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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXVI, Number 28, 24 February 1992 — Rheedland Center helps neighborhood students [ARTICLE]

Rheedland Center helps neighborhood students

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Although in recent years educators have made some strides in helping underprivileged high school students stay out of trouble, these outreach programs often miss younger children.

For more than 20 years, however, one organization based in Morningside Heights has seen to it that this important group has not been ignored.

The Rheedland Center, which operates out of a neighborhood office on 107th Street, is dedicated to preventing the surprising amount of truancy among lower and middle school students who range between five and fifteen years old.

"When you think of truancy, you may think of high school or junior high school children," said Jeff Canada, president and chief executive officer of the Rheedland Center.

Canada said the elementary school students involved in the program have missed school due to one of any number of problems at home--problems that often stem from the poverty that renders their parents unable to make school a priority in their childrens' lives.

"Their home lives are so chaotic and disorganized and they're not able to really get their parents to get them into school. It's largely a family issue," he said.

Constructive Afternoons and Close Bonds

In order to make a difference in the lives of those children, the Rheedland volunteers organize a variety of programs for the students that inlcude everything from fun and games to classroom activities.

"At 2:30 the social workers go and pick up their children that are on their caseloads, bring them to our program sites, and then we proivide them with an after-school program [which] consists of reading tutorials and help with math, tutors, volleyball, regular gym activities, table games and arts and crafts," Canada said.

In fact, social workers at the Rheedland Center participate in so many activities with the children that they are as much tutors and gym instructors as they are social workers, he said.

However, providing activities for the children is only one part of the organization's philosophy. The other aspect is to help the parents of the students make school a priority in their childrens' lives,

"We were very involved in their lives," said Carlton Long, a Columbia professor of political science who served as a social worker at the Rheedland Center in 1985.

"We accompanied parents for enrollment [of their children] in junior high school, provided emergency provisions, did crisis intervention, and dealt with family quarrels," Long said.

Long recalled one time when he even helped a family make arran-

gements for a funeral.

"Because the program offers the kind of emotional and educational supports that are very healthy for young people, our children gravitate toward it," Canada said.

Unfortunately, many children are turned away each year, when the program sites fill to capacity. There just doesn't seem to be enough financial and human resources to fill the burgeoning need for youth support services. However, the Rheedland Center, along with other family and community support services, has had a great impact on the lives of children who are given the sense that their presence in and contribution to society is significant and appreciated.

"There is a sense at Rheedland," said Long, "that all of society has a stake in the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical well-being of [the children]."

Satellites

The center has eight "satellite" centers located in three areas throughout Manhattan--Central Harlem, Manhattan Valley, and Clinton (Hell's Kitchen). Because these communities are populated mostly by African-Americans and Latinos, the organization tailors its programs to meet those groups' specific needs.

One aspect of this involves staffing the satelite centers with primarily African-American and Latino volunteers and workers, Canada said.

"We look for people who are culturally sensitive and who reflect

the population of the children that we're servicing. We want people who can actually stand up as role models to our young people," she added.

In addition, the center places a strong emphasis on helping not only one student, or even one family, but the entire community.

"To strengthen the family while not dealing with the community, what happens is that you strengthen one family but three other families fall while your strengthening one, and you end up with a growing need," Canada said.

The Beginings

When the program started, it had one site, was administered by one director and an assistant, and serviced about twenty-five to thirty children. Currently, the program consists of eight sites in Manhattan, a full-time and part-time staff of about 120 social workers and volunteers, and approximately 2500 children.

Founded in 1970 by Richard Murphy, the current New York commissioner of Youth Service, the Rheedland Center was started to combat the impediments to youth development. The center provided for children from various parts of New York City a safe place to go after school for recreation and study. The center also provided financial and parental counseling for the parents of the children in the program.

The Rheedland Center was founded by Richard Murphy, presently the Commissioner of Youth

Services for New York City.

"Murphy is an excellent choice for Commissioner of Youth Service. He really loves children, and likewise they adore him," Long said.

Branching Out

Recognizing a need for a support group for senior citizens in its communities, Rheedland is taking over the senior citizen's community center.

There are many issues that impact senior citizens that are similar to the issues that we confront when dealing with our youth, Canada said.

"Rheedland also has a history of doing inter-generational programs, of working with Seniors," he said, "And we've found that more of our children are coming from homes where the grandparents are the primary caretakers. "

Citing crack and AIDS as factors that have wiped out a generation of African-Americans and Latinos, Canada said that grandparents now will be called upon to do more parenting than ever before.

Taking over the Senior Center plays an important role in helping Rheedland to accomplish its ultimate goal of improving the community.

"We really feel that their [senior citizen's] resources will help with our mission which is not only to help children, but to actually work and try to change and become agents of change in the community," Canada said.