our performance. This is really about using the arts as a tool to help people come together socially, to help people express themselves. It is more democratic, more open, more in keeping with the work and philosophy of the settlement house."

Founded in 1895, Hudson Guild was one of the first settlement houses in the United States,

## Hudson Guild

T H E A T R E  
C O M P A N Y



and it has long been among the most ambitious and creative in its programming. The agency was established in the Chelsea section of the West Side of Manhattan to serve a burgeoning population of Irish, Greek, Italian, and German immigrants as well as African-Americans newly arrived from the South. These newcomers took jobs as longshoremen and factory workers in the shipping and industrial area along the Hudson River waterfront. They settled in overcrowded tenement buildings hastily constructed near the elegant townhouses occupied by wealthy and middle-class Chelsea property owners.

From the beginning, the Guild encouraged resident involvement in neighborhood improvement through sponsorship of a District Committee, comprising block representatives who monitored local health, housing, and social conditions and worked to better them. The agency also promoted leadership within its own ranks: members of the Guild's Clubs Council determined many of the Guild's early policies and programs.

Guided by its membership, Hudson Guild soon compiled an extraordinary record of practical achievements: creating a vocational training program for the printing trade in 1912 that was so effective it was incorporated into the New York public school system; sponsoring a cooperative store during World War I to ease the economic burden caused by inflation and food shortages; developing a summer camp on agency-owned country property in 1917; establishing neighborhood health clinics in the 1920s. The agency was also instrumental in the opening of two housing developments in Chelsea: Elliott Housing in 1947 and, a while later, Fulton Houses.

Hudson Guild always had a special flair for cultural programs. During the 1920s, the agency created music and art departments and established the Cellar Players, a theatre group that performed in the settlement basement. In 1968, when the Guild moved into its new permanent home in the bottom floors of the city-owned Chelsea Houses, the facilities included a gymnasium, art gallery, and state-of-the-art theatre.

Today, the Guild provides a wide range of programs and services to the diverse Chelsea community, including Early Head Start; a Children's Center; a School Bridge Program, featuring educational, cultural, and recreational activities; teen services, from sports to academic support; senior services, from Meals-on-Wheels to educational and cultural programs; counseling services; tenant services; computer training; community building activities; and a broad-based arts program, including the Hudson Guild Theatre Company.

According to Kathy Gordon, assistant executive director, the Guild's programs work together to serve the agency's overall mission. "Over its 105-year history, the Guild has striven to anticipate and creatively respond to the diverse needs of its constituency," says Gordon. "Major initiatives over the past few years have included the launch of a number of new programs and a renewed focus on our roots—advocacy and community-building efforts. Our mission to 'challenge ourselves and our neighbors to create an environment in which we all can achieve our highest potential' is met through all our varied programs. Through direct services, we assist and empower our low-income neighbors. At the same time, our arts and cultural initiatives foster communications and bridge the gap intergenerationally, racially, ethnically, and socio-economically. These efforts bring Chelsea residents from all walks of life together to celebrate our neighborhood's diversity and explore its potential.

"In our theatre company," Gordon continues, "the emphasis is on the people themselves; teamwork, collaboration, and mutual respect are stressed in the working process. The company has proven effective in helping to build community by bringing people together to work towards a common goal while getting to know and understand each other better."



**Em:** *Dorothy, perhaps you'd better go. Go. Live in the Emerald City. It will break our hearts to lose you, but you'll be so much better off with your strange friends there. It's better that you go.*

**Henry:** *But what if Dorothy finds that her perfect land isn't as perfect as she dreamed it to be? It would make me unhappy to think that she was wandering among strangers who might be unkind to her.*

During the final week of the theatre workshops, participants get their first look at the script, and they begin to try out different roles. Rudy Moor is reading the part of Henry, Dorothy's uncle. He has been a member of the company for five years. Although he clearly enjoys the reading, he focuses with absolute seriousness and concentration on the work. His powerful baritone voice expresses the perfect combination of authority and vulnerability for the role. He seems to have found the key to the character on the first try.

"In the theatre, you use your personal experience to enrich your technique and your art, and you use

your art to enrich your life," says Moor. "I know what it's like to leave the security of home and all the people you know and just go off and try something new. It's exciting, thrilling. But it's also risky."

Moor left his home in Baltimore six years ago, at the age of 44, and moved to New York. He had studied and worked as a commercial artist and had dreams of making it as a fine artist in the Big City. "I thought I'd set up my easel on the streets of Greenwich Village and make my living painting portraits," says Moor. "I thought I'd live the good Bohemian life, earn enough through my portraits to buy time and a studio and materials for my other painting."

But things didn't work out quite as he had planned. Unprepared for the soaring cost of living, and especially housing, in New York, Moor lived a very precarious, unsettled life for his first few years in the city. He says things began to turn around when he connected with Hudson Guild Theatre Company.

"I had never acted before," says Moor. "A friend introduced me to Jim Furlong. At the time, I was trying to make a living carving and selling wooden flutes. Jim asked me to read a couple of poems. I guess I did it pretty well, because he encouraged me to join the group. And in a short time the whole direction of my life had changed. I'd never been much of a reader. I always thought of myself as an artist, but thought of art only as painting. Being in the group encouraged me to read literature and poetry. I began to love acting the way I love painting and sculpting."

"One thing I love about the theatre, it's a social activity," says Moor. "You become close to people working with them in rehearsal and onstage. We stop off for coffee together sometimes after rehearsals. We have cast parties after performances. For me, the company has become a support system, a second family. I don't go to clubs or hang out in bars. So it's great to have this group of people to share things with, share the little troubles and successes of everyday life."

Moor also gives members of the company credit for helping him find his present full-time job, working as an office assistant for a music recording company. "People in the company, they encourage you to try things, to do things that improve your life. When I wasn't able to make a living as a painter, I really didn't have Plan B. I always thought of myself as an artist. After I began studying acting with the company, I still thought of myself as an artist, an actor. But that didn't solve the problem of how to earn an income right now. Well, one day I was reading *Backstage* at the theatre, looking for auditions. And there was an ad for office assistant at this interesting company. Jim Furlong was in the room with me. I asked him what he thought, and he said, "Go for it, man." And I did. And I got the job. That's typical of this company. Everyone's rooting for you all the time. It really gives you a boost."

**Citizen 2:** *Come, we will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon.*

*We will make divine, magnetic lands, with the love of comrades,*

*With the life-long love of comrades.*

*We will plant companionship thick as trees all along the rivers of Oz.*

As the company members try out their new roles, Jim Furlong seems to be everywhere at once—encouraging the actors to project their voices, try a new bit of stage business, have fun, concentrate, listen to one another, respond to what others say and do.

This is the company's twelfth production in six years. About half the plays are original, mostly written by company members. Before performing classic plays, like Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, the group often alters the text, adding and changing parts to accommodate the skills and talents of various actors.

Everyone who plays a part onstage in any production is also required to perform some backstage function: making costumes and props, working the box office, cleaning up after performances, doing community outreach to build audiences.

Working with members so intensely, in different ways, and often over many years, Furlong has a very clear idea of everyone's potential and abilities. Now, as he listens to Lee Kolk read *Citizen 2*, he seems pleased with her efforts. "You really have a feel for the poetry," Furlong tells the actor. "You've caught the rhythm of the lines we borrowed from Walt Whitman. That's no easy task. You work hard and it shows. Good job."

Kolk joined the group four years ago. She had studied acting in college, and at one time even thought of trying to make a life in the theatre. But she opted for a career in social work, instead. And it wasn't until after she retired that she renewed her old interest in the stage.

"When you're working, you look forward to all the things you'll do in retirement," says Kolk. "But when it finally happens, it's hard. You're used to a structured life, to being productive and busy. Suddenly you don't fit in anywhere. You have to rebuild a lifetime of habits. I found it very hard at first. It was like an endless vacation, like eating too much whipped cream."



" BONDING WITH DIFFERENT  
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ABOUT THEIR LIVES, GAVE ME  
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MUNITY. I BEGAN TO NOTICE  
THINGS—A NEW TREE PLANTED  
OR AN OLD STORE CLOSED.  
AND I BEGAN TO TAKE MORE  
PRIDE IN MY COMMUNITY. "

Kolk has lived in Chelsea for 30 years and was very familiar with the Guild's programs. Not long after retiring, she looked into the theatre group and immediately liked what she saw. Since then, she has been in several productions, and loves performing. She is also quick to point out many other benefits she's got from joining the company.

"I love being part of this special little world," says Kolk. "The relationships in the group are very intense. There's lots of temperament, because there's lots of emotion in our work. Look, in most other enterprises, people are dealing primarily with their minds; in the theatre we're dealing primarily with our emotions. So we become very close, very fast. That carries over after rehearsals and performances. We meet at each other's homes, celebrate each other's birthdays, sometimes go to the theatre together."

Being part of the company has also had some very practical benefits for Kolk. Another member of

the group recently told her that applications were being accepted at Penn South housing. She applied, and is now on a waiting list for an apartment. On the recommendation of other members in the company, she has also joined several other Guild programs, including creative writing, yoga, and tai chi classes.

Because she feels she has got so much out of the company, Kolk looks for opportunities to give something back. Over the past few years, she has worked to enhance awareness of the company in the community and to increase participation of new members, especially members of ethnic minorities. Recently, she attended a local community board meeting to request the board's help in recruiting minority participants.

"This group has so much to give," says Kolk. "It's even given me a new identity. I'm no longer an ex-social worker; I'm now an actress. I want to help make sure that we share what we have with as many other members of the community as we can. This is such a rich environment, we have plenty for everyone."

**Chorus:** *There's no place like Oz*

*There's no place like*

*There no place*

*No place*

*No*

*Place*

*No*

Throughout the three hours of rehearsal, Larry Littman has been a very enthusiastic reader. Now, as he recites the final words of the play with the rest of the chorus, he seems a little sad that it is ending for the day. "Let's face it, I'm a ham," says Littman. "I'd like to be onstage all day long, every day of the week."

Littman joined the company five years ago, at age 63, when an old friend asked him to play a part in a new production. After working as a freelance writer for many years, Littman jumped at the chance to try something new and creative.

"Every time I saw a movie, I'd come home and act out some of the parts in front of the mirror," says Littman. "I was getting a little tired of an audience of one. And writing is a solitary profession. I looked forward to participating in something communal."

Being involved in a group activity with his neighbors began to alter the way Littman viewed his community. "There's something in the nature of this activity that brings people together quickly and closely," says Littman. "I guess that isn't very surprising; you really put yourself out there when you go onstage. What did surprise me was the way in which that expanded my life. There are many people in the company who are quite different from me—in their age, background, occupation. But because we share this love of the theatre, we can talk to one another on a very deep level. Somehow, for me, bonding with different community members in the group, talking with them about their lives, gave me a new interest in my community as a whole. I began to notice things—a new tree planted or an old store closed. And I began to take more pride in my community."

Chelsea is one of the most demographically diverse communities in the city. And Littman claims that being part of the theatre group gave him a new appreciation of that diversity. "We did a play, *Amerigrant/Amerigrante*, based on the experi-



"IN SOME WAYS, THIS  
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IS A UTOPIA—IT'S  
DEMOCRATIC, DIVERSE,  
SUPPORTIVE, CLOSE-KNIT."

ence of immigrants to the United States from Central and South America. When we started out rehearsals, the cast members were in cliques—Latinos in one group, the rest of us in another. I have to admit, in the beginning I wasn't very attached to the material. I didn't think I understood the experience we were depicting. But as rehearsals went on, we began talking to one another about more personal things, family experiences. My family is Jewish; my father's family was in the Holocaust. As I heard the Latinos' stories of persecution in their native countries, I realized that even though these are different times, it's the same story. So by the time I played my role, an immigrant crossing the border, I really had a visceral experience of what it was like to be part of that culture. After the performance, we went to a restaurant in the East Village and danced to Latin music. We all felt very close to one another. We felt bonded."

In addition to performing with the company, Littman has also written one of the plays the Guild produced, called *ChildLike*, in which children play teachers and adults play students. "It was thrilling to see my words come to life," he says. "I'm a writer; words matter very much to me. I think about the word *Utopia*. In some ways, this little theatre group is a Utopia—it's democratic, diverse, supportive, close-knit. But Utopia derives from Greek words meaning no place, nowhere. That's because all human beings have flaws, and so long as we have flaws we will not have a perfect society anywhere on earth. The Guild company is not a Utopia. But it is a wonderful experience of the theatre and a wonderful experience of life. And that's good enough for me." ●

# F

or the past ten minutes, they have been talking about listening.

**Sylvia:** "On a very basic level, you need to listen to be able to understand what others are saying—what do they want you to know? what do they need from you?"

**Jose:** "But how do you know that you've understood what they really mean?"

**Sophie:** "Well, one way is to listen, re-phrase what someone has said to you, and then say it back to them. If they accept your paraphrase, you know you've got it right."

**Evelyn:** "That's a clever technique!"

**Sophie:** "I can't take credit for making it up. I read it in a book, *Language Habits and Human Affairs*."

**Jose:** "You have time for reading, with all the work involved in your recent move?"

**Sophie:** "It's easy. My new apartment is so quiet. My soul is just soaking up the stillness, like a shish-kebab in marinade."

