



BRONX Family

WHEDCo gives moms a helping hand

Group champions 'nanny excellence'

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By Tiziana Rinaldi

Parents know how difficult it can be to find good, personalized child-care, and how invaluable it is to those who attain it. Take heart, WHEDCo (Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation) is helping.

The family-minded, nonprofit Bronx veteran has long been a powerhouse of nanny excellence. The organization's Family Daycare Microenterprise Network trains an average of 400 women annually on the ins and outs of running their own home-based day care center. Those who achieve membership status are also taught how to become successful entrepreneurs in the field. University Height's Donna Clark is one of them.

Tired of corporate America, after a 25-year career as executive assistant came to a halt when her Canadian employer decided to close shop in New York, the Bronx mother and grandmother felt it was time for a change.

"What am I going to do now?" I thought," said Clark reminiscing about the motions she went through before the 2004 opening of her Donna D. Clark Family Day Care Program, at 2326 Grand Avenue, where she watches after five children, age 22 months to four-years.

"It was a career choice. I had to earn an income and I really like the idea of being at home, I was sick of the commute." Clark's experience with nieces and nephews in the large family she grew up, plus caring for her grandkids, gave her the confidence to tackle the new challenge.

"I get satisfaction from [kids'] accomplishments, so I felt, 'I can do it.' I just didn't realize how involved it was until I trained with WHEDCo," explained Clark.

"I stuck with it and put into action what I learned about children, building a business. It took me a while, but I got here."

WHEDCo is very clear about it. True commitment and the determination to provide the best quality child-care possible are the bedrock of caregivers success, both for the delicate job they are called upon to accomplish and to create the sustainable, income generating programs they need to support their own families.

"This is all about the children, not the type of industry anyone should go into lightly," said Diana Perez, WHEDCo's director of family daycare microenterprise network. "It's about continuity, which is critical for young kids, and working closely with the parents." When that happens, providers become major contributors to their community.

In the last decade the Bronx nonprofit has developed a network of 180 members, caring for over 1,000 children and generating \$6.1 million a year in gross revenue. A serious career direction that in recent months has registered increased interest among job seekers, possibly due to current economic strains.

“Donna came out of the business world and had other options. So, this [wasn’t] about, ‘I’m making a few dollars for a while,’ and then going back. That speaks volumes,” emphasized Perez, who trained Clark when the microenterprise program was much smaller and feels providers like her, open to furthering their knowledge, receptive to helping others coming into the field and dedicated to helping children become critical thinkers, truly represent what WHEDCo is all about.

To sustain members’ commitment and stabilize service for the community, the organization provides extensive one-on-one training well beyond the thirty hours mandated by law to complete the home-based day care training first, and maintain the license later, as per the two-year renewal cycles. From safety, child development, nutrition, teaching methodology, to business components like financial education, contract development, tax filing and record keeping, nothing is left to the imagination on how to grow a strong program.

For Clark this was the opportunity to earn a steady income finally doing what she loved. “I feel I’m contributing something, I’m helping children,” said the provider, whose life long belief that kids should be encouraged to learn is well reflected in her choice to convert the living room into a full fledged, colorful and curiosity enticing pre-K class.

Children’s art work, plenty of books (some from WHEDCo’s well stocked lending library), learning tools like educational posters, blocks and puzzles, alphabet cards and music CDs, are all part of the environment.

“We do a lot of activities, painting, cooking, [literacy] on the computer. My three and four year olds know all the words on the wall,” said Clark pointing to a large magnetic spelling board hanging on the far side of the room.

“I say, ‘What word begins with C,’ they say ‘Cat.’ ‘What word with P,’ they say ‘Pickle.’”

While the kids’ successes and advanced knowledge may make her proud (all of them can recognize their name and the oldest can spell it), it’s supporting them through the challenges and witnessing their enthusiasm when they master a new skill that has Clark sold on the cause through retirement.

“When they tell me, ‘Look, Ms. Clark I did it!’ I like that. It’s a nice feeling,” said the caregiver who’s also teaching the children how to tie their shoes and zip up their coats, much to their parents pleasure.

“‘Let me do it, let me do it,’ they say. They’re eager to learn, I can tell. You give them the start, but then you have to keep them motivated,” continued Clark undeterred in passing on the message that effort pays off. “I used to have a sign that read, ‘You can do it.’”

Then, there are moments of pure connection and fun. “There’s this song ‘The five little ducks,’ it must be the way I sing it because, every time, they first get quiet, like they’re waiting for something. Then, when I get to a certain point at the end, they [suddenly] burst out laughing,” said Clark exploding into contagious laughter herself.

Challenges are many, acknowledged the provider. Getting the business off the ground, producing enough income in a highly competitive field, the anxiety of interviewing new families, helping a new child settle in. however, there are also rewards of making a difference and commanding your own small company.

"I like the job. It's a way to go and it will never go out of style. So [if people] like children, there are a lot of kids out there who need good care."

WHEDCO is located at 50 East, 168th Street, Bronx, N.Y. 10452. For more on the Family Daycare Microenterprise Network call (718) 839-1100.