

## Kelley dedicated to helping troubled youth get on track

By Sarah Andrews/ Chronicle Staff

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**A**s Ed Kelley celebrates his 25th year at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, he appreciates that the promotions that have catapulted him to the top of the organization have also set him back further from the reason he came to the organization in the first place.

"One of the great frustrations of this work, is that the more promotions you get, the farther away you get from the client," he said.

As CEO, Kelley may not be working directly with the troubled kids he serves anymore, but as a former street youth worker he can fully value the efforts of his "woefully underpaid" staff.

"Society does not appreciate the people who do this work," he said.

RFK Children's Action Corps treats at-risk kids, most of whom come through the legal system or the Department of Youth Services, with both residential and community-based programs. Kelley, who came to the organization in 1981, got his start working with kids in housing complexes like Jefferson Park and Roosevelt Towers.

A North Cambridge native, Kelley went to Suffolk University on a basketball scholarship, a sport which occupied his every attention at the time. But when he took employment as a city youth worker, he realized he had found a different calling.

"When you're working with low-income kids who haven't had some of the breaks that some of us have had, part of it can be very challenging," he said. "But the kids are also hysterical to work with. It's just fun good. They've got a combination of issues going on in their lives ... but they all want to live lives and be contributing members of society."

Since Kelley has been at the helm of RFK, the agency has grown tremendously. It now offers 19 programs, has 450 employees, serves 800 youth across the state and has a \$20 million annual budget.

The work has changed, too, said Kelley. Now, not only are there more kids with mental illnesses in need of help, the legal system has become stricter.

"There was a day when we were considered the model [state] when you were talking about juvenile justice systems," he said. "But I think we've slipped back a little."

Kelley said the tendency to place more kids in the juvenile court system instead of treatment begs a question when it comes time to send them home. "Who do you want to come home, a kid in lock up or a kid who has been in a treatment center where they're expected to go to school?" he asked.

Growing up on Rice Street, Kelley had six siblings and attended St. Peter's Church. He went to the now-defunct Notre Dame High School, where he met his wife. They've lived on Montgomery Street since 1972 and have two children and a grandson.

At Suffolk, he was less motivated by grades than extra-curricular activities.

"I would love to tell you I was only interested in getting a 3.5 [grade point average], but I really just wanted to play ball," he said.

Some of his recent achievements at RFK are the opening of a new residential facility in Lancaster and the creation of a Leadership Institute, an inter-office program that engages his employees in both planning for the company's future, as well as caring for children.

He also helped institute the National Youth Project Using Motorbikes and sits on the board. That program, which he used to run in Cambridge, rewards kids for going to school or doing other positive things with a spin on a mini motorbike. The American Honda Motor Company has donated millions of dollars to the program over the years.

Kelley said his focus for the kids RFK serves is on safety and a feeling of comfort. A new residential home in Lancaster is designed like a house.

"When our kids wake up in the morning, we expect one of our residential care workers to say, 'Good morning, Johnny,'" he said. "Not for some buzzer to go off."