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Taking the Measure of the Zone, One Life at a Time

In April, Rheedlen Centers for Children & Families changed its name to the Harlem Children's Zone, a name we felt better signified our place and our purpose, what we do and who we are.

Our new name was inspired by the agency's major initiative, begun in 1997: the Harlem Children's Zone Project. A geographic area in Central Harlem between 116th and 123rd Streets and between Fifth and Eighth Avenues, the HCZ Project is a 24-block area where we focus much of our efforts. Like our work, the boundaries of the zone will grow, and by 2009 we will have added an additional 67 blocks.

When our agency was founded in 1970, it had a small staff and a single focus—truancy prevention. Today, the Harlem Children's Zone is a comprehensive service organization with a focus on children and families and a staff of approximately 450 full- and part-time employees. Over the years, our mission has expanded. Recently, our name has changed. But our goal remains the same: *to improve the lives of poor children living in the most devastated communities in America.*

We are expanding because we see a stark need in surrounding communities—we want to do our best for those in need, starting with the thousands of children who are living in poverty. The foundation of our work rests on a couple of simple but innovative concepts: that it is hard to raise healthy children in a disintegrated community and that local institutions can reverse even the most devastating conditions by drawing community members together around common interests and activities. So we have made it part of our mission to engage residents in promoting the healthy development of Harlem's children.

What is the best way to accomplish that mission? By giving children what they need. It is as simple as that. At the HCZ we believe that to grow into healthy, productive adults, children need engaged, effective families in their communities. And we also believe that the earlier a child receives good health care, intellectual and social stimulation, as well as consistent guidance from loving, attentive adults, the more likely it is that child will become a responsible, fulfilled member of the community.

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Richaud Manigault,
one month old, is
sleeping peacefully
in his crib. His moth-

The Baby College

er, Angel, age 17, is in the kitchen, preparing
dinner for herself and her mother.

Then the doorbell rings, and the startling sound wakes Richaud, who begins to wail. The sudden confusion might momentarily disconcert even the most experienced parent, but Angel knows exactly what to do. She moves confidently to the crib, takes the baby in her arms and holds him tight, speaking to him softly and gently as she walks to the living room to answer the bell. By the time Angel opens the door, Richaud is still and quiet, his eyes closing, heavy with sleep.

"When a baby knows the mother is nearby, that baby will never really be afraid," says Manigault. "Mother is familiar and comforting to a baby, especially very young babies. They recognize the mother's smell, the sound of her voice, her touch. From the time of conception through birth, the mother has

been the child's whole world; she has protected and nourished the baby with her own body. So of course newborns feel completely safe when they are in their mothers'

arms. I know it's important to give my child a strong sense of security from the very beginning of his life, so I stay close to him and comfort him right away whenever he seems distressed."

Despite her young age and the fact that Richaud is her first child, Angel Manigault knows a great deal about child rearing and child development. "I learned from the best," says Manigault. "At home, I have my mother, with all her experience, to rely on when I need her. And at The Baby College, I've got experts in many different fields—health, brain development, discipline.

"Do you know who taught me about how and why mothers make their babies feel safe? Dr. Berry Brazelton, one of the most famous child-development experts in the world. He came and spent all morning with my class and talked with us and answered questions we asked him. He said that we could get a lot of information in our classes, but that we were the real experts when it



“At The Baby College, parents have one another. In discussions in class, parents really learn from one another and often bond with one another. They become a resource and support for each other, and that has to be good not only for them but for the whole community.”

came to our own children. I don’t know if I would have agreed with him before, but after going to Baby College, I really do feel like I not only know what is best for my baby, I know how to do what’s best for him.”

Touchpoints for the Harlem Community

The Baby College is a program of the Harlem Children’s Zone. Its goal is to provide everyone in the Harlem Children’s Zone who is expecting a child or raising children between the ages of 0 and 3 with the information and support necessary to bring up happy and healthy children who enter school ready to learn. Classes are held on Saturday mornings at a local public school, and all services are free. Participants receive breakfast, lunch, incentives, and child care during the nine-week course, which covers a broad range of subjects including brain development, discipline, immunization, safety, asthma, lead poisoning, parental stress, and parent-child bonding. The program, which began in 2000, now has three full cycles per year, each with more than 50 graduates.

