

October 10, 2008

NEWS FROM THE BRONX

We at WHEDCo are in the midst of a genuine "leap" year. We are taking to scale successful and inter-connected solutions- in housing development, business development, early childhood and youth education- throughout the Bronx.

With your help, guidance, friendship and financial support the Bronx is *changing*, and WHEDCo's role in this borough's transformation is *growing*.

Creating Conditions for Change

Organizations like WHEDCo create change and grow when they articulate an approach that is achieving demonstrable results. WHEDCo's geographic expansion stems from top external evaluations affirming our two-pronged economic development strategy: ***working on solutions for whole families- parents and children- while also working to dramatically alter the streetscapes in which families live.*** Our neighborhood work replicates the attributes found in prosperous communities: safe and healthy homes, professional childcare and extracurricular activities; opportunities for adult learning and business creation, access to healthy food and recreation and more.

We are constantly reminded that individual achievement can be sabotaged by unsafe environments, and how beautiful homes and open space provide a respite from the physical and emotional exhaustion of poverty. Working with colleagues from Fordham University, the Bronx Museum of the Arts and members of our Board of Directors, we have endeavored to first learn about and then re-create some of the lost grandeur of the Bronx, and to restore memories of its once vibrant communities.

"Pride of place" is a term not typically associated with the Bronx, although no one doubts its importance. Too many of this borough's residents have internalized and passed along their own narratives of failure and worthlessness, narratives of decay dating back decades and for which they bear virtually no responsibility. It is easy to understand why people feel unworthy if their physical environments- streets, schools and homes- reiterate decay. The elevated train tracks are dark and rusted; the stations unsafe. Street lights are broken; there are no trees. It remains unsafe to walk home from even the best of schools.

These observations have driven our approach to community development and our commitment to creating the conditions for change.

Building Beautiful and Greener Homes

This fall WHEDCo will double our housing portfolio and accommodate in permanent and supportive housing nearly a thousand formerly homeless and low-income adults and their children!

Our new venture-**Intervale Green**- will open in early November. Intervale Green is vying for a top national distinction: best multi-family housing development, fully green (energy efficient *and* healthy

materials), affordable, wired for internet access and, of course, beautifully designed. The streets, gardens and roofs on Intervale Green will be, well, *green!* Over a half acre of vegetation is already growing on massive green roofs; by mid-October, we will plant two residential courtyards, a public sculpture garden and over 50 street trees.

In our on-going effort to bridge the digital divide, after receiving training, we will give every family a computer for their apartment, so they can bring the wider world into their homes.

At the same time as we are completing Intervale Green, we are in the second year of a three-year energy retrofit of our flagship, Urban Horizons. Again, we were on the cutting edge of the retrofit movement, securing a three year working capital grant/loan from Deutsche Bank for this project nearly three years ago. Lowering energy costs by reducing consumption has the added impact of reducing carbon emissions. In New York City, according to the Mayor's Office of Sustainability, buildings account for 80% of the city's carbon emissions. So, as the City has embarked on its own program to retrofit city-owned buildings, we at WHEDCo will be the very first residential retrofit in the city.

We expect that the "greening" of both of these housing complexes will result in replicable models of how to achieve substantial energy reduction and healthy living environments within the tight budgets of affordable housing. There is no question that reducing energy costs for families already struggling to make ends meet couldn't be more urgent. ***It is incumbent on both the public and private sectors to ease the pressure on low income families-and reducing energy expenses gives far more bang for the buck than any work I've ever done!***

And we're inviting our colleagues into this important conversation. In mid-November, we are hosting a conference in partnership with the CUNY Graduate Center: ***Breaking the Green Ceiling***, to discuss the challenges of weaving together housing affordability, energy efficiency and high-end green interior and exterior design (no small feat).

Expanding the Reach of Home-Based Childcare

It's no secret that microenterprise has taken root here in the Bronx after over a decade of increasingly sophisticated training and business development led by WHEDCo's Director of Home Based Childcare Services Diana Perez and her staff. At the end of 2007, 180 Bronx women owned and operated home-based child care microenterprises collectively cared for 1,200 children and generated over \$8 million in gross annual revenues.

As a result of this extraordinary work, WHEDCo was awarded the first-ever contract by New York State's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to screen and enroll what are called "informal" or "unregulated" childcare providers (typically relatives, friends and neighbors). In contrast to the licensed and regulated childcare provided by our network of entrepreneurs, most childcare in the Bronx (and throughout New York City) is neither regulated nor licensed, even though this childcare is subsidized by the city and state, and the parents of children in unregulated care are required by the welfare reform laws to work.

