

Chapter 1 Building A Family-Focused Community-Centered Program: Commitments, Philosophies, and Interests*

From the deep springs of life there stirs the meaning of every human being; the irreducible dignity of every person as individual. In truth it has been said that 'one person is of more value than a world.' Paradoxically, personhood is nurtured and enhanced in a family, in a people, in a community. Individuality springs not in a fishbowl, but within the vitality and connectedness of community.

The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park is devoted to the growth and development of the one -- the individual child, adult, parent -- and the development of the many that in diversity and richness of background come together for the fulfillment of human needs and aspirations, as a neighborhood.

The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park -- a place of welcome for neighbors who can become friends and partners, a place where each person can find a listening and understanding response to questions, problems or needs, and connectedness in this city and this setting of possibilities. The individual and the many in our caring! -- From The One and the Many, 1978 Center brochure

Sisters Mary Paul and Geraldine, the Center's founders and Directors, began their work in Sunset Park as experienced social work practitioners. They brought with them priorities derived from years of professional work with families, individuals, groups, and communities. In recounting when the idea for a neighborhood family center first emerged, they described their work as Sisters of the Good Shepherd (an order founded in France in 1641 as Sisters of the Refuge to shelter banished women) at the Euphrasian Residence, a program for young girls who were placed by the court system. Sister Mary Paul was Director of Social Services for Euphrasian and several related programs, and Sister Geraldine was Program Director of Euphrasian. Sister Geraldine recalled that, "*It was out of a deep experience of working with children and teenagers that we were convinced that we were just working at the symptomatic end, postponing the essential tasks [of family work]. The kids were just symptom bearers. We were convinced that we had to work with families.*" She remembered the significant impact of the parting words of one child who had been living at Euphrasian as she was being discharged to her family:

She was just crying. She said to me, to Mary Paul, and to the worker 'It's not that I don't want to go home. I'm not upset about that. I don't want to leave here, because everything worked here for me -- if only I could go home and somebody would still meet with my mom and me and help us to get along and if there would be a school where I got the attention I got here, I could do better in school.'

And Mary Paul and I looked at each other, and we said 'Why not? What's to stop us?'

Their first attempt to implement a neighborhood center with a strong family focus was in 1972 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, a neighborhood where the Sisters of Good Shepherd had a pre-existing service program. Sister Mary Paul recalled the challenges inherent in that initial effort: "*There was nothing out there like that -- a family center . . . The family support movement had not been identified anywhere in the United States. There was no such thing as preventive services funding, no funding for family work. We really had no base on which to rest. We started on a belief system.*" Sister Mary Paul noted that while they were in Park Slope "*The model was defined -- the clinical services, the community school relationship, emergency services. We had defined the need for foster care . . . We made some mistakes. But when we came to Sunset Park, what was really clear was that we wanted to be serving families.*"

Thus, Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine approached the establishment of the Center for Family Life with a "blueprint" based upon their earlier professional experiences. That blueprint included emergency services, counseling, and community school services, with family life education, socialization, and learning to be provided at the schools. As the Center staff identified community needs and developed resources, specific activities and services were designed and implemented. Thus the blueprint was adapted to meet the needs in Sunset Park.

Although the blueprint outlined the focus and structure of the Center's services, it is the certainty and intensity of the commitments, philosophies, and interests of the organization's leadership and program staff that have shaped the Center for Family Life. The specific nature of these emerged from our in-depth interviews with the Center's directors, program directors, staff, and participants, and community leaders, our direct observations of the Center's activities, and our review of numerous documents. Over the past two decades these commitments, philosophies, and interests have been tested and refined as both the Center and the community to which it belongs have evolved. The Center is historically and currently characterized by its commitments, which, as described in this chapter, are evident in all its program components.

The Family As the Unit of Attention

From the beginning the keystone of the Center's philosophy has been that the family is the unit of attention. Over the twenty-two years of the Center's operations no shift is evident in the primary investment of the Center's leadership and the larger Center staff in Sunset Park's families. Sister Mary Paul has stated that:

*You have to look for some level of commonality. Somewhere there has to be a possibility of a community of interests. And for me, in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic community, I think family is the plane on which you find things to appreciate in each other. I don't really know what else there is if it's not that. The word "family" in Spanish, *familia*, . . . it's in each culture here. It is really strong. In the Chinese culture and the Arab culture, love of family is equally strong.*

The Center's staff members have always assisted at least two generations of family members at a time. For example, providing employment training and job placement services for adults in a family is deemed as critical as offering a range of programs, activities, and services for children and teens. Involving grandparents whenever they are available and able in the activities of younger family members is a priority. "*What's good for the families of Sunset Park is good for the community of Sunset Park, since families anchor the community,*" agreed Dr. Jennifer Howse, Chairperson of the Center's Advisory Board.

