

# "Everybody needs a support system"

## The family support movement works to build communities that nurture families

**T**he family is the parent to the child, and the community is the parent to the family." That's how family support is described by Bernice Weissbourd, sometimes called the mother of the family support movement.

Back in the late '70s, Weissbourd was a Head Start teacher in a Chicago housing project. She began to realize that "to have a real impact, we need to get to children earlier," before they entered Head Start at three.

So she helped found the Family Resource Coalition, now called Family Support America, to nurture the development of "family resource centers." In the belief that all families need support for raising their children, family resource centers provide a range of services to families—and join with those families to strengthen communities.

Today there are hundreds of family resource centers across California, many based in schools, churches, counseling centers, or child care centers. Two state networks, Healthy Start and the Office of Child Abuse Prevention, provide training, technical assistance, and funds, but family resource centers also draw on foundations, local government, Prop. 10 money, and federal

grants to keep them going and growing. Family resource centers work by:

### LINKING PARENTS TO RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Family resource centers serve as "one-stop" service and referral centers, offering the basics, like food and clothing, and helping participants connect to jobs, classes, housing, medical care, and more. "First we address the immediate needs of food, shelter, support, and as time goes on, involvement in the community is integrated into the plan," says Linda Crouse, Healthy Start coordinator at Mountain Community Resources in rural Santa Cruz County.

Rose Shiner, for example, first went to Mountain Community Resources to get blankets and diapers after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Over the years, people at the center have helped her escape an abusive husband, overcome a drug and alcohol problem, find help for her troubled son, and find housing during periods of homelessness. Now in recovery, she's graduated with honors from the local community college and recently spoke in the state legislature, urging lawmakers to continue Healthy Start funding.

### WORKING WITH THE STRENGTHS OF THEIR PARTICIPANTS

"Too often we ask, 'What's your problem?' Instead, we need to ask, 'What does a family have going for them?'" says Weissbourd. "Participants don't come to a family resource center because they're sick, but because everybody needs a support system."

Fabiola Avila is a program assistant at the Watsonville Family Resource Center/Adelante. Her five-year-old daughter, Celeste, frequently begs her to read stories in the story-telling area of the newly opened literacy center. Avila also regularly attends the center's bimonthly parent meetings, complete with babysitters and food, just to talk with other parents about child rearing. "Parents need time to learn to teach their children," she says.

### REFLECTING THE UNIQUENESS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, "We want richer, community-driven programs that fit the needs of the community," says Judy Darnell, staff coordinator for the Family Resource Center Network of Santa Cruz County.

In Central California counties with large Hmong communities, for example

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NANCY BLAINE

### THE MOSAIC PROJECT:

"A project in the neighborhood that we did together."

**P**ATTI McINTIRE, a longtime resident of the Highland Park area of Los Angeles, had struggled for years to improve the blighted neighborhood walkway known as the San Pascual stairwell. Children had to pass through the stairwell's trash, broken glass, abandoned shopping carts, weeds, and walls of graffiti to get to local elementary and middle schools, and parents worried about their safety.

So when Nancy Blaine, community advocate at Hathaway Family Resource Center, contacted McIntire to see how the center could best help address the needs of the community, McIntire knew exactly what to tell her. Thus was born the San Pascual Pedestrian-Safe Learning Corridor, or San Pascual Stairway Mosaic Project.

### THE PARTNERSHIP

Hathaway partnered with the Garvanza Improvement Association, which had grown from a neighborhood watch group. Neighbors knew they could count on Hathaway, says Rosa Rivas, one of the association's founders. As the mother of four foster children, she had depended on Hathaway's counseling and after-school programs. "Having Hathaway on my side motivated me to keep going," she says.

They received financial support from the L.A. Dept. of Public Works' Neighborhood Matching Fund to help local school children and community volunteers transform the stairwell into a work of art. Together they made 1,000 colorful tiles depicting local plants and animals, to adorn the 125 steps. The theme, says Blaine, would discourage local kids from branding the area by tagging and skateboarding.

### THE ACTIVITIES

Through school activities, aided by the Audubon Society and Wildlife on Wheels and a series of community events, everyone from preschoolers to grandparents cleaned up the area, learned about local wildlife, and made the tiles, which were fired and stored for free at Eagle Rock Cultural Association. A local landscape architect is volunteering time to plan the next phase, which will include middle schoolers planting trees.

