

Family Learning Centers

By Bill Hobby

Children are our most important product. And if this were a corporate enterprise, the CEO would by now be looking for another line of work.

Consider some statistics recently laid out by Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock:

- One of every four Texas children lives in a family whose income is below the minimum considered necessary to be self-sufficient.
- More than two million Texas children have no health insurance.
- One of every eight Texas infants is born at risk of developmental delay due to poor nutrition or birth-related problems.

And two more disturbing statistics:

- About 22 percent of Texas children grow up in single parent homes, most headed by mothers.
- The percentage of children in poverty increased in 84 of the largest U.S. cities over the last decade.

Unfortunately, many of us are numb to these grim numbers--the problem is too big; the situation is out of control. We can't deal with children in trouble any more than we could stop the riots in South Central L.A.

The good news is that some people think differently. They have adopted the environmentalists slogan: "Think Globally. Act Locally."

One of these leaders is Lodis Rhodes, a professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in Austin, who used his position as chair of the Austin Housing Authority, existing resources and the good will of others to create a model program for children who inadvertently find themselves part of a throw-away generation. This is the philosophy of the Family Learning Centers, which operate after school and summer afternoons at six Austin housing developments: "We do not believe poverty is a useful indicator of intellectual endowment. We do know that learners rise or sink to the academic and behavioral standards set for them. We have chosen to raise the present standards."

Most housing authorities use federal drug elimination grants to hire security officers. In Austin, such funds also pay for an education director, Master Teacher Toni Williams, and to help equip the learning centers. They are staffed by volunteer teachers, who are asked to use teaching methods for gifted and talented students.

Another Department of Housing and Urban Development grant, along with contributions from Motorola and Texas Instruments, created another incentive program, called the Neighborhood Longhorns.

The "Hornz n the Hood" program awards incentive prizes and savings bonds, donated by local businesses, to children based on school attendance, book reports and report card grades. The savings bonds aren't the big draw, however, though the plan is to encourage children to start college education accounts.

The big incentives are the orange and white basketballs signed and delivered by Texas Longhorn basketball players, men and women.

Austin Police officers hailed the program as one that could eliminate the gang problem. Rhodes thinks the Learning Centers serve several purposes. They create a safe, comfortable learning environment--"We zero in on families at their homes." They keep children from losing ground over summer vacation. They help deal with transitions, when at-risk children are most in danger of dropping out--like the change from elementary school to middle school.

Needless to say, the Family Learning Centers haven't produced any Rhodes Scholars yet, and Lodi Rhodes is content to measure progress by small steps--children who become prompt and responsible for their attendance, an angry child who successfully spends a week outside his neighborhood at a UT sports camp, a girl with a spectacular singing voice who learns to appreciate her talent. The centers are also succeeding in pulling parents into the program. Two offer adult literacy, English as a second language and preparatory course for a GED diploma. In one parenting skills program, mothers and pre-schoolers attend together. "We're not inventing anything here," Rhodes said. "We're convincing people to put it together in another way. We hope it has not just an impact on individuals but on institutions." He gauges the success by how many children at one of the housing developments gather under "The Tree."

"There's a big tree where people hang out," Rhodes said. "Kids can learn a lot of bad things under that tree. I know we're succeeding when the kids are in the learning center and not under the tree." "The kids are free to come or go. The only thing that holds them in the center is their own interest."

Of course, the jury is still out on the success of the program. What is clear is that a remarkable effort is underway. It is the kind of effort that should be judged by the standards set by the great black educator, Benjamin Elijah Mays of Morehouse University, who said, "The tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching one's goals. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim, is sin."

Written in September 1992.