**Sylvia:** "Have you all noticed that, no matter what subject we start with, we always come back around to talking about food? Maybe it's because good company and good food go together: they're both so nourishing."

The conversation continues in this vein for almost an hour—good-humored, intelligent, intimate, lively, sprinkled with literary references, crammed with the details of everyday life. Hearing what they say to one another, it's easy (and accurate) to guess that these are a group of old friends who have long shared each other's lives and feelings and thoughts. What might surprise the listener is that most of the speakers have never met face-to-face. That's because this conversation, like most of the conversations this group has held over the years, is taking place through a telephone conference call.

These teleconferences are the centerpiece of Elders at Home, a program of the Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center. For the past 12 years, this innovative program has been connecting frail, homebound, often isolated seniors to one another through regularly scheduled, theme-driven group meetings on the telephone. Beverly Jackson, the center's director of senior services, explains how it got started.

"Stanley Isaacs has always been very creative in developing its programs, especially senior programs," says Jackson. "We were the first center in New York to offer Meals on Wheels, back

## Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center

E L D E R S  
A T H O M E



in the mid-1960s. But by the late 1980s, we began to feel that although we were helping seniors to get good nutrition for their bodies, they were still hungry for other things, intellectual challenges and recreational experiences—the kinds of things people get by participating in programs at the center. So we came up with the idea of providing these activities over the phone. The program's informal slogan, 'Not by Bread Alone,' suggests a large ambition: to meet many human needs beyond mere survival. And it is an ambitious program. But we started small, with only about eight conference calls a month."

At first, the center created a few scheduled teleconferences that included lectures on health, art, and nutrition, as well as phone bingo and a current events discussion group. The only requirements for admission to the program were, and still are, that participants be recipients of Meals on Wheels and that they be senior citizens. Former Meals on Wheels recipients who leave the food program for whatever reason, but remain



homebound, can continue on conference calls. Staff reaches out to constituents who meet these requirements, and participation has steadily increased each year.

As Elders at Home grew, and as the center began to solicit and review feedback from its participants, staff members realized that the program had in a short time become more than a source of educational and recreational activities; it had become a meeting place. The teleconferences had become a way for participants to meet and connect with one another, to make acquaintances and friendships, to build community. That was one of the most valued of all the benefits participants received from the program.

"Elders at Home was a real breakthrough in creating community among the homebound elderly," says Walter Higley, assistant executive director of Stanley Isaacs. "The marvelous thing is that this happened organically, naturally. We created the structure and the participants created the community. This program is the embodiment of the settlement house philosophy, that community building is paramount. And it proceeds directly from our organizational mission."

The Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center was founded in 1964 on the East Side of Manhattan, at the boundary of East Harlem and Yorkville, two communities with sharp demographic differences. The population of East Harlem is low income and ethnically diverse—more than one-third Puerto Rican and the rest African-American, Italian, and other groups. Yorkville, once a lively mix of immigrants from various European countries, is becoming gentrified through construction of expensive high-rise apartment buildings. To serve these dissimilar communities, Isaacs offers a broad range of programs including Meals on Wheels, adult day services, a senior center, adult education classes, cultural and educational events and workshops, parent education, afterschool and evening programs for children and teens, and youth employment services. These programs reach across generations and ethnic groups to serve more than 5,000 mostly low-income youngsters, adults, families, and senior citizens annually. All programs advance the agency's stated mission: "to assist our neighbors in need to participate in the life of the community by improving their physical, educational, cultural, and social well-being."

This approach—enriching the lives of individuals so that they can enrich the community—has been very successful. Elders at Home is a good example. Since it was begun in 1988, participation in the program has grown every year. In 1999, 265 individuals participated in 891 calls, with duplicated participants totaling more than 8,000. To handle that volume, the agency requires participants to register for calls in advance. Each month, Meals on Wheels carriers bring a copy of the program's own newsletter, *Rainbow News*, to all recipients. The publication carries a list of scheduled teleconferences for the following month, and homebound seniors are encouraged to check off the calls in which they would like to participate.

The agency owns its own teleconferencing equipment. So before each conference begins, a staff operator calls all partici-



pants at their homes and connects them, at no cost, to their group. Each conference call has a theme, from health issues to the arts to current events. Most conferences are group discussions, although some are presentations by guest lecturers or readings, such as the *New York Times* Aloud session for the sight-impaired. All calls have a leader, or facilitator, to move the conversation along and to encourage universal participation. Leaders can be participating seniors, agency staff, volunteers, or guest lecturers. The center offers about five teleconferences a day, every weekday. Each teleconference can accommodate 18 callers, and most regularly scheduled groups have a solid core of long-term participants.

"The program is immensely popular," says Patricia Grondahl, Elders at Home program coordinator. "Participants love it because they get a lot out of it, and because they give a lot to it. It gives people who are often isolated a chance to express themselves to other people, their peers. It provides a way for them to meet new people and gain new experiences, giving them an increased awareness of the world. And it enables them to contribute to others from the immense store of experience and knowledge they have acquired in their lives. The contributions, like the contributors, are quite diverse. Some people are great listeners; some have expert knowledge on an interesting subject; some are natural leaders, who really strengthen the sense of community among participants and even help advocate for that community in the larger world. Some are just a lot of fun.

What's great is that, within the Elders at Home community, all these people, all these gifts, are really valued and appreciated."

Some participants have also gained a greater appreciation of their own gifts and talents through Elders at Home. Sylvia Rezzolla first signed up for the program four years ago, and tried a variety of offerings initially. Today, she participates in four or five conferences every week and is a regular member of the Current Events and Living with Change discussion groups as well as the Poetry seminar.

"In a word, the conversation is wonderful," says Rezzolla. "We talk about everything: politics, health, what goes on in our everyday lives. And even though I have no idea what most of the people in my groups look like, because we've never met in person, I feel I know them very well. Some I consider good friends." Like many Elders at Home participants, Rezzolla has developed especially strong friendships with a few of the many members in her teleconference groups. Agency staff encourage participants to exchange phone numbers and keep in touch with one another outside the teleconferences.

"Two other women and I have become particularly close," says Rezzolla. "We call ourselves the Three Musketeers. We've exchanged phone numbers and we call one another frequently, just to talk: about what we had for lunch, what's bothering us, who's feeling sick or well. Sometimes we have practical information for one another—where to buy something someone needs or how to take care of yourself when you're not feeling right. One of the women has severe health problems. Another is bedridden and can hardly see. I'm not a doctor or a miracle worker. I can't make my friends suddenly healthy. But I can be there for them. We're there for each other. And I can make them laugh. I'm pretty good at that. What is important is that we get along so well. It makes life a lot less lonely."

Rezzolla says that in group discussions, she is often more of a listener than a speaker. She is most enthusiastic about expressing herself in the Poetry seminar, where she has discovered and, at age 79, begun cultivating a talent for writing. "All my life, words

came easily to me," says Rezzolla. "Sometimes I would write them down, most often not. But studying in a group like this has been motivating and encouraging. Now I love to turn my experiences, my memories and my present activities, into poetry. Some of my poems been published in *Rainbow News*. And," she adds, with a gleam of humor in her voice, "I've even written a few that are probably not printable in a respectable publication like *Rainbow News*."

Not all participants use Elders at Home as a way to help form friendships. William Reuben has participated in Elders at Home for the past seven years as a leader of In Focus, a freewheeling weekly group discussion focusing on national politics and civil liberties. He says his main goal in joining the program was to make a contribution to the settlement house.

"Some seven years ago, I began getting Meals on Wheels delivered to my apartment," says Reuben. "I live in a fourth-floor walk-up, and it's hard for me to get around. Also shopping for food in my neighborhood is quite expensive. So I really appreciated the benefits of Meals on Wheels. When I heard about the teleconference program, I thought this would be a way for me to pay back Stanley Isaacs center for these services that are so helpful to me. It made me happy to contribute in that way."

Reuben is the former public relations director of the American Civil Liberties Union and the author of six books and hundreds of articles on American politics. At 86, he is finishing what he considers his magnum opus, a history of the Cold War. Aware of the amount of work needed to complete the book, he is very protective of his time and solitude.

"Sometimes one or two In Focus participants would call me at home, outside the discussion group, and a little too frequently for my taste," says Reuben. "So I discouraged it, gently. It's not that I'm anti-social. It's just that I have so much on my plate; it's like trying to dig down a mountain with a teaspoon."

If he limits the amount of time he is available to Elders at Home participants, Reuben makes the most of the time he is willing to give. The In Focus group he leads is one of the most energetic, enthusiastic, and often controversial in the entire program. "I see things differently from many people," says Reuben. "Because of all the research I've done over many years, including what I've learned through the Freedom of Information Act, I have expert knowledge in several areas, especially civil liberties and the Cold War. The information and ideas I present in In Focus are not necessarily things you're going to read in the *New York Times*. I love to share my knowledge and insights. And I profit from listening to those who do not share my views. I urge the other members of the group: challenge me, speak out, don't accept what I say, but tell us what you think. I love controversy. I love the give and take."

Reuben seems to find great satisfaction in the serious intellectual sparring he promotes in his group. But he also enjoys sharing simpler pleasures with group members. Elders at Home sponsors a few get-togethers for participants each year: to the Central Park Conservatory Garden or Zoo, Bear Mountain State Park, and Battery Park City in downtown Manhattan. Reuben, an avid fan of horse-racing, advocated for a yearly trip to Belmont Park—and the agency arranged it. "It was a triumph," says Reuben. "I'm going to list it among my accomplishments under my photo on my next book jacket. Most of us hardly get out of our houses, so when we do get out, we want it to be for something special. What's more special than a day at the races?"

All Elders at Home participants are classified as homebound. But some, like Lillian Milliner, refuse to let those classifications keep them home.

"A few years ago, they sent me an electric wheelchair," says Milliner. "Right away, I tried it out, and it shot me across the room, right into the china closet. I wasn't discouraged. I called up the company and said, 'Tell me how to steer this thing.' And



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they told me how to work the controls, and I've been on the move ever since."

Milliner has been an active participant in Elders at Home since it was established and is now one of the program's most frequent participants, often joining four or five discussion groups a day.

Like most participants, Milliner has made a few close friendships among discussion members. But unlike many other participants, she goes to great pains to get together with those friends in person.

"I love talking on the phone to my friends," says Milliner. "We talk a lot. When my diabetes acts up, I will call the girls and they tell me, 'Drink water,' or 'Take some orange juice.' We have good advice for one another. But I like to mingle. So I arrange for us to do things sometimes, go to lunch or go to church together. I go to their church, they go to mine. I bought a rain cape that covers me and my chair, so I don't care about the weather. I just get out there. I love the trips to Bear Mountain and Battery Park, getting together and seeing what everybody looks like, taking pictures of one another. I like to be active."

Milliner is quite active in the community, especially through her tenants' association. She is currently leading a protest against what she views as onerous new restrictions proposed for tenants of city-owned housing.

Alone since the death of her husband two years ago, Milliner, at 75, remains vigorous and spirited. She attributes her "positive attitude" in great measure to the support and stimulation she receives through Elders at Home.

"If it wasn't for this program, you would be lonesome," says Milliner, "because you wouldn't have anything to look forward to. But I have my friends I can call any time. And I have the discussions. I get the *Rainbow News*, and I check all the calls off. Everything is interesting. Then in the morning, I think about my day, look at my sheet and see Poetry, Art, Politics. It's really enlightening. Now when I look at a painting, instead of just thinking 'What a pretty picture,' I'm wondering about the kind of paint he used, the strokes, the way the colors go together, the shapes. I'm wondering, 'What was he thinking when he painted that?' It really is beautiful, this program. Really beautiful." ●

## Supportive Children's Advocacy Network

F A M I L Y  
C A M P I N G  
W E E K E N D S

**L**ate on a Friday afternoon last spring, all eight members of the Roper-Robinson family were preparing to leave the familiar streets of their Bronx neighborhood and set out for the woods of Rhinebeck, New York. Both parents checked and rechecked to make sure everyone had enough warm clothes for the trip. The two teenage children helped the younger children to pack. Then everyone took a last-minute inventory of their gear, making sure they had remembered to take a toothbrush, socks, pajamas.

All of them were excited and a little nervous as they left their apartment to catch the bus. The Roper-Robinsons were traveling with nine other Bronx families participating in the Family Camping Weekend, sponsored by the Family Renewal Center of Supportive Children's Advocacy Network. SCAN had held briefings for the past several weeks, preparing the families for the trip. So they knew what to expect: they would be staying at Camp Ramapo, in a wooded parkland about 75 miles from the city; they would be sleeping in dormitory-style lodges; there would be planned activities indoors and outside throughout the weekend.

"The families were in on all the planning for the trip," says Patricia Roper-Robinson. "We parents helped set it up with SCAN, and then we talked to our children about what it would be like. In the preparing stages, we felt like we knew what we were doing. But then on the bus on the way up, you start thinking about all the other things: being in the woods at night, what kind of animals live in the woods, sleeping in a different place with a lot of people. You realize there are a lot of things you just don't know anything about."

