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CAMBRIDGE

Streetwise administrator makes a difference



Edward P. Kelley, president and CEO of the Kennedy Children's Action Corps, was honored for 25 years of service to the agency. (BILL BRETT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

By Janice O'Leary, Globe Correspondent | January 7, 2007

You might call him a kid whisperer. For nearly four decades, Cambridge resident Edward P. Kelley, 57, has helped thousands of at-risk youths either avoid the pitfalls of adolescence in poverty, or climb back out of the holes they dug.

He is a dedicated father and grandfather who has spent years refocusing his lens, from his own close-knit family to the less fortunate nearby.

"After my grandson, Cian, was born, there must have been about 16 of us in the hospital room with my daughter, Jennifer," Kelley said. "This kid already had a college fund set up, and we're not Rockefellers. I couldn't help but wonder if there was another young woman in a room nearby, all alone."

Last month Kelley, president and CEO of the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, was honored for 25 years of service to the child welfare agency, after arriving in 1981 as deputy executive director. It was the first private agency dedicated to rehabilitating troubled youth when the state reformed its juvenile detention system in the 1970s.

Although he is well-known in the child welfare field for his empathy and authority when working with children, Kelley claims no special talents beyond willingness and experience. He has no special degree; his experience as a street youth worker in the 1970s and '80s informs the policy decisions he makes for the Action Corps, which has grown from five to 19 programs and 104 to 450 staff members under Kelley. The Action Corps reaches about 800 children annually.

Though he negotiates contracts for the organization's facilities and programs around the state, he doesn't have an MBA.

"I tell people I learned how to negotiate at the dinner table," he said. As one of six children growing up in a North Cambridge house with his grandmother, two great-aunts, one great-uncle, and, for a short time, an aunt and three cousins, he learned to be quick and decisive when gunning for the mac and cheese.

Kelley and his wife still live just blocks from that house.

Kelley said he realized how lucky he was to grow up surrounded by family and with a father who had a job. So he talks frequently about the "accident of birth" and how some children face more obstacles. He has tried to remove those obstacles during his days working directly with youths on the street and in the courts, and more recently by setting policy.

"Youth work is not rocket science. It's every kid, one at a time, with some resources," he said. Kelley recalls many of those he helped. He met one 15 years ago when the boy was a 12-year-old gang member. He was put in one of the agency's treatment centers and was able to take classes for credit so that when he was released, he would be caught up with his peers.

"He told me at one point," Kelley said, "that he realized he was a very angry young man and that if he didn't get control of that anger, it would consume him." The boy graduated from high school and later Seton Hall's law school and now specializes in juvenile justice law, Kelley said. That ability to take for-credit classes is essential, Kelley believes. "You may enter the [juvenile treatment] program as a freshman in high school, but without getting credit for classes, you would end up 16 years old and still a freshman. We have to get kids back on grade."

Street work is really prevention work, Kelley said, impossible to measure and, for that reason, often a prime target for budget-cutting. Phil Johnston, the Massachusetts Democratic Party chairman who founded Kennedy Children's Action Corps 38 years ago, said, "Ed is one of the best social workers I have ever encountered. It's a difficult field to stay in. It's frustrating because one confronts such pain and emotion on a day-to-day basis, and you're always worried you're facing [fiscal] extinction at any time. One has to be extremely committed to the work. Ed has that kind of dedication."■