Staff in the Center's preventive services program, which provides individual, family, and group counseling as well as other family support services, articulated the importance of understanding family systems in the process of assessment, in identifying and supporting each family's strengths, and in engaging all family members in Center activities. A preventive program staff member stressed that "*The key is that we work with the family, with everybody. . . In my own cases I'm more successful when I've been able to engage everybody -- every single one of the persons that lives in that particular household. That makes a big, big change. For me, that's the key to the whole thing.*"

Early support for the development of the Center's capacity to focus on families -- both financially and from a policy standpoint -- emanated from New York State. Funding from the New York City Special Services for Children, the New York State Department of Social Services, and foundation grants made it possible to start the Center. The New York State Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979 placed an increased emphasis on keeping families intact through the expansion of decentralized, community-based, and integrated services, and the federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, P.L. 96-272, reinforced the state's policy direction. With the passage of these two laws, the Center was assured continued funding for community-based services for high-risk families and public support for the staff's efforts to keep families together (McGowan, with Kahn & Kamerman, 1990 p. 29).

After the Center was well established, its ability to serve families with school-aged children was further enhanced by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development Beacon School grant program, initiated in 1993. Through this initiative the Center has coordinated efforts with other community agencies to create year-round activities for children, teens, and their parents seven days and evenings at one school and to study ways to enrich other school sites.

Belonging To the Community

We wanted to be in the community, part of the community, and working with families around family issues. . . We brought with us the idea that the neighborhood was the base for family services. We were convinced that family work had to be the task of the community itself. -- Sister Mary Paul

In the Community

Why did the community of Sunset Park become the home of the Center? In recalling their decisions regarding the establishment of the Center for Family Life, Sister Geraldine and Sister Mary Paul both stressed the importance of rooting their work in a community, agreeing to locate the Center in one that was experiencing very serious problems, but was not too thoroughly debilitated. As the Center's founders, they considered several Brooklyn communities for the Center's home. They concluded that Sunset Park fit their criteria: a very troubled and underserved community, but a community in which they believed "a momentum is building for a many-faceted approach to the social and economic recovery of this neighborhood and the development of its people" (Center for Family Life 1979: 5). They saw the newly founded Center as "very privileged to be contributing to this effort" (Ibid).

Sister Mary Paul reported that during the period of their assessment and planning, which began in 1978, they were urged to locate in Sunset Park by the New York City Special Services for Children Commissioner, the District 15 Superintendent of Schools, Community Board #7's District Manager, many from the 72nd Police Precinct, and social service agencies. All identified Sunset Park as a very troubled community, particularly gang-ridden at that time, and distinctly underserved other than by Lutheran Medical Center. The director of community relations at the Lutheran Medical Center, Kathryn Wylde, felt that at the time of the Center's establishment, "a new organization, with a multiservice approach, was badly needed for families who would not respond to the traditional services of mental health clinics, but who needed recreational programs for their children and help in addressing very serious gang problems" (Sheffer, 1992:18).

Another factor in locating the Center in Sunset Park was the consensus among those with whom the founders consulted that it would be productive to locate it within the geography of the major systems (schools, police, social service agencies, etc.) that served nearby Park Slope, a nearby community where the two sisters' credibility was already strong, based upon their work there from 1972 to 1977.

A long-time supporter of the Center, Barbara Blum, who was the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Social Services in 1978, recalled that she would have preferred "*to see a model like this tested in a somewhat more devastated neighborhood [than Sunset Park].*" She noted, however, that "*The Sisters were very practical. You have to have, they felt, some other things that are viable [in a neighborhood] in order to make this model effective.*" Blum observed that the neighborhood's attraction for immigrant groups may contribute to a "*positive force*" not present in other neighborhoods: "*The neighborhood is constantly being infused with people searching for opportunity and that may very well create some positive force that one doesn't find in these more devastated neighborhoods where people are quite walled in and not able to be motivated so well.*"

A comment from State Senator Christopher Mega, cited in the New York Times, was included in the Center's first Progress Report: "'Sunset Park hasn't reached the point of complete disaster like the South Bronx or Bushwick . . . There is noticeable deterioration here that can be turned around' (emphasis added)" (Center for Family Life 1979:5). His comment, noted as "widely shared in the community" (Ibid), lent external credibility to the Directors' choice of neighborhood for the Center's home.