Like the Roper-Robinsons, most of the families on the weekend trip were life-long city residents with little or no camping experience. "We arrived at the camp just in time for dinner," Roper-Robinson continues. "Now I know that there are lots of things we didn't know about living outdoors. But we did know something about living. And we knew a lot about eating. We knew that those beans they were serving were not beans. So we said, 'Just let us in the kitchen, and we'll take care of the cooking for the rest of the weekend.' We all worked together. Four of us really knew what we were doing in that kitchen. We made spaghetti, chicken patties, mashed potatoes. I made my corn bread stuffing. Everybody ate real good. By the time we left, the staff at the camp were all asking for our recipes."

"It really made me feel good. It made all of us feel good. In the group meetings at SCAN's Family Renewal Center, we talk about working from our strengths, building confidence, and about working together for the good of everyone. Well, this was a chance to do all those things. And cooking for everyone was actually fun. Like we say at SCAN, we were really working the program."



SCAN is a community-based family service agency founded in 1977 to address the child welfare crisis in New York City. The group pioneered a group-oriented, strength-based approach to working with at-risk families. According to Lew Zuchman, executive director, "Our mission is to inspire all SCAN children, parents, and families to believe in themselves. Poverty, parental substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, and failing schools inundate the lives of our families. Yet we believe in the inherent strength and potential lying dormant in each SCAN parent and child. We believe that one can best overcome life's challenges by building upon the strengths of families, empowering each parent and child to discover his or her own potential and power."

To fulfill its mission, the agency offers a wide array of services through an integrated delivery system that includes contributions from social workers, youth workers, psychologists, cultural arts professionals, and volunteers. Services include case planning and casework; child care programs;

adolescent services; youth development; day camp; afterschool programs; community organizing; individual, family, and group counseling; adult and child psychotherapy; family activities; socialization, recreational, and cultural programming; clinical assessment; psychological and educational testing; diagnostic and referral services; and access to advocacy and information resources. Services will be expanded even further when the agency completes its imminent merger with LaGuardia Memorial House, a settlement house in East Harlem.

The agency now operates from eight community-based sites serving more than 400 families annually in East Harlem and the Bronx, including the Family Renewal Center in the South Bronx. Established in 1990, the center is a specialized service of the larger agency, designed exclusively for the treatment of the entire families of substance-abusing parents. The center provides substance-abuse treatment services in conjunction with holistic, family-focused support services. Programs include substance-abuse groups, home economics groups, family casework and advocacy, parenting workshops and support groups, an afterschool program for children and adolescents, on-site day care, summer day camp, and family activities, including Family Camping Weekends.

Most of the approximately 80 families who participate in the Family Renewal Center programs each year were referred to the organization by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). For those families, participation is mandatory. And according to Evelyn Castro, program director, that presents a challenge for the agency.

"Our program is very family-focused," says Castro. "We do a lot of work with the entire family. The program is flexible, because our parents are at different stages. But in the beginning, when they first come to us, most parents are very resistant, very angry. They are here because they have been mandated to be here by ACS. Most of the time, they say they don't have a problem: 'I was just at a party where other people were using.' So we have to work to earn the parents' trust and to help them see the value to themselves in participating."

Especially in the beginning, the Family Renewal Center program is both intense and intensive. Families entering the center are assigned to two workers: a family educator, who helps with concrete services like housing and welfare and makes sure the children go to school, have medical coverage, and are up-to-date in their immunizations; and a case planner, who focuses on counseling and relationship-building. For the first four weeks, one or both workers make home visits three times per week. Gradually, the visits decrease to two per week, then one, provided that parents continue to pass mandatory drug tests.

Most parents spend four mornings each week at the Family Renewal Center, attending group meetings covering issues including parent support, substance abuse, nutrition, and personal relationships. Afternoons and weekends, entire families participate in a variety of group activities together, including holiday celebrations, picnics, and day trips to amusement parks.

"Recreational group activities help to accomplish some very serious goals," says Castro. "They help parents see that they can have a good time without being high. They help them connect with others and reconnect with their families while drug free and sober. Establishing bonds, forming community, is critical to recovery. My background is in preventive services, and I learned early on that prevention is really about community, families being together, working together, enjoying one another.

"Our most popular group activity is the Family Camping Weekend. Why? Because through those weekends, we are able to develop a very special sense of community. Staff and their families, program participants and their families, we all attend the camping weekends together. We connect to one another, our families connect to one another, and the children connect to one another. In the group meetings and in other program activities, we get to know one another. But in the camping weekends, we eat together



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er and sleep in the same dormitories and do the same group activities together. We get to know one another on a whole different level."

Group activities on Family Camping Weekends include relaxing nature walks, hay rides, and campfire sing-alongs as well as more strenuous rope and climbing exercises designed to test physical endurance and promote cooperation and trust among participants. Anna Velez,<sup>22</sup> who attended a camping weekend with her three children in the early spring, found both kinds of activities very productive.

"When I first came to SCAN, I was very angry," says Velez. "I had a lot locked in. I came into the program with depression and an anxiety disorder. I worked hard in the groups, talking about my issues and my feelings, what caused me to be so moody and upset. And in groups, everyone said, 'Keep it on you.' So I focused on myself and my family.

"When we went on the camping trip, the feeling was different. It was very relaxed. You don't think of it as part of the program, because it's so much fun. But you're releasing a lot. We all got to know one another in the group meetings, but at the camp everyone united. It was like a family. Someone needed sunglasses for their kid, and someone else would say, 'Here, use mine.' Same with extra sweaters or socks. Everyone just shared.

"When we went outside and started to do one of the exercises, climbing the wall, I didn't want to do it. I said, 'That's for the kids. Let them do it.' But one of the other parents turned it around. She said to all the kids, 'Get your mommy to climb the wall.' And they did. They nagged until I tried it. My children were very excited that they motivated me to try something challenging.

"Something happens at the weekends that brings you together. It's hard to explain. Everyone does their hair. You have talks before you go to bed. You get to know one another's habits. You laugh at everyone's habits, but in a nice way. And sometime someone will just give you a smile or a look of comfort when you need it. You may not even know you needed it at that moment. It makes you feel very close to that person. After the family camping weekend, my children became very good friends with some of the other children in the Family Renewal Center. And so did I. And we continue to stay in touch and see one another even after graduation. We celebrate birthdays together, our families. We baby-sit for one another. Sometimes we go out to dinner together."

Velez graduated from the Family Renewal Center in October after about 18 months in the program, the average amount of time spent by participants. She is now working in another SCAN office as a receptionist. And she is still in touch with several program participants, especially her parent-mentor.

"I can call her any time," says Velez. "She understands, because she's been where I've been. It's not like my other girlfriends who have never used. I had an incident a little while ago: I was sitting in the park and someone threw some cocaine in my lap. I threw it back right away and hit the guy in the eye. I felt then in my heart that I would never use, I'd never pick that up. And I called my mentor. She really listened, and it really helped."

SCAN makes extensive use of volunteers to provide services. These include parent mentors, graduates of the Family Renewal Center who assist the staff or work with participating parents or their children. The purpose of the parent mentor program is to develop useful skills in the mentors and to provide other parents with an experienced and trusted adviser.

"One of the things we try to do at SCAN is develop leadership skills in program participants," says Castro. "Parent mentors are people who emerge as leaders while participating in our program. They are not only drug free when they graduate, they have also demonstrated their ability to communicate, solve problems, and interact well with others. We cultivate these skills in parent mentors, and we try to match the skills and ambitions of parent mentors with work we have to do. So someone who wants to become a secretary might work in one of our site offices. Someone who wants to work with children might work in our on-site day care. What's so wonderful about this program is that while it helps the individual develop, it helps the whole community of our parents because they see hope. They see, 'I can do it. If she was able to do it, I can do it too.' "

Patricia Roper-Robinson graduated from the Family Renewal Center in April, just a few weeks after attending the Family Camping Weekend. After graduation, she became a parent mentor. She says the camping experience helped give her the confidence that she could become a good mentor.

"When I first came to the Family Renewal Center, I did it because I had to," says Roper-Robinson. "Then I did it for myself. We say to one another, 'Work it because you're worth it.' We support one another in the program. And we get to know one another pretty well. But in the camping weekend, I got to know my peers even better.

"On the weekend, you let your hair down and relax. And because you're having a good time, everyone is having fun, you can just be yourself. That is so important. Because in the program, sometimes you feel it's all about your issues, all about work; you can feel like every part of you is under a microscope. There's something more to life than always worrying about the problems.

"During the weekend, a friend of mine was having some problems and she came to me. She said, 'They're watching me.' I said, 'Who's watching you?' She said, 'The staff. I can't stand being watched twenty-four hours.' I said, 'You know, it's their job to



see you interact. If you worry so much about them watching you, you're not going to be able to do anything. Just be yourself, and you will be all right. You owe that to yourself. It ain't easy raising children. And it sure ain't easy raising children in a poverty-stricken area. But if you have it in your heart that you're going to do the right thing, that is the bottom line. You are going to be rich in your heart. All the money and success in the world isn't

going to make you happy. But if you be yourself, enjoy yourself, and let life be life, you can be happy.' Well, she finally relaxed. Later she came back and said, 'I'm really glad I talked to you.'

"That was a lesson for me," Roper-Robinson continues. "I saw that I had really learned something from my work in the program, and that I could help others through what I had learned. I took that lesson home with me. And that's not all. I realized that I had to take everything I learned on the camping weekend home with me. And I learned a lot. In the rope exercises, it was my youngest son, the seven-year-old, who ended up being the one that held us up. He was so proud. And I realized it ain't about weight or size, it's about how we came together to help one another that's important, that makes us powerful. And at night, when we had to find the campfire without a guide and without lights, I wanted to give up and go to bed, but my husband held my hand and showed me how to follow a trail just by listening. I learned new ways of learning from him.

"I learned the staff is us. I got a lot from the staff, and I never felt that they pitied us—'Oh, look at those poor addicts.' On the camping weekend, some of the staff brought their families. And our children played together, and everyone was in the same games. I saw they were no different from us.

"I made stronger relationships with some of the women in the program. At the Family Renewal Center, we connected; on the camping weekend, we bonded. I had time to see these women from different angles, first one way then another. For a few of the women, I could see, 'This one, I trust her friendship.' And we've all stayed friends ever since, even though we're not in the program together any more. On the weekends we play pool together, go bowling, eat dinner at an all-you-can-eat soul food restaurant.

"I realized I love to learn. I'm going to go to school for business, business and political science. I want to own my own business and I want to be an advocate for working people.

"Going upstate that weekend is something I will cherish for the rest of my life," says Roper-Robinson. "I think everyone feels that way. On Sunday before we went back, we had a group meeting with the center staff and the camp staff and the program participants, and everyone talked about how the weekend had changed them. Most people took those changes back home and did something positive. If you have an opportunity like that, where you get to do something different and feel different, and then you come back and act the same, you just threw away that opportunity. You wasted it.

"When I came back, I just wanted to keep learning and doing new things," Roper-Robinson concludes. "So when the center asked me to be a parent mentor, I was so proud. I was grateful that they thought they could depend on me and help me to help others. I feel like we're family now. I feel like I've been blessed." ●

# F

or Kristin Joyner, one career is no longer going to be enough. "I want to be a farmer and an accountant," says Joyner. "I love growing things, but now I see that knowing about money and

business is important too. It will take a lot of work and a lot of studying to be both things. But I know how to work hard. I work hard in the Farmers' Market. It's fun."

Joyner, 12 years old, is one of 20 youths hired by United Community Centers to help run its new Farmers' Market, in East New York, Brooklyn. For months before the market officially opened on June 10, 2000, these young people have been working hard to make the project a success. They have been helping to prepare and maintain the neighborhood gardens that supply produce to the market: unloading and spreading topsoil, building raised beds, weeding, watering, and picking fruits and vegetables. And now on market days, every Saturday from 11:00 am to 5:00 pm until mid-November, the youngsters help out the 30 vendors selling fresh produce and handmade crafts. They set up tables and chairs, help arrange the goods displayed at each stand, assist with sales, and clean up and close up at day's end.

The youths make five dollars an hour for their labors. According to Joyner, the money is only one of several benefits they receive from participating in the program.

"First of all, we learn lots of things," says Joyner. "I learned how things grow: how to prepare the soil just right, and how far apart to plant things, and how to take care of plants to keep them healthy. One of the gardens has a lot of herbs. Johanna, the woman who grows the herbs, taught me some good recipes for cooking. Now I can make a chicken recipe with parsley and oregano and boiled red cabbage with lots of different herbs.

"I learned about my neighborhood, going to places I had never been before to work in people's gardens. I learned how it's important to keep my neighborhood clean. It took a lot of work to change dirty empty lots into gardens and a market. It looks really pretty now. I don't want anyone to litter or dump garbage in the streets or in vacant lots any more, because it will be ugly again.

"And I learned teamwork. There's a lot to be done in the market and in the gardens. And we have to all work together to get it all done. I think this is really good experience for what a job is going to be like when I grow up.

"I'm saving the money I make this summer for my college education," Joyner explains. "If I want to be a farmer and an accountant, I'm going to need to go to college a long time. But then when I graduate I'll always have a job that I like."

It's no accident that this project provides so many different benefits to participants.

## United Community Centers

F A R M E R S'  
M A R K E T



From its inception, and throughout three years of planning, the Farmers' Market has been very ambitious in its goals. The market is a collaborative effort of local and statewide institutions including United Community Centers, Genesis Homes, the Local Development Corporation of East New York, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and Pratt Institute. Working together as the East New York Farms Planning Group, these organizations set out to address several important neighborhood needs: to create employment for youths and adults; encourage local entrepreneurs; develop green spaces; and supply fresh, wholesome, affordable produce to community residents.