The curriculum for the college was developed as a collaborative effort between Dr. T. Berry Brazelton and The Baby College staff. Dr. Brazelton also trained the instructors at The Baby College, including seven part-time staff members of the Harlem Children’s Zone. Dr. Brazelton is one of the country’s foremost pediatricians and the author of hundreds of articles and dozens of books on parenting and child development. At age 83, he is long retired from his pediatric practice in Cambridge, Mass., but he is still a professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School, he continues to research child development, and he has just published a new book that further examines his breakthrough theory on child development, called Touchpoints.

“Touchpoints refers to a vulnerable period in a child’s development, occurring just before an emotional, physical, or cognitive growth spurt,” says Dr. Brazelton. “At those critical points, children are likely to regress for a brief period. That can sometimes be very stressful for parents. What we try to do is to help parents understand that the regressions are a natural part of the child’s development, a positive sign of growth.

“It’s very beneficial for parents to understand patterns in their child’s development. But when they learn about these patterns at The Baby College, parents have an important additional benefit: they have one another. In discussions in class, parents really learn from one another and often bond with one



another. They become a resource and support for each other, and that has to be good not only for them but for the whole community.”

The community in which The Baby College operates, Central Harlem, is a neighborhood in transition. Middle-class families and affluent young professionals are relocating their families and businesses to streets once marked by unrelieved poverty. The local housing stock, long devastated by arson and abandonment, is slowly being renovated, repaired, and restored. Since the 1920s, the time of the great artistic and cultural flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance, the community had been almost entirely African American. Today, Central Harlem is about 15 percent Hispanic, and people of many different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds are streaming into the neighborhood, including a growing population of West African immigrants. As the population of Central Harlem grows more diverse, it is also growing younger. According to the most recent U.S. Census data available, the number of people over 35 years of age in Harlem is declining, while the number of children under 5 years of age is increasing significantly.

Despite these changes, Central Harlem remains largely a low-income neighborhood plagued by a host of ills attendant upon poverty. Data gathered for the Harlem Children’s Zone indicate that nearly 50 per-





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cent of Central Harlem’s population and 61 percent of its children live below the federal poverty line, five times the national average; its unemployment rate is 18.5 percent, while the national rate is in the low single digits; the area has one of the highest rates of foster care placement in New York State; less than one quarter of adults have a high school diploma, and more than 40 percent did not reach high school before dropping out.

In the United States, one of the most reliable routes out of poverty is through education. On average, adult Americans with a college diploma earn exponentially more than adults who have not graduated from high school. But for children in low-income areas, the path to a good education is often insurmountably steep from the start. Studies show that a child from a low-income neighborhood entering first grade has, on average, been given 25 hours of one-on-one picture book reading, compared with up to 1,700 hours for a typical middle-class child (Marilyn Jager Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, MIT Press, 1990). By age three, children from families on welfare have a cumulative vocabulary of 525 words; three-year-olds from professional families have a vocabulary of 1,116 words (Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., 1995).

The wealth of recent research into brain development points up the critical importance of early intellectual and social stimulation. Without significant interventions, disparities in cognitive advantages at very early stages in development often lead to ever-widening differences in educational achievements as children grow older.

Today, fewer than one in five of the fourth-graders in the three elementary schools located in the Harlem Children’s Zone read at or above grade level.

A Network of Support

“All the signs point in the same direction,” says Marilyn Joseph, director of The Baby College. “And they all say the same thing: you want a child to grow up to be a responsible, caring, productive adult? From the beginning, give the child the support of caring adults with appropriate parenting skills and knowledge. And then give families the support of a caring community with a sound infrastructure: good schools, safe streets, strong bonds among neighbors.”

The Baby College actively promotes both those conditions. The expert faculty, composed mostly of Harlem Children’s Zone staff members, work intensively with program participants to cultivate their parenting skills and knowledge. The college also collaborates with a group of health care professionals and organizations to provide a range of health-related services. Because of the relationship the Harlem Children’s Zone has with Harlem Hospital, all expectant mothers in the zone have the option to receive free prenatal and postnatal care at Harlem Hospital, and nurses and doctors from Harlem Hospital teach classes on asthma at The Baby College. On class days, doctors also work on site directly with parents, giving asthma screenings and answering health-related questions. Representatives from Northern Manhattan Start Right Coalition and from other local community-based organizations help parents with a variety of health issues, from how to read immunization cards to how to create nutritious meals. And Dr. Brazelton himself spends time with each new class, explaining the Touchpoints developmental theory and answering questions from participants.