Belonging To the Community

Sisters Geraldine and Mary Paul were concerned not only about locating the Center in a community, but also that the Center's services would belong to that community. To be present with and accountable to Sunset Park families day to day, year in and year out, has been a chief goal of the Center founders. Sister Mary Paul stated, "*We're here, and we're available. It's just like years ago in the settlement house. The settlement house and its staff belonged to the community . . . joining people in their life space on a daily basis, joining them in their daily life tasks.*"

Thus, making the Center's staff and programs accessible to the neighborhood has been a high staff priority over the past two decades. Describing this priority, a Center for Family Life preventive program social worker elaborated:

This is community-based social work, broadly. We limit ourselves geographically [to Sunset Park], but within that geographic area I see the families, businesses, schools, the hospital, enclosed in that area as all being interconnected. I'm connected to guidance counselors and teachers and assistant principals at the school, people at the hospital, my neighborhood foster care families. So when I see a family beginning to deteriorate, falling apart, I can almost visualize pulling in nets or supports to keep them going, and it's all by their friends and neighbors. I believe very much in that. It makes sense to me. . . We draw on the community resources, not just the social workers of the program, but drawing energy from all the supports that are in the community, to keep the family growing and alive and feeling good about itself. All the resources are right here in the community. Very rarely do they [clients] have to go outside of that.

Belonging to the Sunset Park community inevitably means being responsive to the political, economic, and social changes that affect the community. For example, the changing demography of Sunset Park has significantly influenced the Center's program development and its staffing patterns. To illustrate, as more Chinese residents have joined Center activities, greater attention has been paid to the language, culture, and family dynamics of the respective Asian groups participating in programs. The changing nature of Sunset Park's Latina/o population has required Center staff to recognize the distinctions between national groups in its clinical and school-based interventions. Political divisions between and within ethnic groups are important contextual factors as are the common values and priorities shared across ethnic lines.

In addition, the specific nature of the services provided by the Center over the past two decades has been shaped by the needs of the community's families and children. The penetrating presence of poverty and unemployment has required continuing accessibility of emergency services (i.e., food, clothing, financial assistance). The challenges facing immigrant parents in locating and retaining employment, including the need for job skills, English as a second language skills, and childcare, prompted the creation of an employment program and have shaped the services provided through the Center's community schools programs. The problems faced by the community's youth reinforce the staff's strong commitment to providing a range of educational, socialization, youth development, recreational, and employment programs for children and teens.

Creating Communities of Interest

The Center's commitment to community membership is not limited to geographical definitions. In addition to the Center's commitment to be in and belong to the community of Sunset Park, the Center also creates opportunities for children, youth, and adults to experience membership in communities created out of shared interests, such as the arts, sports, and parenting.

The undesirable consequences of not providing positive community experiences for children and youth have been stressed by John Kixmiller, one of the leaders of the community school programs. He has emphasized that when children and teens are unsupervised for long periods of time with no structured activity, *"they're going to figure out some things to do and will create some kind of a community out on the streets."* Yet without involved adults who allocate resources and assist with structure, youth become frustrated and angry. He stressed that *"That anger and frustration leaks out in all sorts of destructive behaviors . . . The anger means that youth are without positive involvement and are angry about it."*

Julie Stein Brockway, another of the leaders of the community school programs who was appointed Co-Director of the Center in summer 2000 after the untimely death of Sister Geraldine in April, described the way in which the Center attempts to develop community experiences as follows: *"We create community through projects that we all engage in together. It's not getting together for the sake of making community, it's being involved in certain things that we all enjoy and value and benefiting from the*

relationships formed." Sister Mary Paul has also emphasized that, "*One person alone might find something too daunting . . . but the experience of community and of doing things together is what generates hope.*"

Comprehensive, Integrated, Holistic Services

Since its inception, the Center has also been consistently committed to providing comprehensive, integrated, and holistic practice and services. For the Center staff, holistic practice has several meanings. First, it approaches families and communities as interdependent entities. In Sister Geraldine's view: ". . . *while we're working with families, we think of them in the context of community, so that both of those contexts educate us. . . . If the school system is accessible and responsive to families, families will do better. The stronger the community context, the better families survive.*" Second, integrated, holistic practice means avoiding dichotomies in goals, processes, and method. Sister Geraldine emphasized:

You don't throw process away on behalf of task and you don't throw task away on behalf of process. We work hard at that integration. You don't throw settlement house away on behalf of clinic; you don't throw social group work away on behalf of casework -- it's both. And we're constantly working on the integration of these pieces on behalf of the systems that we are working with, whether it's a family or what have you. It's so much easier to break apart in pieces than to keep the integration going.