Located on the eastern edge of central Brooklyn, East New York is one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. More than 30 percent of its families have incomes below the poverty line. Its elementary and middle schools rank among the lowest third in the city in reading and mathematics testing. Its residents

have among the city's highest rates of asthma, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and unwed teen pregnancy. Its housing stock, decimated by arson and abandonment in the 1960s and 1970s, is only slowly being rebuilt through public and private redevelopment efforts.

The neighborhood also has great strengths. Chief among these is its vibrant, culturally diverse African-American and Latino population. About 40 percent of East New York residents are immigrants; one quarter of them from the Dominican Republic, the rest mostly from Jamaica, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, and Panama.

Hard-working and resourceful, many residents saw an opportunity in the numerous empty lots created by the past destruction of the neighborhood's housing. They cleared the garbage and debris from the lots and began to plant gardens filled with vegetables, fruits, and flowers. By the late 1990s, East New York had the highest concentration of community gardens of any neighborhood in the city.

The Farms Planning Group sought to capitalize on this community asset by developing a market where local growers and craftspersons could begin to generate some income from their entrepreneurial efforts. The group applied for a grant from a corporate foundation to underwrite development costs, including a request to fund the hiring of neighborhood youths to help run the market as well as a staff person to oversee the project.

After the grant was awarded in 1998, members of the planning group continued to work collaboratively on the startup of the market. In addition, various agencies in the group began to assume responsibility for different aspects of the market's operations. United Community Centers took the lead in youth employment. In January 2000, UCC hired Alely Schoonmaker as the East New York Farms! project coordinator.

"Getting the market started involved many different efforts and activities at the same time," says Schoonmaker. "We were recruiting vendors, trying to identify neighborhood youngsters who could work on the project, advertising the upcoming opening of the market throughout the community. And then, of course, we had to create an actual place for the mar-



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ketplace. We had a vacant lot set aside for that purpose, but at the beginning of the year, it most certainly was not in any shape to be used as a Farmers' Market. It was covered in rubble almost three feet high and teeming with rats.”

The group worked with the New York City Departments of Transportation and Sanitation to clear the area of debris and cover the ground with milling, a grainy mix of tar and stone. By spring 2000, the large fenced lot at the busy corner of New Lots Avenue and Barbey Street looked clean and fresh and ready for business.

“In a short time, this project has already accomplished a great deal,” says Schoonmaker. “One remarkable accomplishment is the creation of this great open space where the market is located. From UCC's point of view, this project is all about community building. Well, communities are built somewhere, in some place. And attractive, inviting public places like this are ideal for the purpose.

“People come here for a specific reason: to buy and sell things. And because the place itself is so pleasant, they are more likely to linger, to strike up a conversation with a vendor, to let their children play with other children, to get to know some of their neighbors a little better. When that happens, the market serves the community in a different way. It isn't only meeting the community's material needs, it's helping to strengthen the community's spirit. In that sense, the market is typical of all UCC's projects in the community.”

United Community Centers was organized in 1954 and incorporated in 1959 as a nonprofit, non-sectarian membership organization. The founding

members were residents of two newly constructed public housing projects in East New York. They defined their mission as twofold: "to create extensive and first-rate social, recreational, and educational programs for children and adults that will not be segregated by race, religion, or ethnicity; and to create a social vehicle with which community residents can inform themselves and act collectively to address community problems and search for democratic solutions."

In the ensuing years, UCC has served that mission in two ways. The agency has led and joined many collaborative community organizing efforts, including campaigns to reclaim playground space for schoolchildren, to protect the local library, to provide summer jobs for teenagers, and to protect the environment. UCC has also developed and implemented a wide range of programs and activities for community members, including a child care program for pre-schoolers; theater workshops, career and college support programs, and environmental programs for youths; literacy and parent education programs; employment and job readiness services; HIV/AIDS prevention services; an immigrant family intergenerational program; social and cultural activities; a street fair; and the East New York Farms! project, which includes support for the Farmers' Market as well as education and training for local gardeners.

"All of UCC's programs and activities are community driven," says Schoonmaker. "There's a theme that runs through everything the agency does; we call it 'the richness of difference.' It has to do with treating the tremendous diversity within the community as a precious resource, learning from our diversity. The East New York Farms! project is a perfect example. I am the coordinator of that program, but the gardeners in the program know a whole lot more



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about gardening than I do. Many neighborhood gardeners have family roots in the West Indies or the American South. They come out of a farming tradition. The agency provides support and technical assistance, but they provide the real know-how. And if you look around at the market, you can see what that know-how produces."

It is an astonishing sight. Table after table piled high with sweet peas, hot peppers, cucumbers, collard greens, lettuce, tomatoes, and squashes of every variety. One of the vendors is a farmer from Orange County, upstate. He specializes in corn, potatoes, and onions. But the rest of the produce is strictly local. Brooklyn beets, East New York eggplant, green beans from Glenmore Avenue.

At tables adjoining the produce stands, neighborhood craftspersons display their wares: crocheted and knit children's wear, jewelry, batik clothing, candles, bath salts, silk-screened t-shirts.

Gladys Penny is one of 15 crafts retailers participating in the Farmers' Market. She sells beaded dolls made by her sister as well as novelty and gift items she has bought from a wholesaler.

"I was praying for someplace to sell my arts and crafts regularly," says Penny. "I tried selling at local street fairs and church fairs and flea markets, but it just doesn't work, because you need those regular customers. When I heard about the Farmers' Market in the spring, I signed up right away."

Since she joined the market, Penny's small business has been growing steadily. At the beginning of the summer, she seldom sold more than \$15 worth of merchandise on a Saturday. By August, she was taking in \$50 to \$60 each week. All goods sold at the market are priced affordably, and most vendors make only modest amounts in sales. During high season in mid-summer, farmers gross an average of \$70, craftspersons \$25, on market day. But many vendors, including Penny, are quick to cite other rewards they receive by participating in the market.

"I've been learning how to run a business," says Penny. "I learn some things just by doing. But I also learn from the other vendors. We act like a family; we all help one another out. If anyone has a good idea, they pass it on to all the others. For instance, I wasn't displaying my items very well, and another vendor came over and offered a suggestion to make the display more attractive. And a while back, another vendor told me about some entrepreneur classes being given in the East Brooklyn Women's Center; so three of us signed up, and we're taking those classes together. Then there's the monthly meetings. I learn a lot there."

Once a month, UCC brings together all vendors, both farmers and craftspersons, to evaluate market operations and look for ways to improve them. One result of these meetings is a more strategic arrangement of the display tables. When the market first opened, vendors set up their tables wherever they liked, and by chance many farmers set up near the entrance gate. Then some members of the group saw that many customers came in, bought produce, and left without even noticing the crafts displays. So the vendors decided to rearrange the sales stands, with crafts nearest the entrance and farmers at the back.



"We can see that we'll do better ourselves if the whole group does better," says Penny. "So we look out for one another. "The vendors share a certain pride in all this," Penny continues. "By selling our goods, participating in the market, we feel we're doing something good for the community. We're offering things for sale, at a good price, that people wouldn't be able to buy otherwise. I get a good feeling when people like my merchandise. I feel like I make their life a little better. I worked at the post office for many years, and in my last years there I worked in customer service. I found out I like working with the public; I like being of service. And this market helps me to be of service to my own community. I think East New York needed this market, and I'm proud to be a part of making it happen."

The need for the market is evident in the number of customers it draws each week. At first, there were just a few curious neighbors from nearby. Now hundreds of residents visit the market each week, many of them repeat customers. The number of customers increased dramatically after the market's farmers were certified to accept WIC payments, coupons available to low-income families for the purchase of locally grown produce. Many of the farmers at the market expressed great satisfaction in being able to provide wholesome fruits and vegetables to young children.

"That is one of the best things about this program, being able to help the young children," says Johanna Willins.

Seven years ago, Willins took over a large abandoned lot several blocks from her home and began cultivating fruits, vegetables, flowers, and especially herbs. Willins was born and raised in Brooklyn, and had lived in East New York for nearly three decades. This was her first attempt at gardening. But she seemed to have a gift for it from the start. And she has embraced it with a Jeffersonian fervor.

"I never liked all those chemicals they put in food in the grocery store," says Willins. "I grow organic—strawberries, collards, bush beans, kale, tomatillos, broccoli, all sorts of vegetables. And fruit trees—apple, plum, cherry, and fig. Every kind of herb you want, I have—oregano, thyme, lemon thyme, coconut creeping thyme (people from the Caribbean love to cook with thyme), angelica, basil, hyssop (very good for colds and flu), all kinds of basil, all kinds of mint."

Willins is a clever entrepreneur. She gets recipes from her neighbors and friends for some of her more unusual vegetables and herbs and distributes them to customers in the market. In this way, she hopes both to encourage her neighbors to buy her goods and to expand their culinary horizons. She also passes the recipes on to the youths from UCC, like Kristin Joyner, who work in her garden.

"I feel I have a lot of knowledge to pass on to young people," says Willins. "When those children work in my garden, I try to talk to them about what you have to do on a job—show up on time, concentrate on the work, don't fool around, cooperate with one another and be nice to one another. We take breaks for juice and water, and then they can talk and play. But I like them to know this is a job, and this is how you act on a job."

"The children love to come to the garden, and not just because they get paid. It's beautiful. It draws all kinds of people from the neighborhood. People walk by and stop at the gate, looking. I say, 'Come on in. Have a glass of water.' A grandmother with two young children comes here all the time. The children love to pick the tomatoes right off the vine and eat them. They're so sweet. I can see their eyes, saying, 'So this is where tomatoes come from, and this is what they're supposed to taste like.' Another woman stopped by a while back and asked for food to feed her pet rabbit. Now every week I give her



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my damaged lettuce or cabbage and she brings me back rabbit droppings that I use for my compost. It's good for the nitrogen. Sometimes men stop by. My brother looks them over, and he'll say to me, 'You got a winner there.' But I don't socialize with them just yet. I'm all business during the market season. I say, 'Wait until the market is closed down in November, then maybe we can go out to dinner. They say, 'You're tough.' "

Willins makes about \$50 a week at the market, and she puts the money right back into her garden. "I buy tools and seeds, make repairs and improvements in the fence or the seed beds," she says. "I hire what I call the 'gentlemen of the streets' to do the work. It gives them a few extra dollars, and they're proud of the work. In the spring, I'm going to make a gazebo right in the middle of the garden, using money I made at the market. And I'm going to have a big barbecue for the whole community."

"The Farmers' Market has been a great thing for this community. It's an accomplishment. We're finally getting something done, instead of people just sitting around telling one another how bad it is. I'm an ambassador for the Farmers' Market. Not a day goes by that I don't stop someone in the street and tell them about it. I tell mothers with young children about the WIC coupons. I tell teenagers they can meet friends there. I tell perfect strangers that this is going to make their life better. And it's the truth." ●

## University Settlement Society of New York

W O M E N A S  
R E S O U R C E S  
A G A I N S T  
P O V E R T Y

**I**n the late spring of 1992, the New York City Council held a series of public hearings on the issue of welfare reform. Over several weeks, many policy-makers, academics, and representatives from nonprofit service agencies spoke before the council. Then, one morning in June, a young working mother came to testify.

"My name is Olga Villa," she began. "I have three children. I now live on the Lower East Side.... Four years ago, I was homeless. I was working as a home attendant and trying to balance the bills with my income. I worked seven days a week, from nine to five.... After I entered the shelter system and applied for supplementary assistance for my salary, I was told I had to quit my job to be eligible for benefits in the system.... On a night in December in the shelter, I saw my seven-year-old daughter, Jennifer, pray for a new home for Christmas. I held my tears. I could not even afford the luxury of crying in front of my children. I had to be strong and not upset them.

"I am here to today to be strong in a different way. I shouldn't have been made to feel I was nothing. You have to hear me and hear how the system failed me. And you have to take action today."

Villa testified as a participant in Women As Resources Against Poverty, a group run by University Settlement's Project Home, a program for formerly homeless families or people at risk of homelessness in Manhattan's Lower East Side. WAR was begun in 1992, a time of economic recession in New York City, and no one suffered more from the faltering economy at that time than poor women. According to the Human Resources Administration, in September 1992, 65 percent of the city's female-headed households with children under 19 lived in poverty; 850 battered women were living in shelters; and 6,000 women were homeless. With a presidential race in full swing and a mayoral race just starting, many issues critical to low-income families were being debated in the public forum that year—from welfare reform to low-income housing to funding for youth and family services. But the voices of indigent women, whose lives would be most directly affected by public policy toward the poor, were seldom part of that public debate.

Then the women of WAR began to speak out.

WAR originated as a poetry and creative writing group, one of several activities undertaken by Project Home to help the women they serve to express their thoughts and feelings. "Most of the women we work with are single mothers with very limited financial



resources," says Melissa Aase, program director of Project Home. "Many are recently homeless when we first have contact with them. They have just moved into a new neighborhood. They will say to us, 'It's exciting to be starting something new, but I'm scared and I'm lonely. I don't know anyone here and I don't know how to get to know my neighbors.' Also, many of these women have been subjected to domestic violence. And isolation is a characteristic of that situation. We have a commitment to helping our members break that pattern—by talking about it and speaking out.

