

New RFK building brings hope to many

By **Patty Angevine**/ Staff Writer

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LANCASTER - They come to the Old Common Road campus with lots of baggage but few belongings - their young lives burdened with years of neglect, abuse and trauma. And while the children who come to the RFK Children's Action Corps residential treatment program in Lancaster may seldom complain about cramped living quarters and outdated facilities, those who care for them during their stay have long wanted something better for these troubled children.

For decades, RFK's CEO and president Edward P. Kelley has dreamed of building a modern facility that reflects the vision of the non-profit child welfare agency, an organization inspired by the late Robert F. Kennedy. On Monday, June 19 that dream will become a reality when students and staff move out of three Victorian-era buildings into a new state-of-the-art facility that will become the heart and soul of the 26-acre campus.

"This new building just means the world to us," said Kelley. "We've been on the Lancaster campus since 1971 and when we got here, these buildings that were once part of the former Industrial School for Girls and built some time in the Victorian era, were closed.

"The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been wonderful to us, but it has been a challenge to get the funds we needed to invest in our facilities. Now we have a tremendously functional building that is much more welcoming to children and will improve the morale of everyone here - the children, their families and the staff. It's bittersweet to leave those old buildings behind, but this new building is just so wonderful."

Although they come and go, at any one time there are about 50 children who live at the Lancaster campus, according to Residential Director Booker Lester. Most are referred to the residential program by the state's Department of Social Services and Department of Youth Services, although school systems may also seek the RFK's educational and therapeutic services for some day students. Children come to RFK for a variety of reasons, but all come in need of a safe place to live, learn and work through their struggles.

"They've been abused or neglected," said Lester. "They've had problems at school or at home. Some kids have [Department of Mental Health] issues and can't live at home at a particular time. There are myriad issues why kids come here. But we're here to provide a safe and nurturing environment so they can learn and grow and hopefully become a more productive part of society when they leave here. We help them build skills that will help them get back out into the community."

According to program director Cindy Schofield, who oversees Wellington Hall, a program for boys ages 6 through 12 and the youngest group on the Lancaster campus, many of the children come from foster care situations that have been unsuccessful. Some have had little or no family support and come to RFK with the challenges that come with a lifetime of instability.

"Some of the boys are here because they haven't been successful in foster homes or their behaviors are more in crisis and so they need a higher level of care. Typically we get kids that have been in the foster care system and have blown out. But there are some kids who don't have any family involved. There's one little guy here who has everything he owns right here in his room. His whole life is right here."

According to Schofield, staff do what they can to create a nurturing family-like environment - holidays and birthdays are important events, particularly for those who may never have experienced traditions many take for granted.

"All the programs do a really good job with holidays and birthdays," said Schofield. "We just do what you would do for your own kids. I remember when I first started here, we had a little guy who was about 6 and he came to my office and said, 'Cindy the staff are putting a real tree in the house are they going to be in trouble?' He had never had a real Christmas tree before."

Building for success

In addition to providing a safe place to live for boys age six through 18, RFK also operates a school for its

residents. Housed in yet another of the campus' antiquated buildings - a new school is next on the list for future facility improvements - there are nine classrooms and a curriculum that is similar to that in any public school, according to Assistant Principal, Joyce West.

"We provide the same services as public schools -we have a [physical education] teacher, computers, and a pre-vocational education program as well as speech and language services - we follow all the same guidelines of the Department of Education," said West. "By the nature of the population, we take in kids that have to meet a disability criteria to be here, but the goal always is to get them ready to eventually transition into a less restrictive environment, whatever that may be, depending on what their educational needs are."

While many of the kids arrive at RFK with a background of disrupted schooling and learning challenges, the small classes and individualized attention produce a number of success stories, according to West.

"Just this week we had a boy come back to us who had lived here for a few years in 8th and 9th grade and he's been doing great since he left," said West. "When he was here he'd always say he would someday be a teacher and now he's at Lesley College. He came back and just wanted to say hi to everyone - some days here can be very difficult and challenging, and then to end our day with somebody coming back can be very emotional. The teacher who had taught this boy was just beaming that he remembered her enough to come back."

In addition to teaching kids how to read and write, the staff at RFK also engages children in a variety of therapeutic activities aimed at addressing behavioral issues and bolstering self-confidence. Innovative adventure programs offer opportunities for children to ride mini-bikes, rock climb and canoe - all activities that teach children a wide spectrum of life skills from self-discipline to self-confidence.

"We give them building blocks," said Booker. "Our campus is building foundations for these kids so they can have a chance at a successful future. But it's also not just the individuals in the program we're working with, it's also the families and the communities. They need all of those pieces to make it out there in the world."

According to Booker, RFK is not intended to be a final destination for troubled kids, but a place where children come to gain stability and skills - the ultimate goal is to help them transition back into the community. This community-based philosophy is one that the Department of Social Services now promotes and one the new facility is intended to encourage by providing common spaces and clinicians' office that will allow staff to work with a child and his family - whatever that may be.

"What is family? Family for these kids can be a foster family or extended family like an aunt or a cousin. But what we really want is to make sure the community takes ownership of these children and not just tries make the problems go away."

"The idea now is rather than pluck kids out of their community and send them to places like this, we should try to keep them in their communities. Here we give them the safety and services they need, but the goal is to slowly move them into services in their community.

The RFK Children's Action Corps was founded by a group of individuals inspired by the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy's belief that society has a responsibility to improve the lives of all its members, especially children and their families. That philosophy continues to motivate the organization today, according to Kelley, who notes that fund raising for the new \$15-million facility is being handled by a capital planning committee led by the chairmen of the state's two political parties - Democrat Phil Johnson and Republican Darrell Crate.

"We thought it was important to send the message that people can put aside their political views and agree on what our priorities as a society need to be," said Kelley.

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