This is particularly evident in the Center's unique integration of the concrete and therapeutic services typical of family preservation programs (Cole & Duva 1990; Fraser et al. 1997; Kinney et al. 1991; McCroskey & Meezan 1997; Nelson et al. 1990) with the continuously available comprehensive neighborhood-based services typical of family support programs (Allen et al. 1993; Kagan & Weissbourd 1994; Lightburn & Kemp 1994). Over the past two decades, these two distinct program models have been developed within the field to address the needs of vulnerable families. Family preservation services are specifically designed to prevent, through intensive brief services, the imminent out-of-home placement of children in families on the verge of breaking apart, while family support services are envisioned as providing a range of continuously available primary prevention services to all families who perceive themselves as needing such support. Yet there are many families whose needs place them somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes: families who are not yet at serious risk of breakdown, but whose needs and problems are more complex than can be adequately addressed by family support services. Since its inception, the Center's model has combined elements of both family preservation and family support programs to provide a comprehensive yet individualized response to the needs of Sunset Park's families.

The Center's commitment to comprehensive integrated practice continues. Families as well as staff members acknowledge the importance of the comprehensive nature of this service approach. For example, a parent served in the Center's preventive program commented:

I was only expecting to find counseling here, like they would help me with the kids, but I didn't think they would care about me personally. I thought they would just care about my son and help him because he was the one with the problem. But once we started going, they really helped me. If you don't have a job, they help you, and they also help with summer camp for the children. If you are a couple and you have problems, you can go there for counseling. And if you don't have food, they give you food. They also have free classes in English for the beginner. I wasn't expecting this.

Inclusive and Non-stigmatizing Programs and Services

The Center also has always stressed inclusivity. To the Center staff inclusivity means that all families with children in Sunset Park have access to its free programs and activities. It is assumed all families may at some time have the need for a range of services and that families themselves are able to determine which services are needed and when.

To assure families' ease and comfort in accessing the Center's services, the directors and staff have consistently avoided any word or act or funding that would stigmatize families who participate. This commitment is demonstrated through the sources of funding sought and accepted, the nature, location, and names of its programs, and the language used by staff members as they describe their work with Sunset Park residents. Unlike workers at many family service agencies and mental health centers, they *never* refer to their clients as patients. Center staff members actively reject thinking of Center clients or program participants as people with special problems.

To illustrate, therapeutic small groups, which are available to children, youth, and parents through the Center's preventive services program, are identified not by a problem focus, such as women who are battered or youth who are delinquent, but rather by participants' age and/or gender (e.g., the pre-adolescent girls' group, the women's group, the men's group). Workers believe this method of grouping clients encourages the engagement of clients who might not participate were the problems with which they were struggling identified in the group's name. A worker noted: "*All the women who come to the women's group are there to support their families and improve the level of their functioning for their families. That's their commonality. There doesn't have to be anything else but that -- that they want something better for themselves and their families.*"

Working Partnerships

The development of partnerships with families, community schools, and others in the community is another defining characteristic of the Center's model. As described earlier, the co-founders established the Center with a blueprint of the model they wanted to develop. A partnership with community schools was central to this model. However, Sister Geraldine stressed that when the Center enters a partnership with another agency or organization, neither the Center nor its partner gives up its identity, mission, or structure. She emphasized that:

We don't become a part of another system, we become a partner. We are a separate entity from the schools -- just like we wouldn't move in with a family, even though the family would love for you to. It is important for systems, such as the individual family system or the individual school system, to have their own lives and to be separate from us, but for us to be a partner.

As partners, parents and children share the staff's interest in the continuation of the Center's community-based programs. To illustrate, in the mid-nineties when New York City funds for the community school program were threatened, parents and children associated with the Center wrote to the City's mayor to argue for continued funding. A content analysis of the letters identified the great value attributed to the Center by families. For example, children most frequently noted that the Center helps with homework/school, keeps children "*off the streets*" and "*out of trouble*," and is "*fun*." Children also wrote that they make new friends at the Center and can "*hang out*" there. They emphasized that the Center encourages dance, art, drama, sports, etc., and that elimination of the Center's activities would be like "*taking down a part of my life*." Children/youth wrote that the Center "*teaches us how to perform on the job*" and helps "*prepare for the future*," "*learn how to work with the younger children*," and develop confidence and cooperation.