Sandra Chavez was one of the mothers who accompanied the groups of third, fourth, and fifth graders to the park for Audubon Society lessons in local plants and animals. "It was really good to see the kids using their imagination," she says, but she had to tell a few, "you can't put tigers and coconuts."



NANCY BLAINE

### THE COMMUNITY

It wasn't just for kids, says Chavez. For the tile-painting parties, she brought along her 59-year-old mother, who painted four tiles of her own, and her 25-year-old brother. Her husband got in on the final phase, helping to place and grout the tiles at a recent weekend Glue N' Grout Extravaganza.

But it was much more than a fun art project for her family, Chavez emphasizes. "It's a project in the neighborhood that we did together. Kids will defend their tiles and say, 'No, my family did this, don't mess it up.' Our neighbors will know who our children are, and the children will say, 'that's the lady down the block; she was there helping to paint tiles.'"

As Nancy Blaine puts it, "This is marking territory in a different way. It's about investing in the community." ■

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ple, family resource centers sponsor activities like a sewing group of elders, who teach the art of quilt-making to tell the history of the Hmong. One center is helping a Hmong youth group create a web page dedicated to their culture.

At the Watsonville Family Resource Center/Adelante, volunteers from the community teach Spanish literacy classes to recent immigrants.

### WELCOMING FAMILIES

"If families don't feel that this is where they belong and are cared about, the center doesn't work," says Weissbourd. She sadly recalls seeing this sign in a center: "If you miss three classes, you're out." That's not the way to run a family resource center, she says.

Centers like the Watsonville Family Resource Center, on the other hand, not only help translate and fill out documents for Spanish-speaking families, but even write letters to faraway relatives for them. Sofas, play spaces for kids, even available fax machines—all these help make family resource centers a home base for families.

### SUPPORTING THE WHOLE FAMILY

"We can't work with a child alone," says Weissbourd. "To affect a child, we need to affect the family."

Instead of just tutoring kids who read below grade level, for example, the Hathaway Family Resource Center in Los Angeles transformed a recent Halloween party into a family literacy night. Eight hundred participants of all ages attended the festival, prepared by 60 volunteers. Young children wrote their own scary storybooks while the older kids designed the haunted house. "Activities like this, for language support, are phenomenal," says the center's director, Pat Bowie.

### CONNECTING PEOPLE TO PEOPLE

"The key to family resource centers is connecting people to how they become their own problem solvers," says Bowie. A few years back, for example, a young Los Angeles muralist, Danny Ruiz, was involved in Hathaway's survey asking close to 900 households about neighborhood needs. He noticed an empty lot at the end of one street and came up with the idea of transforming it into a place of art. The resource center introduced him to key people in the city and to an Occidental

College volunteer center; now a team of neighborhood residents and volunteers from the college has emerged to make the vision happen. [Take a look at Ruiz's art at [www.hathawayfrc.org](http://www.hathawayfrc.org)]

### HELPING BUILD COMMUNITIES

"We try to support families to help themselves, so they can do it in their own communities," says Darnell. The Santa Cruz Family Resource Center Network sponsors a parent leadership training series and a Family Leadership Committee, with three agency staff members and ten parent participants.

Jose Moreno originally came to the family resource center in Watsonville for help with citizenship and for employment information. Referred to a local job-training program, he was later hired by the family resource center. He used his newly acquired skills as an electrician to help link up low-income Spanish-speaking residents to an energy discount program and teach them about energy conservation. "He's been inspirational for us," says co-worker Amy Lombardy. She helped organize the presentations, but Moreno knew both the technical part and the neighborhoods. ■

### FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER RESOURCES

• **Family Support America**, the national pioneer in the family support movement, connects family resource centers with technical assistance, training, conferences, and publications. 312-338-0900, [www.familysupportamerica.org](http://www.familysupportamerica.org)

• **The Office of Child Abuse Prevention** provides technical assistance, training, and a newsletter to family resource centers throughout California. 916-445-2771, [www.familyresourcecenters.net](http://www.familyresourcecenters.net)

• **Family Resource Network of Santa Cruz County** is a countywide network of family resource centers, 831-465-2210

• **Hathaway Family Resource Center**, 323-257-9600, [www.hathawayfrc.org](http://www.hathawayfrc.org)

• **Mountain Community Resources**, 831-336-2553, [www.mountaincommunityresources.org](http://www.mountaincommunityresources.org)

• **Watsonville Family Resource Center/Adelante**, 831-763-3106 and 831-724-2997

## MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY RESOURCES:

"It's been great to give back."

