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In the Heart of the Bronx

An interview with Alice Trimmer, who spent 9 years directing the Rosedale Achievement Center in the Bronx, helping many young women from underprivileged families to live up to their full potential.

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Located in the heart of the Bronx, the *Rosedale Achievement Center* provides after-school tutoring along with other academic, cultural and

character development programs for girls ages 10 to 18. Inspired by the life and writings of St. Josemaria, a group of women started Rosedale in 1978, and in 1993 it became part of the South Bronx Educational Foundation (SBEF), a foundation that greatly helped Rosedale grow and expand. Over its 37-year history, Rosedale has served thousands of girls and their families.

Despite improving trends, the Bronx is still a challenging area in which to live and grow up, with a high crime rate, nearly 30% of people living below the poverty line, more than half of households run by single parents and only 59% of students completing high school in four years.

Rosedale helps create a better future for young women growing up in the Bronx by helping them complete high school and go on to college. But Rosedale aims far beyond academic

development. Its character and leadership programs enable students to aspire to their personal best, develop a sense of purpose and become confident leaders today and in the future. The programs Rosedale offers are run primarily by volunteers with the help of a small staff team. Alice Trimmer took on the job of Director of Rosedale soon after retiring from her office job of many years at a large corporation in Manhattan. Her 'retirement job' at Rosedale proved to be an extraordinarily enriching experience. She retired last summer after nine years at the helm and agreed to share her experience in a recent interview.

What led you start working at Rosedale?

I had known Rosedale for many years, as some of my close friends were instrumental in starting it back

in the 1970s. Over the years I helped with promotional materials, funding proposals, and the like. When I was getting ready to retire I heard that Rosedale was very understaffed and needed help with business development and fundraising. I applied for a part-time job and started working there a month after my retirement.

Was this something you had thought you would do after retiring? How did this change your retirement plans?

Years before I retired, I thought about teaching music to the preschoolers in Rosedale's Reading Readiness Program, but by the time my retirement approached, this program had been phased out. Since my professional background was in editing and publishing, I had assumed that I would continue to do the same kind of work, perhaps

using my skills to help non-profits. But in fact my plans were quite vague, so that when I heard about the opportunity to work at Rosedale it seemed like a good transitional experience. My first job was largely focused on writing funding proposals, developing brochures, and other marketing and development work. But a year and a half after I started, the Rosedale Director moved out of state, and I was asked if I could become the new director.

What were some of the challenges you faced when you transitioned from your corporate work in Manhattan to running Rosedale in the Bronx?

The learning curve was very steep. Fortunately, I had the 18 months at Rosedale beforehand, so at least I was familiar with the programs and what needed to be done. But it was a huge step from helping with

development to running the place. I do not know Spanish well, and many of our parents are not fluent in English, so communication, especially on the phone, was quite a challenge. In addition, there was the whole issue of finding parking places for two vans, the upkeep of the building, trash and snow removal, and functioning without all of the support you get in a large corporation with computer technology experts, building maintenance, and the like. Most of all, I was not used to being in charge of children, so a big worry was safety issues at first.

But I quickly realized it was a lot of fun, and very empowering to not have to go through many levels of approvals if we wanted to try out new ideas. Our budgets were small but my two co-workers were very talented, and the families were so welcoming and understanding. And I

was used to managing projects in the face of uncertainty, because of my experience working through the takeover-ridden 1980s and 1990s. I found this was useful background when we faced the ongoing budget crises that small, struggling non-profits are prone to.

How would you describe your experience working there? How did it impact your life?

Being at Rosedale was a great adventure and has had a huge impact on how I view life. I feel as if I existed in a kind of bubble in the corporate world. Certainly the work I did was interesting and the products we created were useful, but being a part of a community is a whole different matter: the doorbell rings and there is a new family with whom your lives will suddenly intersect. Seeing the courage and ingenuity with which some of the families

confront really difficult situations has caused me to be more sensitive to any kind of prejudice or intolerance.

Our neighbors and many of our families were from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other parts of Central and South America, and learning about the island cultures—the celebrations, the cooking, the strength of their family ties, the different styles of parenting—has been wonderful.

How does Rosedale serve young women and families in the Bronx?

Rosedale offers academic help and leadership development in a home-like, informal environment. The girls are teamed with individual mentors, but one of the biggest helps to them is the positive peer influence. They meet and make friends with other girls who are striving for similar goals. The staff and volunteers help

them cope with the pressures of middle school and high school. They are helped to think for themselves and not be swayed by some of the cultural influences around them that are pulling them away from becoming responsible young women. The families are supported in their efforts to help the girls set and achieve goals that are high but at the same time realistic. The teenage years are the time that young people start to separate from their families. Although this is perfectly normal, it can lead them into situations that are unhealthy and dangerous. Rosedale provides a safe place to land: during times when it is difficult to air things with their parents; they can talk matters over with other adults who have their best interests at heart.

What are the main challenges young women and their families face in the Bronx?

A lot of the challenges in the Bronx are the same as elsewhere in society: unstable home life, moving too often, unhealthy peer pressure, and broken homes where the parents do not cooperate or agree on values. In addition, many of the schools in the area are underperforming and sometimes not even safe. There are very few community resources for young people in the area, and for this reason, many of them end up watching TV or playing video games much of the day. Many of the families have significant obligations to extended family members who are in difficult circumstances. In addition, both parents may be working more than one job or struggling to keep a small business afloat, so their time and energy is stretched thin.

What did you learn from the families and students with which you worked these past ten years?

First of all, that a strong family life can overcome almost any kind of obstacle. I also learned, or rather was reminded, about what an interesting and challenging time the teenage years are. When you are 10 you are blissfully confident and think you can do anything, then when you turn 12 or 13 you suddenly are paralyzed by self-doubt and feeling that you don't fit in anywhere. A few years later the college acceptance letters are arriving and you are on your way. Of course the journey is different for each person, but accompanying each girl as the drama unfolded taught me a lot about how you have to keep checking that you are on the right path all through your life—the path that is right in general, and the path that is right for you as an individual.

Now that you are no longer working at Rosedale, do you still visit from time to time?

Yes, I serve on the Advisory Council, and have been in touch with the new team during this time of transition. In addition, I have continued to help organize the music program, so I go in once a week on the day the girls have their lessons. This enables me to keep in touch with some of the girls and their families. I continue to help in the activities for mothers, parenting lectures and discussions, etc. and mornings of recollections given by priests of Opus Dei for the mothers and alumni. I expect I will always be involved in Rosedale in some way as long as I can make it up and down the steps of the elevated train.

Can people volunteer or help at Rosedale in other ways?

Rosedale is almost totally dependent on volunteers to carry out its mentoring, academic tutoring, and leadership programs, so there is

always a need. In addition, the foundation that supports Rosedale is always in need of financial help, so any efforts to fundraise, even if relatively small amounts are raised, are always welcome. There are many other ongoing ways that people can help; for example, looking for internship sites for our high school summer job training program, facilitating contacts with funding foundations, and even bringing people to Rosedale to view the programs in action.

What advice would you give to people approaching retirement?

As the end of a demanding career approaches, it can be tempting to think “that’s enough” and shy away from prospective experiences that go outside one’s comfort zone. I think this is a real mistake and would recommend embracing any chance that comes your way to try

something completely new that will at the same time give you an opportunity to give back. A lot of the skills that one develops during a corporate career—team-building, budgeting, project management—are badly needed in the non-profit sector. Being able to apply those skills in a situation where they translate into direct service to people, that is a chance worth taking.

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