In their letters, parents emphasized that they cannot afford babysitters and that the after-school program keeps their children from becoming latchkey kids; it keeps their children "*off the streets*." Many parents' comments paralleled their children's regarding the help with homework and opportunities for recreational activities. Parents also noted that the Center allows them to meet other parents and gives parents an opportunity to become more involved in the school and the community.

One reason for these enthusiastic endorsements is that staff members invite and foster the participation and partnership of Sunset Park children, teens, and adults in the myriad activities -- recreational, artistic, vocational, educational, and therapeutic -- that make up the Center's programs and services. A parent of two children enrolled in one of the Center's Community School Projects commented "*They [Center staff] never close the door on me. I could have a question, a disagreement, a concern, and that door was*

always open, and they always tried to resolve the problem. That in itself is enough. I don't need anything else . . . just having that sense of security, that [knowledge] that they will listen to my concerns, that is enough."

Families served in the Center's preventive program also reported highly valuing the sense of partnership in their relationships with their social workers. Family members served in this program consistently described relationships with their social workers in which they feel accepted, not judged, and equal with their counselors.

An Intergenerational and Developmental Focus: "People Realizing their Possibilities"

The paradigm of development -- of the individual (child, teen, adult), the family, the community -- is a theme of Center conversation and written materials. The staff members conceptualize the Center's programs as interventions designed to address the developmental needs of all family members.

This developmental focus further incorporates a particular understanding of the role of intergenerational contact and interaction in the ongoing development of individual children, youth, and adults, of their families, and of the community. For example, the Center's community school programs are designed to involve Sunset Park teens with adult staff in the care of elementary school- aged children and to engage parents and grandparents in various aspects of the children's experiences. Two of the leaders, Kixmiller and Onserud (1995: 209-210), have asserted that, "The task of creating and maintaining a holistic environment representing the various ages and developmental stages of life is at the heart of any community center model." They describe the school-aged childcare program as an integrative component for the Center, as it encourages:

. . . a wide range of age groups, activities, roles and responsibilities to overlap and meet around a common purpose. It includes teens who volunteer their time working with children through a counselor-in-training program, and who then become committed to the success of that operation; young adults who have reached the level of maturity needed to become group leaders; and parents who naturally have a stake in the well being of their children and of the community in which they live. (p. 210)

A former Counselor-in-Training who is now an adult and a Center staff member reflected upon her own development, the development of the children she works with, and the experience of becoming a role model for the younger children:

It's interesting to see how they [the younger children] grow, how they develop, certain stages they go through. You see yourself in them also, like when you were a child, the things you used to do . . . It's important for them to have positive things to look at and model on . . . I feel proud of what I do, like I was saying about being a role model. Being a role model is a hard thing to do, but it also brings positive feelings.

Fostering Self-Expression. The Center's commitment to participants'/clients' development has not only involved attention to the individuals' developmental needs, but also to making opportunities for self-expression, cultural expression, and creativity fundamental aspects of daily life in Sunset Park. It is not sufficient at the Center to help Sunset Park residents with food, housing, jobs, money, schooling, health care, childcare, home care, family harmony, and safety; the Center staff members place high priority on helping people express their talents and aspirations. For example, each year in the community school programs, two musical performances are presented in which all children participate. The performance is written, designed and produced entirely by the children and staff. A high priority is given to the development of such opportunities. To illustrate, Julie Stein Brockway described the benefits of enhancing capacities for self-expression:

Self-expression, particularly finding one's voice, finding what one has uniquely to say as well as learning to hear from others, is such an incredibly important part of getting one's

needs met, resolving conflict creatively, dealing with and managing difficult feelings, finding a way to address difficult feelings without resorting to behaviors that might be detrimental to oneself or to others in the community.

A parent's description of the Center's work with each of her children further illustrates the benefits of the programmatic emphases on development and self-expression:

My son was the first in our family to join the program, and I felt it had an impact on his self-esteem. From a very shy little boy, he sort of grew into this self-assertive person. I was in shock the first time I saw him in a show at the Center. For a child who would not even say hello to people, now to be on stage performing. He had counselors who were very positive role models for an Hispanic child. He felt comfortable. He felt he was accepted. That helped him a lot. He became more secure in himself. He learned to express his feelings.