The curriculum is designed to stimulate discussions about child rearing among class members, who include mothers and fathers as well as grandparents, foster parents, and guardians. Faculty members continually reinforce the parenting strengths and capabilities of the participants in the program, and they encourage those participants to begin to see one another as a support network.

Broadening the Network

With each cycle, The Baby College tries to broaden that network, reaching out to the community through a variety of means—at tables set up in heavily trafficked areas, through mailings and phone banks, and by going door to door to recruit new participants. Outreach efforts represent a significant part of the work conducted by The Baby College. Of the 13 full-time staff members, 8 are engaged primarily in community outreach.

One of those outreach workers is Aminata Diallo, age 32. Born into a large family in Mali, West Africa, Diallo emigrated to the United States and moved to



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Harlem in 1998, joining her husband, a native of Ghana, who had come to America before her, in search of a better job. With two small children under five years of age, Diallo spent most of her first few years in this country working in her apartment, taking care of her family. Then in 2000, while she was pregnant with her third child, Diallo was contacted by a worker from The Baby College.

“She came to my home and explained the program, and I was interested right away,” says Diallo. “I had always wanted to learn more about child development, and this seemed like a good place to learn. The Baby College came along at a time when I was missing my parents and my family in West Africa very much. I didn’t know many people in Harlem. I think I was feeling isolated and a little lonely.”

Although she signed up for The Baby College simply to learn about child development, Diallo found that she enjoyed all the coursework that was offered. The college strongly encourages participants to attend every session of the nine-week course. Participants who are unable to attend an individual class are given several opportunities to make up the missed session. Even with all her parenting experience, Diallo found she had a lot to learn.

“I always considered myself a good parent,” says Diallo. “But no one knows everything about how to raise a child. And there were many things I just never thought about before I went to Baby College. Like lead poisoning. It had never occurred to me my child might be exposed to a toxic substance like that in my own home. I remember the day we studied that in class I ran home and checked out the entire apartment, looking for evidence of lead paint, which, thank God, I didn’t find. Then I went to my child’s play school and checked for signs of lead paint there.

“I learned so many things: about why it was important to keep to the schedule for immunization, about how to deal with asthma, about making my apartment child-safe.

“The Baby College also did things to make it easier to learn and to help us practice what we studied in class. They provided child care on site. Every week, they gave each person in class a gift, something that brought home the lesson of the day. After the class in which we studied safety, they gave us a basket with socket plugs and a safety gate. The day of the asthma class they gave us an asthma handbook, with important information and phone numbers. When we studied brain development, they gave us books we could read to our children.

“My favorite sessions were the classes on brain development. I was absolutely thrilled to learn I could



talk to my unborn child and it would make a difference in her development. I began talking to her all the time, reading to her, singing to her. I know it’s had an effect on her. She’s two years old now, and she’s a very smart little girl. And every time she sees a book, she insists that you read it to her.”

An Agent of Change

Pleased with the way The Baby College had helped her own family, Diallo wanted to help other families get the benefit of parent training. In June 2001, she joined the staff of The Baby College as an outreach worker. She now specializes in contacting immigrant families who moved to Harlem from West Africa.

“I consider every part of my job to be important,” says Diallo, “but the first impression is critical. When I go door to door, recruiting new parents, I ring the bell or knock on the door and introduce myself, first in English, then in French, which is spoken in Ghana and Burkina Faso, or sometimes in Bambara or Mandango, which are spoken in Mali. I say, ‘I’m from The Baby College’ in one or all of those languages. They may not know what Baby College is, but that’s not important. I just want them to open that door. And when they do, I give them a big smile. Smiling is a language that everyone understands. When I smile, they smile. And then it’s always the same: we get this feeling that we have known one another for a very long time.

“The rest is easy. If the people I’m talking to are parents, they are always eager to talk about their chil-



*“I know that
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change parents’
lives. It can
change the whole
community. I
know it because
it changed my
life and because I
see it changing
my community
every day.”*

dren and to have a chance to learn something more about raising children, about their child’s development or health. I tell them about the college, and they often sign up for the very next cycle. That’s how it begins.”