"When participants are fluent in self-expression, it has many happy results," Aase continues. "First, it gives them a better opportunity to establish a relationship with staff members on their own terms. Instead of our telling participants, 'You need to work on this,' they can tell us what they want and need and how they want to work to achieve that. Second, they are better able to make connections with others. They can

share their lives and thoughts and feelings and break down barriers of isolation and loneliness. And finally, the ability to speak out and speak up for yourself is a critical skill in becoming self-sufficient. Empowerment, relationship-building, self-sufficiency—those are important goals of Project Home and of our parent organization, University Settlement. Promoting self-expression in our members is a way of fulfilling the larger goals of our program and our agency.”

Project Home began in 1990 as a homelessness prevention program whose goals are to prevent entry into or return to the homeless shelter system and to enable participants to eliminate dependence on public assistance. In ten years, it has become a national model for delivery of comprehensive social services that both respond to the immediate needs of participants and prepare them for self-sufficiency.

Each year, the program works with about 550 families and individuals, reaching about 1,000 people in Downtown Manhattan, especially the Lower East Side, Chinatown, the Bowery, and the East Village. Much of the strength of the program lies in its ability to provide services to anyone who walks through the door. Those services include homelessness prevention; employment training and placement; adolescent pregnancy and prevention; advocacy/empowerment groups such as WAR and its counterpart, Youth Empowered to Speak (YES); and walk-in social services dealing with issues such as domestic violence, abuse, and hunger. All services are offered without regard to age, income, or background and are provided in the many languages of the neighborhood, including English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Burmese. Project Home is an integral part of the diverse, vital community it serves, well respected for its accessibility, friendly attitude, and effectiveness. In fact, other community members who have used its programs refer most of Project Home’s participants.

Project Home is operated through University Settlement, and many of its programs and activities are integrated into that agency’s comprehensive programming. So participants can be referred to University Settlement for services like day care, afterschool and summer programs, mental health programs, and English classes.

Project Home’s operating principles are also well integrated into the core philosophy of University Settlement. Founded in 1886, the agency aimed to embody the following ideas, articulated in its mission statement: “the idea that economic and environmental conditions, as well as individual character, determine a person’s station and welfare; the idea that poverty



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must be addressed systemically—that the causes, not just the symptoms, must be addressed.”

This emphasis on the larger picture, on global and systemic responses to individual and community issues, may help explain how a neighborhood poetry and writing gathering like WAR quickly became a highly effective advocacy group.

“WAR started out with a very specific intention,” says Susan Kingsland, associate director of Project Home. “Some case managers decided to set up a short-term poetry class in order to give women a pleasurable way to meet each other and get to know each other. It was voluntary and self-selecting, different from a service relationship where you are working on a problem. But the boundaries on our programs are loose, and it’s not unusual for a program to transform or enlarge in a kind of organic way.

“Sometimes when you’ve been through something very difficult, something like homelessness, it’s hard to believe that you’re not all alone, the only one this is happening to,” Kingsland continues. “Then groups like WAR can be very powerful. You suddenly have a place where you are really heard, maybe in a way that you never have been before. You learn to build mutual trust and you can model ways where you can communicate your needs and wants.

“In WAR, what happened was that women began sharing and making connections. These women have a wealth of knowledge and abilities that they have been building up all their lives. Once they began talking to one another, they started to bring concrete information to the group, and that made it easier for everyone to see, ‘Oh, this is how that part of the system works.’ or ‘This is the elected official who is responsible for

that part of the system.' It became old-fashioned consciousness-raising, where people would say, 'That happened to me, too.' And then someone else would ask, 'Do you know what we can do about it?' And another person would say, 'Here's something we can do together to address this issue that affects us all.' "

Over the past eight years, WAR members have found many ways to address a variety of issues that affect them all. They have planned domestic violence sensitivity training with local police, co-sponsored a rally and march celebrating Martin Luther King Day, written a Child Welfare Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, testified before the New York State legislature and the New York City Council and spoken out at numerous community forums on welfare reform, homelessness, violence, and economic development.

Though WAR members have continued to work together over a long time in behalf of scores of public issues, the "group" itself can more accurately be described as many different "groups," reincarnated again and again

for time-limited projects and activities. These include poetry and creative writing, story-telling, performance art, and dance. According to some participants, it is the strong bond of friendship among WAR members that keeps drawing new women to the group and that helps to create a continuous group identity.

One participant who feels that way is Eleanor Campbell. She came to the United States from Jamaica in 1992 in order to complete work on her bachelor's degree. In her native country, she ran a preschool/after-school program. She wanted to improve her skills to make herself a more capable school administrator and a better provider for her three children. But things didn't work out as planned.

"I came here with certain dreams," says Campbell, "but I became homeless and, worse yet, began to feel helpless. In the shelter I felt isolation, desolation. And after I got an apartment on the Lower East Side, I was still lost.

"When women from Project Home knocked on my door, a different world opened up for me," Campbell continues. "Getting together with other women broke the isolation. The women in the group really saw me for who I am, Eleanor—not somebody's mother or wife. That was all I wanted—for some people to ask, 'How are you?' not just 'How are the children?' when they saw me. Those women who recognized me as a person, who saw Eleanor, had tremendous value for me. They still do. They got me to dream again. And they helped me to begin planning to make my dreams come true."

Campbell decided to defer her long-term goal of opening a school in order to diversify her skill base and improve her knowl-



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edge of business. She studied computer technology at University Settlement's Computer Center, took business courses at local colleges, and began full-time work as a bookkeeper, while working part time as a personal assistant to several clients. Despite her crushing schedule, Campbell continues to make time for the women of WAR and the causes they promote.

"I really made friends with many of these women," says Campbell. "We call one another all the time, sometimes just to say hello but often to pass on information or to check up and make sure someone is okay. I was sick for several weeks recently and some of the women called me, and of course that didn't cure my flu but it make me feel better, mentally stronger.

"I value friends, and I try to be a good friend. One of the things I really value in friendship is reliability and support. So I try to help whenever I can. Some of the women for whom I work as a personal assistant, they're always getting rid of useful things, like good clothes or computers. They give them to me and I pass them on to the other women or to other programs in the neighborhood.

"That's one of the things I really liked about WAR. There was such a positive attitude, such a feeling of trying to make things better. We shared stories and we realized we had many things in common. We really got together around a common cause. At first it was welfare reform, then other issues. I took advocacy training at WAR, and now I write letters all the time to elected officials about issues that affect me and my children and my community. And I pass on the information I learn in WAR to other members of my community.

"Most people think, what can my one little voice do? But it's like a little ripple, it moves outward and affects everything. And when you have lots of ripples together, you make big waves. It's the unity that's important. You put your story together with another woman's story and another, and then you've got something very powerful. You haven't got a story people can ignore; you've got the story that people have to listen to."

Many people have begun to listen to the women of WAR and have found what they have to say to be very persuasive. In the spring of 1999, several WAR members testified at hearings on the Transitional Jobs Bill then before the New York City Council. The bill would permit internships and other transitional jobs to count as work experience required under federal public assistance laws. WAR advocated passage of the bill forcefully. The council initially voted for the bill, but the mayor then vetoed it. In the summer of 2000, the City Council overrode the veto and passed the bill into law.

One of the women who testified at those hearings was Brigitte Rivera. A divorced mother with two young children, Rivera had come to Project Home in the early 1990s for help with her public assistance case. She participated in many of Project Home's programs over the years as a group member and a staff member, working as an AmeriCorps Vista and an intern with University Settlement. In 1999, she became deeply involved with WAR when the group was gearing up to begin a short-term dance program.

"I joined WAR because it was a chance to socialize with other women, something I don't get to do very often," says Rivera. "I was very stressed at the time. I love my kids, but they can sometimes drive me crazy. I got a chance to talk about that in WAR. Many of us were going through the same things, and we talked about our lives, shared our stories, and cried together. We became really close. I made friends in that group that I really trust. And we stayed in contact. We're still close. We call one another, sometimes do things together, by ourselves or with our children. WAR gave me a chance to stretch myself, try new things, and learn new things about myself and other people and about my community."

Rivera claims that one of the hardest things for her to learn was how to ask for things. "When we were starting the dance program, some staff members thought it would be a good idea to have food at all the meetings and rehearsals; it would be an extra incentive for new members to participate. But we didn't have any money for food. So they asked me to call and visit all the local restaurants and ask for donations. I really didn't want to do it. I didn't want to beg for food. I said, 'We're not going to get donations. This is the Lower East Side. No one cares.' But the Vista worker said she thought we'd do fine. Of course, she's from Texas. What did she know? Only it turns out she was right. We got donations of food for every day of the program. And one restaurant owner, when he heard what we were doing, actually made a list of local restaurants that might hire women who needed a job. And he gave us his business card and told us he would help any way he could. It made me realize we have some wonderful people in this neighborhood. It completely changed my attitude about my community. And it changed my attitude about myself. It helped my confidence and self-esteem. And it made me want to give back to my community. I got very active speaking out on issues and helping to organize rallies. I already knew that things that affected my community affected me, but I was learning how things I did could affect my community."

Like many other women in WAR, Rivera used the intensely personal activities of the program to help bond with other



members and then used those bonds to help strengthen the entire community. It is a complex process.

"I think many of my closest friendships started in dance class," says Rivera. "I'd never done anything like that before; I'm not very artsy. We worked with a choreographer, Risa Jaroslow, and she played this quiet instrumental music and encouraged us to move. I felt sort of goofy. We would move to the music and then sometimes just break up laughing at one another. But I began to use the class as a kind of meditation. It was time for myself, without my children, just me. I really concentrated. And when we all concentrated, moved with one another, suddenly the experience became completely different. It's hard to explain."

It may be easier just to watch. The WAR dance group recently performed before an audience of family, friends, and staff from Project Home and University Settlement. When the music started they seemed to be moving separately, listening to the music but unaware of one another. Then someone brought out a white ball and began bouncing it. She passed it to another performer who threw it high into the air and spun around as it fell back into her hands. As the ball passed from woman to woman, each used it in a different way—with grace, athleticism, wit, style. With each move, the women smiled, encouraged one another. And suddenly all of us in the audience were no longer looking at a group of women moving onstage. We were watching a dance. ●

## Forest Hills Community House

G A R D E N  
P A R T Y

**J**ohnny Richardson is a hard act to follow. Maybe that's why he is scheduled to be among the last of the resident entertainers to perform at the Forest Hills Community House Garden Party. He will come on after Inez Castillo recites the poem she wrote in praise of the community's young people. After Rose Bartkowski sings the theme song from *Evita*. After members of the Evening Teen Club wow the crowd with their acrobatic break-dancing. He will perform after Morris Ruffin belts out some Broadway show tunes. After Luis Medina raps about justice and injustice. After Fannie Lopez dances a Colombian cumbia in full traditional costume.

By the time Richardson finally mounts the small outdoor stage on the lawn behind Forest Hills Houses, the crowd is boisterous and noisy. But as soon as he strikes the first chords on his battered guitar, every one of the nearly 300 people in the audience becomes absolutely quiet.

"*Yo soy un hombre sincero*," Richardson sings softly. Many members of the audience know his repertory. *Guantanamera* is an old favorite, and as soon as he begins the song, the audience erupts in applause.

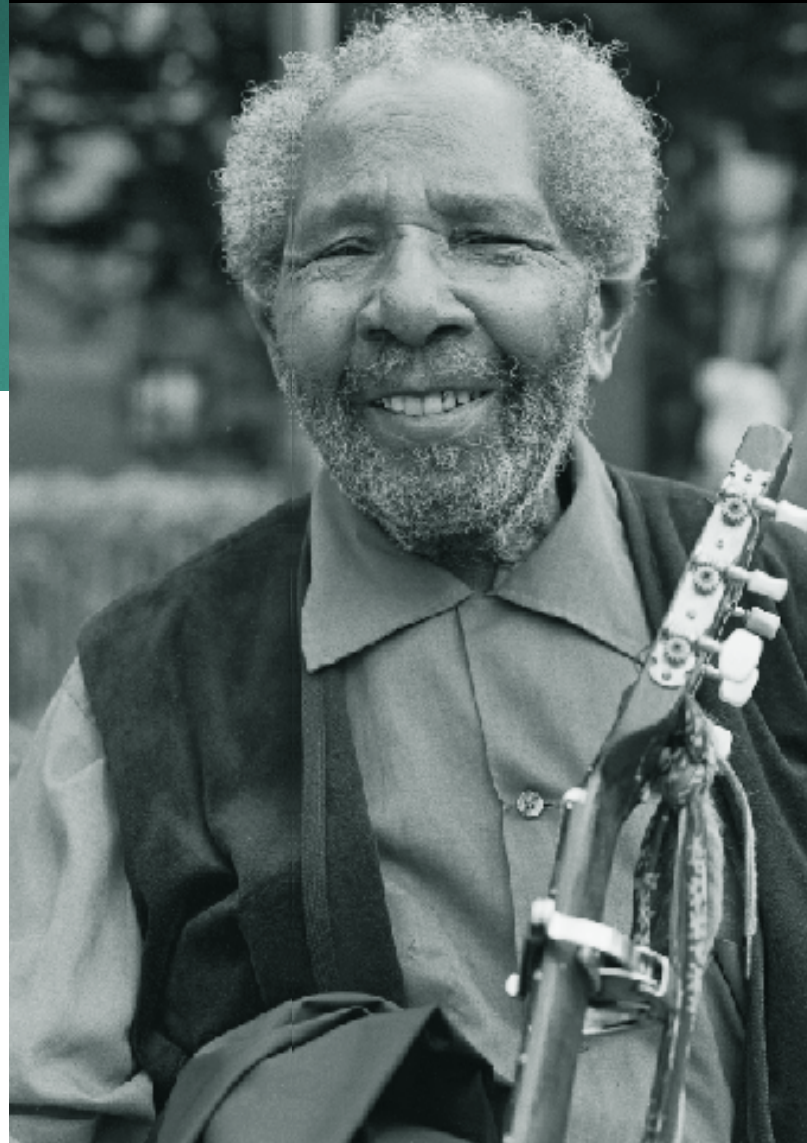
"*Si, si*," an elderly woman in the front row whispers. "Sincere."