[My daughter] is very artistic, and the Center has a wonderful art program. I saw her blossom. . . . She's a very assertive young person and one of the things that used to bother her a lot in her classroom was that the teacher used to send the boys only to do certain jobs, heavy lifting and that kind of thing. She always had a problem with that. One of the things that she used to come home and tell me is that she was allowed to play any sport in the Center. It could have been basketball, dodge ball, very physical kinds of things. And she felt she was capable of doing it. . . . She just wanted to play and she was allowed to play. I think that was important for her.

Continuity: A Secure Base

Since its inception, the Center has enacted its commitment to maintaining continuity in its provision of accessible services to all families in Sunset Park. The loyalty and longevity of key program coordinators and other Center staff, including volunteers and former program participants now on staff, and the ongoing accessibility of the Center's programs and services over a twenty-two year period have enhanced community residents' perception of the Center as a "secure base" where a range of needs can be met.

Longevity of Program Staff

Over forty staff members have been with the Center for over ten years; many of these have been with the agency for much longer. During in-depth interviews with the Center's staff, the Center's mission, philosophy, and program model were described both as "what draws" staff members to the work at the Center and what retains them. In addition, Center staff members reported greatly valuing the opportunities for professional development, the administrative support for autonomous professional practice, and the supportive relationships with Center colleagues. One social worker noted: "*What I value about this place is it's the most autonomy I've ever been given. I was told when I was hired that I would have creative freedom -- freedom to use yourself in a variety of ways. I have felt respected and that has supported me. It makes an environment where people grow.*"

We have concluded that there is a coherence and integrity between the philosophy, definition, and structure of the Center's programs and both the personal and professional philosophies and commitments of the staff who implement the programs. This contributes to a synergy that enhances the sense of community experienced throughout the Center, the positive experiences and outcomes reported by program participants, and the continuity made possible by the retention of committed staff.

A Philosophy of Continuity in Program Access

Since its establishment, the Center has enacted a philosophy of continuity in the provision of accessible services to Sunset Park families. Many have observed that current family support programs have built upon the settlement house movement of the early 1900s (Halpern 1988, 1991; Lightburn & Kemp 1994; Weissbourd & Kagen 1989). Given their emphasis on the accessibility of comprehensive, developmentally oriented services to all families in a community, such programs inevitably are

characterized by continuity of services. Since its inception, the Center has shared these commitments. However, it is important to note that the Center's inclusion of intensive clinical services designed to prevent the unnecessary placement of children in out-of-home care (the preventive services program) as one of its continuously available and accessible core programs differentiates it from other family support programs and settlement houses, which typically lack a clinical component (Hess, McGowan, & Botsko, 2000). Every family served by the Center in all its programs, including the preventive services program, is encouraged to access services over time as needed on a voluntary or self-referred basis. Center staff members stress the benefits to families of being able to stay involved with the Center's programs over long periods of time to maintain the children in the home. We found that many families were using not only school-based childcare, parent education, and other family support services over many years as needed, but were also accessing therapeutic services both continuously over several years and episodically over time as the need arose.

We believe that the strong commitment to continuity in access to services over time and to consistency of staff responses over time contributes to the experience of the Center as "*like home*" or an "*anchor*" for many community residents. Conceptualizing the Center as a "secure base" to which family members may turn and return as needs arise may be useful. The concept of a child's attachment to a parent as a secure base for exploration was first introduced by Mary Ainsworth (1967: 345-346). Although the concept of a secure base typically has been limited to dyadic attachment relationships, including those of parent-child, intimate partners, and therapist-client, the multi-faceted patterns of families' service use and interpersonal connections with staff over time would suggest that many family members may in fact experience *the Center itself* as a "secure base." This is consistent with the observation of Lightburn and Kemp (1994) that family support programs provide a "supportive ongoing base" (p. 23) from which services are accessed as required. For example, in outlining the many changes made by a single mother over several years, a worker described the Center's continuous role as follows: "*I think the Center has given her a grounding, a place for her and her children.*" Similarly, a staff member in the community school programs who has participated in Center programs "*since I was a little girl,*" observed that "*A lot of people from the community consider this like home to them.*" She further emphasized the depth of her long-term connection to the Center both as a child as well as currently:

As a child, the after-school program meant a lot. Whenever I couldn't come I would cry. I remember that. I remember crying to my mother, begging her to let me stay. It really meant a lot to me. . . What kept me returning year after year? All these people. They've seen me since I was a little girl. They's always told me, always, come back, help us. [Now as a staff member] I enjoy being with my group, my supervisor and my assistant, you can speak to them when you need them. I guess that those are the only true friends that I have and I love coming here.