Once parents enroll in The Baby College, Diallo’s many responsibilities on the job keep her in close contact with them throughout the class cycle and often for a long time afterwards. She and other outreach workers are in charge of the preparations for Saturday classes: they work with the 32 child care workers, all part-time HCZ employees, who watch over the young children of the participants, and they ensure that breakfast and lunch are prepared and served to class members and children every week. During the Saturday classes, Diallo moves from room to room, seeing to it that the children are cared for, checking the hallways for strays, translating for parents who may be having difficulty with the language spoken in class. During the week, she visits family residences to talk with parents one-on-one about what they are learning in class and to find out whether they are able to put those lessons into practice at home. She checks to see whether parents know how to install safety gates or plugs in electrical outlets, if they have enough reading material for their children, whether

the Harlem community of which they are a part. “One of the most important things I learned to do in Baby College was to step back and look at the larger picture,” says Diallo. “Take child development. If you know nothing about how the brain develops, you will probably just go along, improvising activities for your child moment by moment, day by day. But once you understand patterns in how a child develops, you can begin to create specific strategies to promote and support that development.

“It’s the same with communities. Once you understand that individuals, families, and communities have a relationship to one another, and that relationship can be very beneficial, you begin looking for strategies to support and strengthen the relationship. When I attended Baby College, I started to make friends with other women in my class, who lived in my community. We began to help one another in hundreds of small ways, from baby-sitting to sharing information to simple companionship. I really appreciated the support we gave to one another. I started to see myself as a member of a community, not just a resident of Harlem. I became more active in community affairs, began attending meetings on neighborhood issues, and became a regular member of the Parent-Teacher Association at my children’s school.

“When I recruit new parents, I talk to them about their children, about how this program can change their children’s lives. But I know that The Baby College can change the parents’ lives as well. It can change the whole community. I know it because it changed my life and because I see it changing my community every day.”

Learning from One Another

The Baby College curriculum is designed to promote a sense of community among participants in several ways. All classes devote a significant amount of time to discussion, question-and-answer periods, and sharing of experience. Every class ends with a break-out session, in which class members recapitulate the lessons learned. They then elect a representative (a different person each week) to report out to the entire student body, gathered together from all classes held that day. The larger group then discusses issues raised in each individual class. In this way, the members from all classes in each cycle get to meet and learn from one another.

In addition to classroom sessions, The Baby College sponsors regularly scheduled social and educational events to give participants a chance to know one another better. In each cycle, there are baby showers for pregnant mothers and parents of newborns. At graduation, participants and their families come together for a culmination ceremony and celebratory luncheon. And once a month The Baby College hosts a meeting open



they’ve completed an action plan for youngsters suffering from asthma. She also discusses the broader achievements and needs of the family, and, when appropriate, makes referrals to other organizations or to different programs operated by the Harlem Children’s Zone, including the Employment & Technology Center, the Family Support Center, and the Parents’ Help Center.

All the while Diallo is working to strengthen individual families, she also has in mind strengthening





“When my woman asked me to join, I thought, why not? I’ve got a new baby, and I’ve got a lot to learn. I felt it was important to understand as much as I could about what was going on with my son. And I was willing to do whatever I had to do to find out.”

to all current participants and past graduates. Sometimes the occasion is social—a Mothers’ Day party, for example — and sometimes the group studies an issue of common concern, such as asbestos testing in neighborhood schools.

“We try to create opportunities for participants to bond and to band together over longer periods of time,” says Marilyn Joseph, director of The Baby College. “And we also want that band

to grow larger and larger, so we make a great effort to reach out to and accommodate different groups. We held focus groups with different populations—West African families, young adults, fathers. That helped us understand what might make various people want to attend classes and what might hold them back.

“In our first cycles, we had very few West African families, although we have a growing West African population in Central Harlem. Our focus groups taught us that many West Africans thought that programs like ours were only for families with severe social problems. So we made sure that outreach workers like Mrs. Diallo cleared up that misconception when she recruited participants. After some West African families enrolled in The Baby College, we saw that we sometimes had a language barrier, so we began holding some classes in both French and English, with bilingual reading materials. We’re also reaching out to fathers. Of course, some of our most effective outreach is done by word of mouth. Parents talk to other parents, wives talk to husbands. In the beginning, we had very few fathers in our classes. Now we have more and more fathers in each cycle.”

She Said, He Said

In the first Baby College cycle of 2002, there were 6 fathers in a class of 76. They included Garvin Turner, 35, who enrolled at the urging of the mother of his children. “My woman signed up for Baby College first, and she seemed to be having a lot of fun in class,” says Turner. “So when she asked me to join, I

thought, why not? I’ve got a new baby, and I have a lot to learn.”

Turner’s son was born in the fall of 2001. The mother of his children has a nine-year-old daughter, whom Turner has helped to raise since the girl was three. He loves children and felt that he knew a lot about raising them, but he says he was completely unprepared for life with a newborn.