State and city lawmakers wisely realized that any effort to move a parent (mostly women) into the workforce without safe and affordable childcare was doomed; so they decided to outsource this critically important caregiver "assessment" function to WHEDCo. We will interface with every parent receiving public assistance and needing childcare in the entire borough; do background checks for both criminal and child abuse histories; and assess the qualifications of every informal childcare provider.

While this contract is limited in its scope, *it presents WHEDCo with an opportunity to assist heretofore underserved families: to leverage state funds and to increase access to support for families who fly under the radar screen, whose lives are the most unstable, and who do not, on their own, obtain often life-saving help.*

With the additional support we are seeking (and receiving) from the philanthropic community, we are using this door into the lives of an estimated 14,000 parents and their childcare providers a year, to bring information about health, personal safety, housing and childcare. We also hope to entice informal childcare providers to join our microenterprise training program and encourage them to become trained and licensed caregivers. This is both an awesome task and an opportunity to bring the depth and breadth of WHEDCo's expertise to families needing both help and hope.

Achieving Excellence in Early Childhood and Youth Education

In May, WHEDCo's Head Start Center received accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NYPEAC), one of the first programs in the nation to receive what the *Wall Street Journal* calls "the gold standard for early childhood education." The Center is home to 104 toddlers every year, whose families hail from around the world including almost every West African nation (reflecting the rapidly changing demographics in our community). The NYPEAC accreditation process was lengthy and rigorous—a full year of review that included staff competence, curriculum, parent engagement, child achievement, Board oversight and the beauty and cleanliness of the classrooms and playground.

The Center is a stand-out for parent involvement. Over 800 parents—an extraordinary number for an inner city Head Start program—participated in school-related activities in the past four years, including monthly parent meetings, classroom activities, leadership meetings, holiday celebrations, and open houses. In addition, parents participate in daily adult literacy classes we offer with our long-time colleague, Literacy Partners. It is this kind of parent engagement that our Head Start Center nurtures, and we have witnessed these authentically engaged parents move with their children to elementary school, and become leaders in Parent Associations. High demand for our coveted Head Start program means that 97% of the three-year olds return the following year, and 483 children are on the waiting list.

Also in the high-achievement department is our after school program's Youth Service Learning initiative—which received "best in city" awards for program content, longevity and student participation. And, over the past three years an average of 81% of the 8th graders enrolled in our Project STEP middle school academic enrichment program were admitted to high performing high schools, including Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and The High School of American Studies at Lehman College.

Continuing to Provide Solutions to Families in Crisis

Even as we celebrate positive changes in lives of Bronx residents, and the rebuilding of the borough, we have no illusions about “ending” poverty or curing all that ails so many. How could we, when our Food Pantry has tripled in size since this time last year? We now serve fresh produce and staple foods to over 400 families a month and the lines are getting longer—fully around the block. In August we ran out of food for the first time.

It's hard to imagine how more schools or even more housing, alone, will matter if families don't have enough money to prepare an evening meal. School breakfasts and lunches go only so far (they don't feed parents nor pre-schoolers); and a mother's inability to cook a meal for her children is beyond depressing. How can even a motivated child attending a decent school do homework while hungry? In addition to providing the most basic of needs, food, WHEDCo staff are there to help families navigate all of their daily challenges, including eviction, domestic violence and attending to the special educational needs of their children.

Documenting What We Are Learning

A year ago, we hired our first in-house professional Director of Research and Evaluation, who is responsible for the quantitative data in this letter. Dr. Meredith Reitman has designed evaluation instruments for each program and has captured historic information, while providing staff with easy tools to input new data. One of Meredith's most important achievements this year was to study, and prepare a report which compared the achievements of our Project STEP students, with students in the same school but *not enrolled* in Project STEP. (We have the school's principal to thank for giving us access to data from a "control" group). We learned via the data that ***80% of the children in Project STEP were admitted to high-performing high schools, as compared with less than 50% of those not in the program! It is rare in the human services world to actually document, with hard data, impact of this kind.***

In this historic year when national discourse is finally focused on the fundamentals of success: education, health, homes and economic security, we at WHEDCo, with your help, are taking our ability to offer genuine solutions to these national problems and applying them throughout the Bronx. One day soon I hope that policy makers will point to the Bronx as the place where change actually took place at the individual and community level, erasing once and forever imagery of burned out buildings and raging fires. Now *that* would be a fitting tribute to the historic richness of this vibrant community.

Thanks for your continued interest in our work.



Nancy Biberman
President