Similarly, a supervisor described a mother as

. . . attached to her worker and attached to the Center as a whole . . . there have been many times when she would come here and under the pretense that she would have to meet her child here, she would stay quite a bit in the reception area, maybe writing, or finding another excuse to be there. I think it's partly our aggregate involvement. Everybody knows her . . . The Center has a certain amount of resource itself and that represents something to her. I am absolutely positive that she comes here for more than to see her worker alone . . . the Center is her anchor.

The perception of the Center as "like home" to many Sunset Park families both reflects and facilitates repeated access to services over time as needs arise. It is most likely that family members' experiences with the Center's continuously accessible, responsive, sensitive and trustworthy staff in all programs makes possible the experience of one parent described as follows by her preventive program worker: "*She has a constant sort of knowing that there's a place for her here. Whether I'm here or not, she would see this a place where people respect and understand her and she won't be ridiculed or judged.*" Such experiences enhance families' willingness and ability to seek services as they identify needs and thus prevent crises, rather than seeking services only when a crisis arises.

Professionalism: Grounded in Values, Knowledge and Theory, and Skills

A deeply committed community of professionals is at the core of the Center's service delivery model. Although this could be said of many community-based agencies, the Center has developed an unusual degree of coherence, mutual respect, and support between the professional social workers and performing artists who staff its diverse programs. Both within and across programs, one quickly senses staff members' mutual deep respect for each others' professional knowledge, skills, and values; shared commitment to Sunset Park's children and families and to the Center's mission; and collective investment in an authentic, dynamic process of creative program design, delivery, and evaluation.

Although the majority of the Center's professional staff are social workers (twenty-six), the Center also employs eighteen full-time professional staff in other disciplines, including the creative and performing arts. Center co-founders Sisters Mary Paul and Geraldine made a commitment to have at least one professional staff member in each program in whatever discipline is relevant -- a social worker with particular expertise, such as group work or family treatment, or a professional artist or dancer. Thus they assure that the daily decisions that must be made about both broad programmatic and specific service issues are consistently informed by professional knowledge. In addition, the presence of at least one professional in each program guarantees that regular supervision and support are available for the Center's many paraprofessional and volunteer staff.

Whether one is a social worker or a creative or performing artist, professionalism at the Center means being grounded in the knowledge and theory of the profession or discipline, undergirding family and program development with comprehensive professional assessment of needs and resources, and purposeful use of professional knowledge and skills in building productive working relationships with people and institutions. The importance of the staff members' ability to draw upon their professional knowledge in their work was stressed by the Center's Directors. Ongoing collaboration regarding program design and sharing of information and expertise among all Center staff about individual and program interventions is also a critical aspect of the Center's professionalism.

The Influence of Professional Social Work on the Center's Services

The professional social work presence at the Center for Family Life is palpable. The Center's Directors and social work staff are proud of their professional identity and are unusually well able to conceptualize and articulate the theoretical and conceptual bases of the Center's programs and their own professional practice. Center social workers assess the needs and resources of individuals, families, and the community, coordinate and implement programs, supervise other professional staff and interns from graduate schools of social work in New York City, supervise, train, and develop leadership among volunteers, paraprofessional, and bachelor-level workers, perform clinical work with families and individuals; and involve themselves in community development, advocacy, group leadership, and other activities.

A common framework and value base. In their discussions with us Sisters Geraldine and Mary Paul consistently emphasized the value they place on their own and other staff members' social work education and their shared commitment to the values of the profession. Sister Mary Paul emphasized that, "*We never have to argue values with our staff. We don't have to educate staff about our values. They share them.*" Integral to staff members' discussions about their relationships and work with Sunset Park's families and children are their professional concerns about confidentiality, self-determination, starting "where the client is," and conveying respect.

The shared social work identity and professional education provides a common framework from which staff members think and act. To illustrate, the profession of social work has always had a primary focus upon the *psychosocial* needs of those one serves (Hamilton 1951; Hollis 1964; Meyer 1970), or, as others have stated, a focus upon the person:environment (Germain 1973; Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy 1997). This dual focus upon psycho- and social is evident in the Center's mission statement, development of programs that focus upon children's and families' inner and outer worlds, and staff members' ongoing interventions with individuals, families, and community institutions.

