

Serving the Community: Community Organizing and Family Issues

By Lacey Sikora

Maralda Davis knows the importance of community when it comes to raising children. The mother of eight has seen the difference that parents can make in the over twenty years she has been raising her children.

"I've been involved for about twenty two years in the community. I started with Head Start with my first born, and he'll be twenty three this year. Now, I have one child who just got out of Head Start and my youngest is just starting. All eight of my kids will have gone through Head Start."

Davis notes that enrolling her children in Head Start was the beginning of her involvement in their education and in her interest in the community's educational opportunities.

In 2008, when there was talk about closing a neighborhood school, she attended a meeting and was introduced to Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI). "We were all doing this kind of work before COFI, but COFI helped us when the city wanted to close the school. There was a turnaround instead, and I started working with COFI then."

COFI was founded in 1995 to organize low-income parents of color to advocate on behalf of their children. Patricia Islas, an organizer and trainer with COFI, says that COFI is responsible for intensive leadership training in communities and schools across Chicago in neighborhoods like Austin, but the first focus is always on families.

"We really focus on families and personal goals before digging deeper into community



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Tashana McChriston and Dexter Leggin walk down the West Garfield Park neighborhood going door-knocking as headstart ambassadors which are part of Community Organizing and Family Issues. A door-hanger is left at the door of a West Garfield Park residence, that advocates for early childhood learning.



goals. We find out what obstacles families have or what obstacles they are looking to overcome. When they realize that other parents share the same commonalities, they can move into the schools and communities to make change." Islas cites the Head Start Ambassador

program as one of the key components of COFI's early learning committee. Many parents are not aware of the early childhood programming Head Start offers in their communities. COFI's Head Start Ambassadors are a peer-to-peer group that reaches out to other families with young children

and lets them know how to find and enroll in community Head Start Programs.

In the years since joining COFI, Davis found her calling as a Peace Ambassador. Islas explains that COFI helps parents set up and run Peace Centers, parent-run centers in schools meant to find solutions to suspensions and violence in schools.

Davis says her personal experience was what made her get involved as a Peace Ambassador: "I've been advocating for this sort of justice for years, since my son was at school and got suspended when he was jumped by a group of kids who came into the school but didn't even go there."

Davis and other COFI Peace Ambassadors work in the Peace Centers every school day, helping students make the choices that will lead to success in school. "If the kids are getting in trouble or going down the wrong path, they can come to the Peace Center. The Peace Center makes a difference. It keeps the kids focused and gives them a better outlook on what they need to be doing to do well in school. Instead of arguing and fighting, there's a better way to do things."



WILLIAM CAMARAO/Staff Photographer

Dexter Leggin talks to children of the West Garfield Park neighborhood going door-knocking as headstart ambassadors.