“Pampers, feedings in the middle of the night, no sleep, not knowing why the baby’s crying—I was not ready for any of that,” says Turner. “I was very motivated, though. I felt it was important to understand as much as I could about what was going on with my son. And I was willing to do whatever I had to do to find out.”

For Turner, learning about child rearing and child development involved changing his mind about a number of ideas he already held. “In the class discussions, very often in the beginning it was me on one side and everyone else on the other,” says Turner. “I remember after the first class session on discipline, I said that I thought men were better disciplinarians than women because men were more laid back and logical and women were more emotional. I got into a whole lot of trouble with the women in class for that. But that discussion made me think. And I began to open up to new ways of seeing things.

“See, I was born right here, right in Harlem Hospital,” Turner continues. “I thought I knew what was best for a boy growing up in this neighborhood. I thought you had to be tough because this neighborhood can be tough. When I was growing up, discipline meant a beating. I got the belt when I misbe-





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haved at home, and the ruler when I acted up in school. I thought that’s what you needed to do with boys. I would hear people talk about how you shouldn’t yell or scream at children, let alone hit them, and I’d think to myself, they’re just being too sensitive—a beating worked for me, it taught me a lesson. Then at Baby College they explained some things to us: why it might be better to call a time out than to yell at a child, what bad effects can result from hitting a child. They didn’t preach, they just talked about the facts and let us think and talk it out ourselves.

“And I started to think about my daughter. I never even raise my voice to her. I talk to her about right and wrong, about studying in school and behaving. I can see that she doesn’t want to disappoint me, and that’s the reason she listens to me. And then I thought, it can be the same with my boy. You can have authority with your children without ever hitting them. Now I pray to God I never have to raise a hand to either of my children.

“I worry. Sometimes I see kids on the street and they seem to be out of control. They don’t seem to understand the consequences of a negative lifestyle. Some kids think it’s cool to be a hoodlum. It’s not. It’s cool to be loving. For me, it’s love that rules the world. And that’s what I want to teach my children: that it’s not a bad thing to be a good guy.

“I think men have to step in more and talk to their children about values, be there to show them what it really means to be strong. So now I’m like a recruiter for Baby College. I have a friend who’s wife is five months pregnant with their first child. I say to him all the time, ‘Get used to it. You are going back to school. The Baby College is in your future.’ ”

Great Expectations

Participating in The Baby College has also helped Turner take some steps to improve his own future. A veteran employee of the New York City Housing Authority, he has begun taking evening courses at a heating plant technical school to improve his job skills and enhance his employment opportunities. He recently took a second job working in a group home to bring in more money for his family. And he has become more active in caring for his own physical and spiritual well-being.

“I’m eating healthy and working out regularly,” says Turner. “Hey, I’m thirty-five years older than my son. When he’s fifteen, I’ll be fifty. And when I’m fifty, I still want to be the boss, so I want to stay in good shape physically. I also want to be in good shape with God, to have my foundation with God solid. I’m more ambitious now, professionally and personally. I want to be the best I can.

“I think that’s true of all parents,” Turner continues. “At The Baby College, even though we had disagreements in our discussions, I could see that really all parents are alike. They want the best for their children. Sometimes in our community we stress the differences among various people and groups too much. The truth is, we all have this important thing in common: we love our children and we want to do right by them.

“The Baby College helped me to understand the best way to do right from the very start. It’s like the root of a tree. If the root is healthy and well taken care of, the tree will grow straight and tall and strong. That’s what I want for my children, to grow up with big dreams, reach high up and succeed—reach right up to the sky.”

Early this year, Turner joined his class in the auditorium of P.S. 149/207, on West 117th Street, for a morning-long Baby College graduation ceremony. Everyone was dressed up. A number of staff members and community leaders made speeches praising participants for their great work in class and at home. A group of mothers performed a West African dance in honor of the occasion. And then the children of the participants came onstage, about 50 of them, the oldest 11 years old. The music started, they raised their arms, threw back their heads, and sang:

“I’m the sun up in the sky.
I’m the mountain peak on high.
I’m the world’s greatest.
I’m the world’s greatest.
I’m that little bit of hope
When your back’s against the rope.
I can feel it.
I’m the world’s greatest.” ■





Our programs are built around those beliefs; they aim to develop healthy children and a healthy community at the same time. Our programs form a continuum of care, beginning with the HCZ Project's The Baby College, which teaches skills for parenting children ages 0-3, and progressing through TRUCE (The Renaissance University for Community Education), a comprehensive youth development program that has just helped 17 out of 18 high school students gain entrance to college as well as earn \$600,000 in scholarships. Programs to promote community building include the Employment & Technology Center and Community Pride, a resident-led neighborhood revitalization project.