At the end of the first verse, the audience cries out for an encore. Richardson nods in response, then speaks into the microphone. "I've written some new words for this song, and I'd like to sing them for you now." And with the crowd keeping time, clapping their hands and stamping their feet, he sings:

"If we could love one another  
And all the things that surround us  
If we could love one another  
And all the things that surround us  
Then all the world would be beautiful."

At 92 years of age, Richardson is still an electrifying performer. By the time he leaves the stage, many in the audience have come forward to surround and cheer him as he boogies across the lawn back to his seat.

"Isn't that something?" says Richardson. "Usually the people you've known for a long time don't get so excited any more about your music. I've performed many different places, and here in my own back yard, among people I know best, I feel most appreciated."



Richardson came to New York in 1924, at the age of 16, and first got involved in the city's music scene as a dancer at the Savoy Ballroom. But his true calling was as a singer of folk music and blues, and he has sung with some of the best—Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger. Today he performs mostly at events in the Forest Hills Houses, where he has lived for the past two decades. He says his favorite of these events is the Garden Party.

"Music keeps me going," says Richardson. "When I was a little boy in South Carolina, picking cotton for fifty cents a day, I would stop my work in the fields every now and then to play the harmonica. There is music inside me and I want to share it. The Garden Party is a great place to share. That's what it's set up to do. People who are your friends and neighbors, people you only know because you see them out shopping or in your elevator, they get together and share this day with one another. They share them-

selves. It brings us all together and makes us feel closer to one another. It's like the words in the song: when we learn to love what is around us, the world is beautiful."

The Garden Party is held once a year, in the afternoon of the last Sunday in September. The first Garden Party was in 1997, and it has since become a favorite event for many neighborhood residents and Forest Hills Community House staff members. But it is only the latest of scores of programs, events, and activities that the agency operates in the service of its mission: "to help all people improve their lives and work together to strengthen their communities."

In its mission statement, the agency describes itself this way: "The Forest Hills Community House is more than a social service provider: it is a welcoming, extended family for both new and long-time residents." The work it has taken to bring that family together has not always been easy.

The community house was established in January 1975, a few months after the completion of the Forest Hills Houses low-income public housing project in which it is located. When the project was first proposed, in 1972, Forest Hills was a middle-class, overwhelmingly white, and politically liberal neighborhood. The tenant pool for low-income housing projects at that time consisted largely of African Americans and Latinos. Local residents bitterly opposed the project as originally planned: three 24-story buildings with more than 840 apartments. As residents organized to block the project, using demonstrations and legal action, the dispute became a national news story highlighting some of the central urban issues of the day: integration, public housing, and the limits of liberalism. The project eventually went forward through a compromise negotiated by a then obscure Queens lawyer, Mario Cuomo. It called for construction of three 12-story buildings with 432 apartments. The new buildings were more in keeping with the scale of surrounding neighborhood housing.

The forerunner of the community house was a committee of neighborhood residents who favored construction of the project. They planned social services that would be needed by tenants in the new buildings, including day care, recreation, senior services, and mental health. From the time the community house first opened its doors, its larger goals were to promote the personal growth of all participants and to develop strong bonds among residents that would turn this fractious neighborhood into a close-knit community.

Over the last 25 years, FHCH has developed a broad range of innovative programs to achieve its goals. Today, the agency's 17 sites serve more than 15,000 people throughout Queens with a broad array of innovative services and programs in the following areas: Youth Services, including an afterschool program, school-based youth development centers and enrichment programs, a library project, a Beacon school, summer day camps, an evening teen center, teen counseling/peer counseling services,



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COMING TOGETHER; WE FORGE  
A COMMON IDENTITY. "

career counseling, employment services, leadership programs, and HotSpots, a nationally recognized teen outreach program; Intergenerational Services, including escort services, a work study program, and a tutorial program; Senior Services, including senior centers, a community center, a gay and lesbian clubhouse program, case management services, transportation, day services, and refugee immigration services; and Family and Community Services, including a housing and homelessness prevention program, an eviction prevention program, community mediation, an early childhood center, a childcare network, a family computer room, and a volunteer program.

The agency's board of directors is composed entirely of community residents, and its programs are developed and run with a remarkable degree of community participation. According to Irma Rodriguez, associate director of Forest Hills Community House, the Garden Party is an excellent example of the agency's operational philosophy in action.

"Like many activities at the community house, the Garden Party works on many levels," says Rodriguez. "On the one hand, it brings together participants in programs at our many sites throughout Queens. It also helps to bring together program participants with other neighborhood residents. And it is an opportunity for staff and residents and program participants to get to know one another much better because they are working together in a new way.

"The idea for the Garden Party actually came out of the agency's community-building committee," Rodriguez continues. "The committee saw this event as a way to break down traditional staff/participant roles. How do you do that? Well, in this case necessity

showed us the way. The party has no budget within the agency. That means everything is done through volunteers. Staff, program participants, residents all start from the same place. They are completely dependent on one another to make this happen.

"The Garden Party comes about much the way a family reunion happens. Everyone pitches in. And it has the feeling of a family event. Many staff members bring their children or spouses or parents. We all take pictures. And even though it's only one day, it has a lingering effect. Our lives are marked by this way of coming together; we forge a common identity.

"This is a very, very diverse community. We speak many languages here. And language barriers are the basis for a lot of misunderstanding. The Garden Party features many ordinary, but wonderful, things that transcend those barriers—food, music, dancing, eating. There's something for everyone here, and it seems there's something from everyone as well."

This year, for the children there are games and contests, clowns and balloons, and, for the most daring among them, face-painting by a resident artist. Teens have dancing and music and a chance to exhibit artwork and posters they have created for the event. Adults and seniors get to visit with each other and meet one another's families.

And everyone eats (and eats and eats) the food made mostly in their neighbor's kitchens. Throughout the afternoon, many of the cooks stand proudly behind the long buffet table, as, one by one, a long line of guests carefully choose from an array of dishes including barbecued chicken wings, Chinese spring rolls and dumplings, baba ganoush, baked ziti, rice and beans, braised beef, hot dogs, and an astonishing variety of salads.

Volunteers do everything in the Garden Party, from the entertainment and food to the planning that makes it all possible. The Garden Party Planning Committee, composed of about 20 residents and staff members, begins meeting in early June. Over the next four months, they recruit local talent to perform at the event, design and develop activities for the day, solicit food contributions from residents and local restaurants, and help publicize the party through posters and flyers printed in English, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese.

Benny Pan has been on the planning committee for the last four years, working mostly on outreach to the Chinese members



of the community. "I have something that makes me invaluable to the committee," Pan says, with a mischievous smile. "I have a computer with Chinese characters, so that I can print out flyers translated into Chinese."

Over the last four years, Pan has put a lot more into the Garden Party than just printing out flyers. And he says he has also got a lot out of it. "I got involved with the Garden Party through the Forest Hills senior center," says Pan. "I've been going there for six years, ever since I moved into the neighborhood. Since I taught English in Shanghai, where I was born, my English is pretty good. Many members of the Chinese community here do not speak English so well. So I always acted as a kind of bridge between the Chinese and other members of the community. And I tried to get the Chinese to become more active in the larger community, to participate in community programs and events."

Pan found the Garden Party to be an ideal vehicle for promoting his agenda. He arranged for a tai chi demonstration and displayed his own Chinese stamp collection at last year's Garden Party. And by talking up the event among Chinese residents, and posting flyers in Chinese, Pan has helped bring an increasing number of Chinese community members to the party each year. The result, according to Pan, has been greater cross-cultural interaction and understanding.

"I have made many friends through the senior center," says Pan. "And I have to say, most of my closest friends were in the Chinese community. We would have lunch together. Sometimes we would go to restaurants together or to exhibits or events in Manhattan, especially Chinese cultural events. But through the Garden Party, everyone, including me, started to get to know all our neighbors better, including those with European, African American, and Latino backgrounds. It happened gradually, so I hardly noticed. Instead of just saying hello to my neighbors in the elevator, we would stop and talk, ask about one another's families.

"How I finally realized relationships had changed, become closer, was through something sad," Pan continues. "A few months ago my wife died. I knew that many of my Chinese neighbors would come to the funeral. But I was very surprised how many of my other neighbors came, from all different ethnic backgrounds. The Chinese have a custom at funerals, to give the family of the deceased a card with a small amount of money to express sympathy. I don't know how they found out about that custom, but many of my neighbors who were not Chinese did that, gave me a little card like that. I was so moved. I live alone now, but I feel surrounded by family, because that's how my neighbors act, like family."

That is certainly how almost everyone acts at the Garden Party. All throughout the afternoon, people seem to enjoy one another and help take care of one another. Young people help the elderly through the food line, and then escort them to their



# The Role of Settlement Houses in Fostering Relationships Among Neighbors

## Settlement House Context: Mission and Philosophy

**A**s a trusted neighborhood institution with permanence and stability, the settlement aims both to address the needs of families and to serve as a forum for community voice and problem solving.<sup>23</sup> The ten settlement houses describe their broad missions in similar ways:

- *“to improve the quality of life for neighborhood residents”*
- *“to help people help themselves and work together to strengthen their community”*
- *“to help people utilize their strengths and talents, reach their full potential, and achieve self-sufficiency”*

Embedded in the daily life and social fabric of the neighborhood, the settlement has a long history of relying on residents' goals and aspirations to define its agenda.<sup>24</sup> The settlement's values of self-sufficiency and empowerment operate within a context of shared community interests and concerns.

Within this broad mission, the settlement house provides a supportive context for the development of relationships among neighbors. Evidence suggests that the “most effective support is given and taken in the context of daily social intercourse without being asked for and without supporters feeling that they are giving something, or supportees feeling that they are receiving something.”<sup>25</sup> Four of the settlement's characteristics—its hospitable space, its holistic approach, its strength-based approach, and its tradition of “case-to-cause”—play a particularly important role in creating the conditions under which social bonds are created as part of everyday life in the neighborhood. Walking in the door of the settlement—joining the Theatre Company, participating in Parents Helping Parents, or being a member of the Family Council—does not require or signify any particular need or carry any stigma with it, as might be the case in a traditional social services agency. Warmth, fellowship, and informality are more characteristic than formal or bureaucratic relations.

**Hospitable space.** Before relationships can develop, people need a safe and welcoming physical space in which to interact. Settlement house lobbies are often bustling with activities—people coming in to get information about something happening in the community, to sit and have coffee, or to participate in a program. Announcements of upcoming events and the products of art classes, reflecting the cultural diversity of the neighborhood, contribute to an inviting and inclusive atmosphere. In many of the settlements, rooms and kitchen facilities are available for neighborhood functions such as a family wedding or a cultural arts festival, or for local groups to hold meetings or events. Despite what are often cramped and hardly new quarters, settlements aim to develop a physical space that can embody the notion of settlement as an extended living room, a setting that can nurture informal connections and a sense of belonging among neighborhood residents.

**Holistic and inclusive approach.** Settlements are open to all neighborhood residents. Their multigenerational programming and wide range of services and activities mean that most people in the immediate neighborhood know at least one person who has participated in the settlement. Many know numerous such participants—families with children in day care or afterschool pro-

seats. Older people watch over the very young children of mothers and fathers who are helping to supervise the games or participate in the entertainment. Everyone visits with one another, sings and dances together. And by the end of the day, everyone lingers together in the deepening shadows of the autumn afternoon, exchanging phone numbers, neighborhood news, recipes for ethnic foods.

Blanca Izaguirre is among the last to leave. She has been involved in the party from the very beginning. A member of the community house board of directors, she was on the planning committee that helped put the party together, she made sure things ran smoothly all day long, and now she is helping to wrap up, folding and putting away the last of the lawn chairs before the evening darkness falls. She looks exhausted, but she says it was worth every bit of effort she put into it.

“This Garden Party is a celebration of all we are,” says Izaguirre. “I think Queens today is the new Ellis Island; people from everywhere on earth come here and have to learn to live together. And the Garden Party teaches them how to do that

“I've lived in this neighborhood for twenty-two years,” Izaguirre continues. “My two children and I have used many of the programs at the community house. This party helps bring people from all those programs together, along with the staff and other community members. The coming-together is part of the whole process; it doesn't just happen at the party itself.