Skillful use of professional self in relationships. Further, the uses and qualities of professional *relationship* and the importance of the *conscious use of professional self* are frequently referenced in staff members' descriptions of their work in all Center programs. For example, Sister Mary Paul noted that, "*Helping is not a 'delivery' of some kind. It results from two people or a group of people exchanging their understandings, their life experiences or a problem or perception at a particular point in time. It's an exchange. Their learning occurs within a relationship. Most change in human beings occurs within a relationship of some kind.*" Consistent with Sister Mary Paul's observation is Julie Stein Brockway's reflection on the challenge with regard to use of professional self in her work in the community school programs:

The hardest thing about my job, if I had to define it, is my use of self, my professional use of self, in all the different roles . . . that's where I struggle the most. Do I respond to my junior staff member as a colleague and friend, because I've known him for years and let my hair down and say 'Look, I'm really disappointed?' Or am I still a professional there and do I still have to call for work in him? Push him to get a full time job, push him out of the nest, because as a professional I recognize he's having an individuation process with me. I'm his family. I'm the mother. He's the teenager. At what point am I me, and at what point am I me and a professional?

Clients' descriptions of their work with Center staff also provide examples of the staff members' skillful use of professional relationships. One single mother stressed the ways in which her worker related to her: "*My worker is always there, not to supervise, but kind of help and guide me in how to handle a situation. . . I have the sense that she understands where I'm coming from and what I'm trying to tell her . . . She says 'I know you have a feeling, can you tell me what kind of feeling? I see it in your eyes.'*" She continues, "*Sometimes I want to run out the door, and she says 'No, that's not the way to go about it. Running away is not going to solve anything.'*"

Similarly, youth who have participated in the Center's after-school childcare and youth development programs emphasized the importance of the staff's use of professional relationship. One reflected "*I depended on them to help me if something was difficult, and I depended on them if I had a problem with the other kids. . . I depended on them to help me through it.*" Similarly, another commented, "*The social workers, the people who work here. . . I learned from them . . . They got some wise people in the Center.*"

Focus on both case and cause. Central to the social work profession is *a commitment to social and economic justice*. In Center staff members' work with individual clients and families, they often discover needs or problems that also are affecting others in the community. The identification of a problem affecting both the one and the many is often referred to within the profession as moving from "case to cause" (Sunley, 1970). Center staff members' willingness and ability to move from case to cause is assumed by the Center's Directors.

Both Sister Geraldine and Sister Mary Paul have been role models for staff in their own constant movement from case to cause. A number of issues commanded their attention as advocates during our study, including state efforts to computerize child welfare records, raising widespread concern about clients' privacy. In describing her own advocacy efforts about the computerization of records and the possible effects of this on client privacy, Sister Mary Paul noted that:

I find more recently my letters are much angrier . . . I protest more vigorously. [The anger comes from] frustration, from actually seeing that the obligations and commitments that have long been respected are being trifled with. Like the value of privacy and confidentiality, the very heart of social work practice. It's a value that has to be central. People act as if they can give it away, compromise it, trade it, negotiate. I'm not sure we have a right to negotiate. Confidentiality is a client's right.

The Influence of Theoretical Frameworks on the Center's Programs

The work of the Center for Family Life is theory driven. One hears in the Directors' and staff members'

discussions elements of the theoretical frameworks that have emerged as particularly influential in shaping the Center's practice principles and the staff members' professional interactions with community residents and the Center's programs. Staff members' references to various conceptual frameworks are not rhetorical. The Center social workers clearly are engaged not only in applying theory to practice, but also in examining the application of various social work theories in practice. Thus, Center staff members differentially draw upon various practice conceptual frameworks and approaches as they struggle with the complex problems facing Sunset Park's families and children. As one staff member noted: "*We have a great flexibility here to work with people in a way that seems best for that particular individual -- individualized in terms of what techniques we use and how we work. It's not like we're all behaviorists here or all psychoanalytic here, or that we just do individual work or that we just do family or that we just do group.*" Similarly, another stressed: "*We have the goal of trying to keep families together . . . we can use any kind of intervention that we feel comfortable with to achieve that goal.*" Those theoretical frameworks clearly shaping the Center's practice include systems theory and an ecosystem perspective; developmental, attachment, and psychodynamic theories; and developmental group work.

Other Areas Described in Chapter 1 in *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*

Additional areas discussed in Chapter 1 that have not been excerpted here include a discussion of the inclusive definition of Center staff; an extensive examination of the ways in which theory shapes the Center staff members' practice; Sister Mary Paul's and the late Sister Geraldine's perspectives regarding where religion fits in with what the Center does; an examination of the Center as a flexible, learning, and evolving organization; details regarding the Center's organizational structure; and an exploration of the Center's ability to maintain control over its purpose and size while responding to community needs and opportunities.