The HCZ also provides child-abuse and neglect-prevention services to residents within and outside the HCZ Project in part through its two Beacon Schools—Countee Cullen Community Center at P.S. 194 and Booker T. Washington Center 54 at M.S. 54.

We are currently devoting considerable time and effort to testing the effectiveness of our programs, gathering a wealth of data from a variety of sources to create an evaluation system for the HCZ. But in the end, one of the most important measures of our success will still be this: Have our programs improved the lives of children and families in our communities? What are their stories? And how do we capture and share these compelling and inspiring stories?

The Harlem Children's Zone has launched this publication in part to answer these questions. In every issue we will focus on one of our programs, interview staff and participants, and try to show how these programs have affected the lives of those who take part in them—in *their own words*. We believe that the participants' stories add a human face that gives life to cold statistics. This, our first issue, highlights the work of The Baby College.

The HCZ is a work in progress. We depend on staff, community members, supporters, and friends like you to continue and to expand our efforts. We are grateful for all your help and hope you enjoy reading about the work of HCZ.

Geoffrey Canada
PRESIDENT/CEO

A LOOK AHEAD

It is a time of great change in Harlem. Just take a walk through the streets. You'll see block after block of brownstones under renovation, new buildings going up, new businesses moving in. Where once there were vacant lots strewn with trash, now gardens bloom, filled with trees and flowers, and alive with the sound of children playing.

This transformation did not happen by itself. Many individuals, many public and private agencies and programs, worked hard to bring about what is now commonly called the Second Harlem Renaissance. One of those programs is Community Pride, the resident-led revitalization project of the Harlem Children's Zone.

The HCZ is a comprehensive service organization, whose programs, listed below, form a continuum of care for Harlem residents. With each issue, this publication offers readers a look inside one of these programs. The next issue will feature Community Pride.

Administrative office:

Harlem Children's Zone, Inc.
2770 Broadway
NY, NY 10025
Tel: (212) 866-0700
Website: www.hcz.org
President/CEO
Geoffrey Canada

Booker T. Washington Center 54 Beacon

M.S. 54
103 West 107th St.
NY, NY 10025
Tel: (212) 866-5579
Willie Vasquez, Director

Countee Cullen Community Center Beacon

P.S. 194
242 West 144th St.
NY, NY 10036
Tel: (212) 234-4500
Robin Hannibal, Director

Family Development Program

201 West 144th St.
NY, NY 10030
Tel: (212) 234-6714
Lynn Burt, Director

Family Support Center

207/209/211 Lenox Ave.
NY, NY 10027
Tel: (212) 666-7390
Wilma Morton, Director

Project CLASS

2770 Broadway
NY, NY 10025
Tel: (212) 866-0700
Regina Garrett, Director

Midtown Family Place

Sacred Heart School
457 West 51st St.
NY, NY 10019
Tel: (212) 315-1707
Laura Rice Stein, Director

Truancy Prevention

2770 Broadway
NY, NY 10025
Tel: (212) 866-0700
Regina Garrett, Director

The Baby College

2037-39 7th Ave.
NY, NY 10027
Tel: (212) 665-9832
Marilyn Joseph, Director

The Harlem Gems

P.S. 149/207
41 West 117th St.
NY, NY 10026
Tel: (646) 672-9830
Caressa Singleton, Director

Community Pride

157 West 122nd St.
NY, NY 10027
Tel: (212) 932-1920
Lee Farrow, Director

Employment & Technology Center

170 Lenox Ave.
NY, NY 10026
Tel: (212) 369-5912
Leroy Darby, Director

Parents' Help Center

P.S. 149/207
41 West 117th St.
NY, NY 10026
Tel: (212) 876-1638

Harlem Peacemakers

157 West 122nd St.
NY, NY 10027
Tel: (212) 932-1920 (staff)
Tel: (212) 866-0700 (Director)
Rasuli Lewis, Director

TRUCE (The Renaissance University for Community Education)

147 N. St. Nicholas Ave.
NY, NY 10026
Tel: (212) 663-0555
Laura Vural, Director

TRUCE Fitness & Nutrition Center

147 N. St. Nicholas Ave.
NY, NY 10026
Tel: (212) 864-7159
Will Norris, Director