“During the planning, we start looking around for people with talents. I learn that a neighbor I've seen around my building for years plays the clarinet; that a member of the planning committee is a published poet and her son is an artist. A Russian woman, my neighbor, who had always been very quiet, it turns out she is a painter; and when she had the chance to talk about her painting, she began to open up and talk about her whole life.

“Food is another way to learn about people's talents. Some of our neighbors are extraordinary chefs. When they bring these amazing foods to the party, when they contribute like that to the whole community, you see another side to them, and I think they begin to see themselves in a new way in relation to the community.

“Now when I see those same people later in the streets or in the lobby of my building, they are more than a familiar face. Someone who is now aging I can see as a young woman playing the clarinet. I see a shy young man as a muralist. I remember the woman across the way as the cook who made that fantastic lentil salad. This is good information to have. It's not gossip. It's information about who people really are.”

Izaguirre pauses for a long time before she continues. “It's going to sound strange to say this, but the Garden Party has helped make one of my oldest dreams come true. I grew up in Chelsea, in Manhattan, on a block where everyone knew everyone—store owners, residents, kids, adults, grandparents. It was a big family. Then one day the city took over the whole block and tore it down. And ever since then I've been looking for that same sense of family everywhere I lived. Here in Forest Hills I finally realized I have found it again. I look across the lawn at the party and I see people talking and eating and singing and dancing together. Weeks later those same people are playing chess together, or bocci. They're looking out for one another's children. And it's just like the stoops of my old neighborhood in Chelsea in the 1950s. It's a neighborhood that feels like a family. I never want to leave that again. And I won't. If I win the Lotto tomorrow and I can live anywhere I want, I swear I'll stay right here on this block in Forest Hills.” ●

grams, adults in literacy classes or activities for seniors, and youth in employment training programs. Residents see their neighbors in a theater production or at the garden party, a forum for local politicians, or the farmers' market. The settlement's holistic approach reinforces opportunities for relationships to develop—within and across different programs, among people from different generations and different parts of the community, and over time.

**Strength-based orientation.** A fundamental element of settlement house philosophy that connects its mission to its activities is a deep belief in the expertise and resources that lie within the community and its residents. Settlements strive in all that they do to treat people as whole human beings with strengths that can be mobilized to promote their own well-being, as well as that of their neighbors and of their community. Settlement house staff generally refer to people involved in their programs and activities as participants or residents rather than clients, seeking to avoid language that might convey stigma or reinforce a traditional service relationship. A strength-based orientation involves an implicit critique of the traditional approach to service delivery in which recipients are seen as collections of problems or difficulties that need to be fixed, programs are organized around various forms of dysfunction, dependency upon the agency is fostered, and individual initiative and dignity are unrewarded or undermined.<sup>26</sup>

Settlements are not alone in their strength-based orientation—indeed, such an approach is now standard good practice in a number of fields. For example, one of the key principles guiding family support centers states that “families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.”<sup>27</sup> Despite the growing appeal of such principles, operationalizing them requires an organizational context that supports peoples' strengths and gives them an opportunity to be contributors, not just consumers of services.

One way in which settlements provide this context is by establishing a norm that values reciprocity: people are expected to give as well as to receive, to be contributing members of the group and the larger community. Given the breadth of programming, participants can go from being a member of one group—for example, a support group for women leaving welfare—to a volunteer for another one, such as helping students in a literacy program. Their roles in the settlement can also evolve to match their needs and circumstances as these change over time: the master of ceremonies for the Garden Party at Forest Hills first got involved in the settlement as a twelve-year-old participant in its youth outreach program; a SCAN participant with substance abuse problems became a resource for others as she gained confidence and success as a volunteer; a formerly homeless man became a New Horizon courier and then moved on to join the settlement house staff full-time. Finally, reciprocity happens informally within the natural give and take of settlement relationships—experienced couriers mentor new couriers, residents help each other with their gardens and their children and their lines for the upcoming theatre production.

**Case-to-cause tradition.** The settlement's roots are based in the progressive tradition of optimism and belief in the possibility of change, at both the individual and community level. When common problems are identified among residents, such as summer youth unemployment (at Goddard Riverside) or Medicaid cutbacks among seniors (at Stanley Isaacs), the settlement can shift from case to cause, that is from focusing on a problem requiring individual case assistance to helping people mobilize around a cause for social reform. People come together in relationships that produce collective power when they perceive common interest and anticipate that this interest can be promoted more effectively as a group than alone. Viewing strong relationships as key to strong communities enables the settlement house to value its investment in relationship building among residents as a foundation for a strong advocacy agenda.

In this way, settlements operate as *free spaces*, “settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens . . . are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of

cooperation and civic virtue” (Evans and Boyte, 1986, p. 17). It is the lived, daily character of these networks and relationships—their familiarity, dependability, and commonality of purpose—that Evans and Boyte see as critical to nourishing active citizenship and conceptions of the common good. Settlement programs can thus be a forum for linking personal connections among participants to community problem solving and social action in the public realm.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, settlements provide a physical space, an organizational culture, a set of values, and a group of positive, normalizing programs in which caring and empowering relationships can flourish.<sup>29</sup> Some of these relationships are between staff and residents; others are among residents. Committed to practice that enables people to solve problems for themselves and gain control over their own lives and over the issues affecting their communities, settlement staff underscore the need to be intentional in fostering relationships among participants.

In some cases, these relationships are an explicit goal or part of the program's structure. The primary aim of the Elders at Home program is to connect homebound seniors; SCAN's program structure includes support for “graduates” to mentor new participants; Women as Resources operates as a support group for women leaving shelters. In other cases, the relationships result from activities whose primary goals are very different—to organize a community celebration (the Garden Party), to create a cultural group (the Theatre Company), or to start a new business (New Horizon Courier Service). Because people are social creatures, many of these relationships happen naturally. Sometimes it only takes providing a forum in which people can gather on a regular basis and find fellowship. Other times it takes more deliberate work on the staff's part to structure and encourage positive social interaction.<sup>30</sup> The next section addresses how members of the settlement's staff help residents to build supportive relations with each other and what challenges staff encounter in the process.

## Settlement House Practice: Role of Staff

Valuing neighbor-to-neighbor relationships and understanding their central role in the settlement's mission is important; however, translating this value into concrete practice is not easy. Indeed, traditional training with its emphasis on specialized expertise in the context of a professional one-to-one relationship may not be well suited to provide “assistance aimed at self-reliance, competence, and, above all, citizenship, the goal of settlement house activists like Jane Addams.”<sup>31</sup> Such assistance requires staff to draw upon many different skills and to play many different roles, often taking a collaborative stance with groups of participants who are planning a new business or creating a play or producing a farmers' market.

One of the roles of staff is to help create the conditions under which social support can develop among participants. At the core of settlement practice is the fundamental role of respect. This value is critical to the range of practice strategies outlined by settlement staff below.

**Working with groups.** A significant reliance on groups is a common way for staff to move away from the isolated professional-client relationship. Groups can generate mutual support and provide a vehicle for integrating vulnerable people into the community as, for example, through the Theatre Company, WAR, or Parents Helping Parents. Peers are often far better positioned than staff to provide support for each other's accomplishments because they know what these accomplishments mean in the face of homelessness, mental and physical illness, and so forth.<sup>32</sup> As Sonia Scott from Parents Helping Parents noted, “This is the kind of place where they [group members] could see the stress on my face, and I could tell them everything.” Going through hard times together, as among the SCAN family campers or the Grand Coalition of Seniors, can create a bond of fellowship and support. Peers may also be in a unique position to exert

informal social control when a person's problematic behavior threatens the group, as when a new worker in the New Horizon Courier Service resorts to drinking between deliveries or a member of the Elders at Home program begins to dominate the phone meeting.

Staff point to another advantage of a team or group approach—the opportunity to rely on each other for different skills. Veteran workers can act as mentors to new couriers, each actor can find a niche in a play that suits his or her particular talents, and members of the planning committee for the Garden Party can divide up the tasks according to their skills and interests. The challenge for staff is to help identify an individual's strengths and to be creative about their deployment. The director of the Theatre Company, for example, never turns anyone away. Keeping a sharp eye out for special abilities and needs, his task is to help to fashion a niche that draws upon these strengths at the same time that it fosters an opportunity to learn new skills or develop in new ways.

Settlement staff often say that the settlement creates the structure and the participants create the community. Working with groups, however, is not without its challenges. One such challenge is keeping the group open to new members. Group members who develop strong bonds over time can have difficulty incorporating new members into the group. Sometimes these bonds coincide with racial/ethnic or gender groupings: the largely African American mothers at RENA-COA who were challenged to welcome Latino mothers into the program or the predominantly Latino members of the Grand Coalition of Seniors who were joined by their Asian counterparts. Sometimes the parochial or exclusionary impulse has more to do with the powerful sense of group that has evolved, as in the Theatre Company.

Staff in all three of these cases managed the potential problem by underscoring the inclusive nature of the group, reaching out to new members and encouraging their participation as appropriate. For example, the director of the Theatre Company reports that the settlement makes an active recruitment effort before work on each new play is begun. When new members join, he makes sure that veterans in the group reach out to these new members and help them become active participants. If any problems arise, they talk about it in the group. In both the RENA-COA and Grand Street cases, the new members had few problems becoming engaged in the group, symbolically captured, at Grand Street, by the Asians taking up salsa and the Latinos learning tai chi.

**“Doing with” rather than “doing for.”** Staff members in each of the ten settlement programs point to their need to resist the impulse to take care of participants, to make decisions for the group, or to exert control in other ways that do not convey respect and a deep belief in the strengths participants can call upon to promote their own well-being, as well as that of their neighbors. People who are homeless or who have been addicted to drugs or have been unemployed for long periods clearly have real needs. They are often isolated from people and institutions that can provide support and connect them to resources for addressing these needs. The fewer skills the individual has and the more complicated his or her situation may be, the easier it is for staff to take on the work rather than to share it.

The impulse to take control even exists among staff members who are very self-conscious about their roles. At Forest Hills Community House, staff and residents meet together as volunteers to plan the Garden Party. The planning group provides an opportunity for members to get to know each other and to value each others' contributions outside of their staff or participant roles. But there are pressures from both residents and staff for staff to assume more responsibility for carrying out the tasks necessary to make the day happen successfully—to solicit donations from local restaurants, to supervise the day's set-up, and so forth. Forest Hills staff recognizes and discusses instances in which it has occasionally crossed the fine line between providing support and taking control, and it is currently considering the possibility of transferring Garden Party planning over the next couple of years to the board of the local housing complex. Staff views incubating the planning group and then spinning it off as one way for the Garden Party to produce maximum resident leadership and ownership over the long run.

Staff learn when to step back and let the group make its decisions, even if some of these decisions appear to be mistakes from the staff's perspective. By giving up some control and believing in the capacity of the group, staff again reinforce a culture of respect and empowerment. It is the same message that is communicated, for example, when formerly homeless persons with a history of mental health problems are entrusted to deal with customers of the messenger service and to relay important documents. Staff members are seen as collaborators and facilitators rather than primarily as symbols of control, judgment, or decision making. As Ms. Roper-Robinson pointed out at SCAN, “I never felt that the staff pitied us—‘Oh, look at those poor addicts’.”

**Fostering opportunities for self-expression, celebration, and fun.** Settlement staff underscore the role of the arts in creating opportunities for self-expression and for building meaningful emotional bonds among participants, whether through the Theatre Company, dance and poetry sessions at WAR, the talent show at the Garden Party, or discussion about the arts among Elders at Home participants. In these cases and others, “the arts have the power to connect people to each other through a symbol of their shared identity and to the place in which that identity was forged.”<sup>33</sup> People also find fellowship in playing together—family trips (Parents Helping Parents), bingo (Elders at Home), dancing, dominos, and tai chi (Grand Street Coalition), and camping (SCAN).

**Providing opportunities to give back to the community.** Settlement staff appreciate how community involvement can give a participant a critical sense of connection and purpose. People get a sense of satisfaction from giving back, both in one-on-one relationships and in their contribution to the larger community as through providing a messenger service, creating a cultural event, or making fresh produce available. As a consequence, staff aim to reinforce norms for mutual helping and to structure vehicles for “bringing people into the flow of community activities and decision making.” Sometimes it happens naturally—people help each other find apartments, take care of their children, and share each other's problems and accomplishments. Often staff simply need to create a forum so people will share a song or a dish at the Garden Party, visit members who are sick at home (through the Grand Coalition of Seniors), or swap tips for growing vegetables at UCC's Farmers' Market. Once norms for reciprocity are established, mutual support is typically contagious and self-sustaining.<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes staff encourage particular individuals to contribute by taking on special roles as mentors (SCAN), discussion leaders (Elders at Home), speakers at rallies (Family Council) or writers of the next production (Theatre Company). These roles not only provide an opportunity to give back to the community but also stretch people and promote their sense of competence and connection to something larger than themselves. Many of the individuals described in the program profiles echo Mr. Santiago's sentiments at the Grand Coalition of Seniors: “I owe a lot to this group, and I like to be able to give back in any way I can.” Ms. Colon, also of the Grand Coalition, was able to find apartments for two homeless women in the group and said: “I think I was even happier than the women who got the new apartments!”