**A**T MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY Resources we don't 'graduate people' once they're self-sufficient. Instead, we ask them to play a different role," says Healthy Start Coordinator Linda Crouse. That's the philosophy in Healthy Start, one of many programs offered through Mountain Community Resources, Santa Cruz County's oldest family resource center.

This Healthy Start program has eight advocates working through the local schools in the San Lorenzo Valley in Santa Cruz County, helping parents connect to the resources and services they need.

An evaluation of the Healthy Start programs shows the benefits of family support. Among children between second and third grade, it found:

- **Days absent** reduced by 35 percent
- **Disciplinary actions** down 20 percent
- **Grades up** by 20 percent.

But the stories of participants best illustrate how Mountain Community Resources builds community.

### MONEY FOR CAMP

In the rural Santa Cruz Mountains, social isolation is a big issue for parents and kids. A few years ago, Crouse planned a one-hour get-together for single moms. When they stayed for three hours, she knew she was on to something.

She launched a series of parent meetings. "I wanted to flip things upside down," she says. She told the group, "I want you to tell me what you want done, and I'll help make it happen."

Parents agreed that a top priority was

raising funds for kids to go to summer camp. Julia Glasser was one of those parents. A second-grade teacher, concerned about her son's bad grades and classroom outbursts, had referred her to Healthy Start. Afraid of losing her children to CPS, at first Glasser didn't tell the staff about her problems with money and with drinking.

But she did pitch in to work on the Human Race, an annual 10K walk that raises funds for local nonprofits. Together with other parents, she spoke at local organizations to get sponsors. The kids went to science camp that year and ever since.

### "CONNECTED TO PEOPLE"

Meanwhile Glasser's kids were getting help from the Healthy Start "homework club." Mountain Community Resources also connected her to the Healthy Families health insurance, helped her get help paying her energy bills, and got her into a rehabilitation program. She began to realize, she says, "I didn't have to be as impoverished as I was because I was connected to people."

Inspired by the success of the Human Race, she and other parents approached the owner of a local Tae Kwan Do studio, offering to raise \$600 if he would sponsor six children with scholarships for lessons. Impressed by the parents' offer, he gave them scholarships unlimited in time and recyclable to other children. "We set the groundwork for all future kids," Glasser says proudly.



Karen Bruni, a Healthy Start parent advocate, with her son, in the Healthy Start office.

Glasser now does volunteer phone-answering and filing at Healthy Start. If someone who calls needs work, sometimes she can offer a part-time job in the house-keeping business that she's developed. Other times, she just offers support. "I've learned to respect people rather than save them," she says. "I'm learning that you can change things."

### MANY KINDS OF SUPPORT

The last thing breast cancer victim Karen Bruni wanted to hear from school was that her kids had lice. After five surgeries and still undergoing chemo treatments, the single parent of three children admits, "I was crawling on the floor just to get the kids out to school."

But along with the call from the school came a referral to the Healthy Start program. The family advocate there helped her solve the lice problem, but eventually, weakened by the illness and the treat-

ments, she lost everything: her home, her job, her car.

But the family resource center was there, not only to offer "lots of hugs and support," but to find her temporary housing, anger and grief counseling, transportation to school for her kids, and even a basketball scholarship for her son. "Without the support of the center, I would never have made it," she attests.

### FULL CIRCLE

Now she's a Healthy Start family advocate herself, helping families and kids link up to resources—counseling, food, housing, health insurance, and more.

"I've come full circle," she says. "It's been great to give back. I feel so vital again." With a job, a car, and an apartment, she sees a real change in her kids too. "They have a lot of compassion for the children I work with. I think it's been a life lesson for them." ■