**Promoting a sense of collective efficacy.** When people are stressed and isolated, they can feel helpless and blame themselves for not being able to cope. Accomplishing something together—whether it's a play, a garden, a fundraising event or a political rally—generates energy, pride and optimism that can, in turn, provide fuel for further joint activity. One function of relationships like those formed among participants in WAR is to help the individual identify external causes of stress that can, ideally, be collectively addressed (such as through various advocacy activities). Even the fact of seeing problems as a shared condition rather than one's own problem can reduce self-blame and lay the foundation for common cause.

One way in which staff help participants develop a sense of collective efficacy is to provide training in organizing and advocacy. For WAR and Family Council staff this means teaching about how to analyze problems and their sources, holding letter-writing and public

speaking workshops, and helping participants take on new roles as fundraisers, advisory group members, and providers of testimony to various political bodies. Being constantly attuned to opportunities to move from case to case as discussed earlier also enables staff to connect individuals' problems to those of other participants and to a broader social and political agenda for the community.

**Promoting relationships across generations and across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.** Settlement programs provide a forum for learning about difference and for reducing community tensions that result from difference. The relationships described in the profiles involve people with both similar and different backgrounds, relationships between youth and farmers at UCC, between largely African American youth and predominantly white seniors at Forest Hills, between Latino and Asian seniors in the Grand Coalition, between African American and Latino participants in Parents Helping Parents, between people of different races and economic backgrounds in the Theatre Company and Elders at Home programs. In many neighborhoods undergoing demographic changes, where tensions among groups can be most challenging, few opportunities exist for different groups to interact in meaningful ways.

Settlement house staff view one of their roles as helping to forge these opportunities within a context of mutual respect and inclusiveness. Many volunteers and staff members live in the neighborhood and have strong ties to the neighborhood's social networks and informal systems. These individuals are particularly well positioned to reach out to different groups within the neighborhood and draw them into the settlement. In some cases, staff deliberately mix people from different backgrounds on athletic teams or in youth leadership groups. More often, this process happens naturally. Culturally sensitive programming that acknowledges differences at the same time that it aims to establish common ground can go a long way to reducing fear and misunderstanding across groups.

- Mr. Pan (Forest Hills) talked about the support he received from his non-Asian neighbors when his wife died: "I was so moved. I live alone now, but I feel surrounded by family, because that's how my neighbors act, like family."
- An African American mother in Parents Helping Parents reported that most of her neighbors are Hispanic, and she sometimes feels that they look down on her. But after participating in the group, which was racially and ethnically diverse, she notes that "it made it easier for me to get together with neighbors in the building to get the landlord to fix up the lobby—I don't feel as though they are judging me as I used to."
- Larry Littman underscores the value of his participation in a play about immigration for connecting his experience as a Jew to the those of his Latino counterparts: "By the time I played my role, an immigrant crossing the border, I really had a visceral experience of what it was like to be part of that culture. After the performance, . . . we all felt very close to one another."

Settlement staff note that differences can present significant barriers early on in the life of a group. At a WAR meeting, for example, the staff person worked with the group's diverse members to deconstruct some of the classist and racist attitudes and stereotypes that participants had brought to the program: "Where does that idea come from? Who taught you that?" By engaging the group in learning how beliefs are socially constructed, and drawing on everyone's experiences, the staff person was able to help group members relate to each other in a more respectful and informed fashion.

**Linking individuals and networks to resources and opportunities outside the neighborhood.** In addition to fostering connections among participants, settlement staff look for opportunities to link people to resources—employers, schools, service agencies, and so forth—outside of the neighborhood. By being embedded in the neighborhood but having staff and board members who have strong connections beyond it, the settlement can serve an intermediary or bridging function as it uses its institutional connections to enrich and expand local networks. The couriers at New Horizon relate to a customer base throughout the city; the WAR dance group and the Theatre Company participants reach out to attract audiences from outside their existing networks, members of

the Family Council go to city hall and the state capitol to rally their cause, the farmer from upstate invites some youth at UCC to visit his farm. In each of these cases, new relationships are formed, information gained, and opportunities created.

**Ongoing challenges.** In working to create the conditions that foster social support, staff underscore the need for flexible and stable funding that can support the settlement's holistic and inclusive approach. Unfortunately, settlements largely depend on multiple sources of funding that target specialized services for discrete categories of community residents. Further, settlement staff often find it difficult to identify sources of support for many activities that are key to promoting social support among participants, ranging from organizing to community arts and theatre. Many funders have yet to understand the links between these activities and the significant benefits—at relatively low cost—that derive from the neighbor-to-neighbor relationships they generate.

## CONCLUSION

Each of the ten programs we have highlighted here has yielded benefits for the individual and for the neighborhood. A commonly articulated theme among participants is that "someone will notice if I'm not here." The sense of belonging and support that comes from "being a second family" is voiced by many: "If you don't see someone for a day or two, you know something's up, and you call to see if they are okay" (a member of the Family Council); or "In New York, you need someone to worry about you once in a while. We look out for one another" (a courier at New Horizon); or "Everyone's rooting for you all the time, it really gives you a boost" (a member of the Theatre Company). It is in this supportive context that people are more willing to stretch themselves, learn new skills, and see themselves as competent and valuable.

The theme of belonging is mirrored by the often-repeated sense of satisfaction from being able to contribute to the group and to the larger community. People's connections with each other often seem to translate into greater investment in their neighborhoods. Larry Littman talked about the way in which bonding with different members of the Theatre Company "expanded" his life and gave him a new interest and pride in his community. Although we have little systematic evidence about how relatively small networks of social ties help whole neighborhoods function more effectively, we do know that the gardeners who recruit their neighbors to shop at the farmers' market, the members of the Theatre Company who leaflet the community to increase their audience, and the residents of Forest Hills who organize themselves to provide the food for the Garden Party all experience a new sense of themselves as members of a larger community. Sometimes this greater investment produces various forms of social action designed to improve the lives of their neighbors: to block cuts in youth funding (Family Council), to secure a neighborhood lot for the Farmers' Market, or to deliver testimony at a city council meeting (WAR).

By engaging in meaningful activity together—putting on a play, carrying out a business, shaping a political agenda, singing in an intergenerational choir—participants create something larger than themselves. The teamwork and camaraderie that are generated through fellowship and problem solving and producing something together create bonds that can have impact beyond the moment. Feelings of accomplishment enrich participants and increase their confidence about what can be accomplished together.

Relationships develop through the gradual accumulation of shared experience over time. Although the impact of any single relationship is limited, the settlement provides a stable and generative forum for multiple relationships whose cumulative effects can have staying power. These relationships are not unique to settlement houses; indeed, other organizations can and do foster connections among neighbors. But organizations that aim to increase their capacity to promote such relationships should be alert to the particular values of the settlement that provide the very fertile ground in which these relationships are cultivated over time. ●

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> United Neighborhood Houses of New York, Inc. (2000).
- <sup>2</sup> See Wright (1997) for a more in-depth analysis of how Grace Hill, a settlement in St. Louis, translated a similar philosophy and set of values into a Member Organized Resource Exchange (MORE).
- <sup>3</sup> Each settlement received a modest honorarium to help cover staff and participant interview time and other costs. Settlement house staff and relevant participants had an opportunity to review and provide feedback on the profiles prior to circulating the draft report more widely.
- <sup>4</sup> Nelson (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Costello and Fenton (2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Stack (1974), Cohen and Wills (1985).
- <sup>7</sup> Cohen and Wills (1985).
- <sup>8</sup> Cohen and Wills (1985) review confirmatory evidence for both the “buffering” hypothesis and the “main effects” hypothesis that posits that simply being part of a social network enhances well-being (p. 351).
- <sup>9</sup> Granovetter (1973).
- <sup>10</sup> Baumeister and Leary (1995).
- <sup>11</sup> Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497).
- <sup>12</sup> Reissman and Carroll (1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Putnam (2000).
- <sup>14</sup> Stack (1974), de Souza Briggs (1997).
- <sup>15</sup> Putnam (1993).
- <sup>16</sup> Chavis and Wandersman (1990) found that a sense of community can have a catalytic effect on local action by affecting the perception of the environment, social relations, and one’s perceived control and empowerment. Participation is nurtured when people have a sense of belonging to a neighborhood in which they care about the people who live there and believe that others are disposed to care about them.
- <sup>17</sup> Study Circles Resource Center (2000).
- <sup>18</sup> For example, Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) found that urban neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy (defined as mutual trust among neighbors combined with willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good) had lower rates of violence than neighborhoods with low levels of this resource. In examining the effects of neighborhood and family on delinquency among youth, Gorman-Smith (2000) cites evidence that cohesive neighborhoods (as measured by perceived social support, involvement, a sense of belonging) may provide some protection for youth, even for those from low-functioning families.
- <sup>19</sup> Such action may involve various forms of civic participation including volunteering, voting, social action (Cochran, 1994). The role of civic capital is discussed by Potapchuk, Crocker and Schechter (1997).
- <sup>20</sup> de Souza Briggs (1997) distinguishes between social capital that can be used to *get by* (for social support) or to *get ahead* (for social leverage). Relationships that connect neighborhood networks, associations, and organizations to opportunities outside of the neighborhood often serve a social leverage or bridging function.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, the Neighborhood Partners Initiative, a five-site community development effort in New York City, focuses on one-to-five block areas in part because initiative designers assumed that building the social capital required for collective problem solving and action would be most successful in these small geographic areas. Another example involves Putnam’s current work with a group of community foundations to assess changes in social capital over time in their communities (see Web site, <http://www.bettertogether.org>). See also Wallis, Crocker and Schechter (1998).
- <sup>22</sup> This participant asked that her real name not be used; this is a pseudonym.
- <sup>23</sup> For further documentation of settlement house mission and practice, see Brown (1995); Hirota, Brown and Martin (1996); Hirota, Brown, Mollard and Richman (1997); and Hirota and Ferroussier-Davis (1998).
- <sup>24</sup> Husock (1993); Vedeka-Sherman (1992).
- <sup>25</sup> Cohen and Wills (1985, p. 351).
- <sup>26</sup> Husock (1993); Specht and Courtney (1994); Kinney and Trent (1999).
- <sup>27</sup> Family Support America (2000).
- <sup>28</sup> O’Donnell and Schumer (1996).
- <sup>29</sup> Rauner (2000).
- <sup>30</sup> Herrera, Sipe and McClanahan (2000) have studied how effective mentoring relationships can be fostered.
- <sup>31</sup> Chesler (1996), p. 10.
- <sup>32</sup> Kinney and Trent (1999).
- <sup>33</sup> Kelly (2000), p. 11.
- <sup>34</sup> Reissman and Carroll (1995).

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# Contact Information

## **Grand Coalition of Seniors**

Grand Street Settlement  
80 Pitt Street  
New York, NY 10002  
212 674-1740  
[www.grandstreet.org](http://www.grandstreet.org)

## **New Horizon Courier Service**

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House  
331 East 70<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10021  
212 744-5022  
[www.lenoxhill.org](http://www.lenoxhill.org)

## **Family Council**

Goddard Riverside Community Center  
593 Columbus Avenue  
New York, NY 10024  
212 873-6600  
[www.goddard.org](http://www.goddard.org)

## **Parents Helping Parents**

RENA-COA Multi-Service Center  
1920 Amsterdam Avenue  
New York, NY 10032  
212 368-3295

## **Theatre Company**

Hudson Guild  
441 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10001  
212 760-9800

## **Elders at Home**

Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center  
415 East 93<sup>rd</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10128  
212 360-7620  
[www.isaacscenter.org](http://www.isaacscenter.org)

## **Family Camping**

Supportive Children's Advocacy Network  
207 East 27<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10016  
212 683-2522

## **Farmers' Market**

United Community Centers  
613 New Lots Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11207  
718 649-7979

## **Women As Resources Against Poverty**

University Settlement Society of New York  
184 Eldridge Street  
New York, NY 10002  
212 674-9120  
[www.universitysettlement.org](http://www.universitysettlement.org)

## **Garden Party**

Forest Hills Community House  
108-25 62<sup>nd</sup> Drive  
Forest Hills, NY 11375  
718 592-5757  
[www.fhch.org](http://www.fhch.org)

## **United Neighborhood Houses**

70 West 36<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10018  
212 967-0322  
[www.unhny.org](http://www.unhny.org)

## United Neighborhood Houses of New York

**F**ounded in 1919, United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) is the nonprofit umbrella organization for 37 settlement houses that provide more than 500 programs and activities at over 335 sites throughout New York City. These member settlement houses make up one of the largest human service systems in the city, reaching out to more than a half a million New Yorkers each year with high-quality services and activities, including early childhood education, employment training and job placement, computer learning centers, and the arts.

For more than 80 years, UNH has focused on improving the lives of New Yorkers and their communities by strengthening the settlement house movement. UNH accomplishes this mission through advocacy and public policy analysis, public education and media relations, program replication and collaborative projects, and management and technical assistance.

## Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

**C**hapin Hall Center for Children was established in 1985 as a policy research center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analyses, innovative ideas, and an independent, multidisciplinary perspective to bear on improving the well-being of children and the families and communities in which they live.

Chapin Hall's research agenda currently includes the following major areas: children's services, covering the problems that threaten children and the services designed to address them; primary supports for child and youth development, concerning the resources and activities in communities that enhance the development and well-being of all children; and community building, focusing on the development, documentation, and evaluation of community-building initiatives designed to strengthen communities as important environments for children and families.