



UIC Neighborhoods *Initiative*

Building Partnerships for Stronger Communities and a Stronger University

Spring 2001

The University of Illinois at Chicago

Teen REACH Helps Kids Help Themselves

Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes lack support in certain areas of their lives, including school, health and home. But programs like Teen REACH are trying to bridge those gaps.

Overseen by Dr. Cynthia Barnes-Boyd, director of UIC Neighborhoods Initiative and assistant dean of Community Health Initiatives, Teen REACH comprises several programs that help ensure the well-being of children and adolescents in the surrounding community.

Teen REACH works with students from Henry Suder Elementary School and provides after-school activities that focus on academic enrichment, life-skills education, recreation and peer/adult mentoring. Funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Teen REACH enlists graduate students from the College of Education, Human Nutrition and Development, and the School of Kinesiology to help facilitate activities and programs.



Participants in the Responsibility of the Gym program learn self-control techniques through physical activity

In early 2001, Teen REACH implemented a new tutoring program using College of Education graduate students and students from Crane High School (located near UIC) as tutors. The tutors work with junior high students on reading comprehension, provide homework assistance and teach computer-based learning skills, such as helping students learn to use the internet for research.

Teen REACH also aims to help young people develop healthy eating habits. Nutrition classes provide information and hands-on experience in meal preparation so students develop good nutrition habits at a young age. "The nutrition program is a big hit with the students," says TEEN Reach project director Regina Ortiz. "The meals they prepare are selected based on their nutritional value, taste, ease of preparation, accessibility and affordability, and the students also get to eat the meals after they prepare them."

Another component of Teen REACH is a stress management program that works with 1st through 3rd graders and 7th graders to help them recognize the causes of their stress and how to manage stress constructively. Facilitators have incorporated Tai Chi into the classes to teach the students relaxation techniques and have engaged the students in various craft activities that require concentration.

"The objective is to leave the students with a feeling of self-control and accomplishment," Ortiz explains. Similarly, the Responsibility in the Gym program encourages responsibility through coaching and basketball. Headed by professor of kinesiology Don Hellison and manned by School of Kinesiology and staff and students, the program deals with students who have problems with self-control by providing continuity for applying strategies toward responsible behavior while allowing students to engage in physical activity.

In addition to responsibility, Teen REACH teaches other life skills through three different programs. Teen Talk gives 8th graders the chance to interact with students from Marshall High School to discuss health, career options and goal setting. When the students move on to high school, they can participate in Teens Educating, Learning and Leading, which teaches them to be peer educators and mentors for Teen Talk. And Boy Talk/Girl Talk provides a forum for 3rd through 5th graders to ask questions and talk about basic anatomy and physiology, sexual abstinence, different types of abuse, parenting, goal setting, and conflict resolution. Students are grouped according to gender and grade level.

"The programs were initially established because students were getting most of their information from the street or improperly informed individuals," Ortiz explains.

Teen REACH also emphasizes parent involvement. Four parents are employed as assistants to program facilitators. They help escort students to and from different

programs, keep attendance records, collect consent forms and report cards, assist with classroom management and recruit students for the programs.

In addition, Teen REACH is part of the Better Care for Youth Clinic, which provides Suder Elementary students comprehensive primary and preventive medical care; acute management of chronic illnesses such as asthma; dental treatment; nutritional counseling and treatment of nutrition-related problems; mental health services; case management; health education; and group and individual parent education.

Ortiz says that what Teen REACH aims to accomplish is vital to young people, especially "in the wake of all the horrible things happening to them across the country, particularly those who do not have opportunities to engage in constructive activities that help them have a positive outlook."

NWSCDC Aims to Revitalize Madison Street

Construction began in March 2001 on a new Walgreen's drugstore at Madison Street and Western Avenue on Chicago's Near West Side. The store will include space for two to three small businesses, all of which will be an anchor for the revitalization of Madison Street.

This economic development venture is part of a HUD-sponsored Joint Community Development grant UIC Neighborhoods received. It involves numerous partners, including the Near West Side Community Development Corporation and the City of Chicago.

Meet A UICNI Community Partner: Ed Lucas/Renacer Westside Community Network, Inc.

Part of a continuing series profiling UICNI Community Partners

For Ed Lucas, being a community organizer is more than just a job. It's his life -- - literally. As Executive Director of Renacer Westside Community Network, Inc., Lucas helps residents of Chicago's Near West Side obtain job placement assistance, health screenings and housing assistance, runs youth programs and provides technical assistance to businesses and other community organizations. But it doesn't end there; community residents call him at every hour for help with matters that far exceed his formal responsibilities. They come to Lucas if they're in a bind, whether it be a legal matter or otherwise. And Lucas never lets them down, even if it's 3 a.m.

That might be where some people draw the line, but Lucas isn't complaining. In fact, he says he's never been happier. But his life hasn't always been this way.

Six years ago, Lucas was teaching at the City Colleges of Chicago and about as far removed from the Near West Side community as one can be. A challenge from a business associate named Rod Farrar (who, along with Lucas, became Renacer's co-founder) changed all that.

"Rod said to me, 'Ed, affluent, educated black folks like you aren't doing anything to help the community; you are turning your backs on the community,'" Lucas recalls. "What he said really bothered me. I come from public housing, and I guess as soon as I got out, I wanted to insulate myself from it." While Farrar had touched a nerve, Lucas was hesitant to take action. "I didn't know what I could do --- I'm just one person," he explains. But in a matter of a week or so, he'd quit his job and began to research methods of starting up a nonprofit organization.

"My friends --- a lot of them in corporate jobs, doing well --- they thought I was crazy. But a few of them gave me some start-up money, and I started working out of my apartment with a donated computer," he says.

He enlisted Farrar's help, and they started by giving their prospective organization a name. "Renacer is Spanish, and it means a rebirth or reawakening," Lucas explains. "We wanted the community to experience just that."

Since then, Renacer has made strides in helping the Near West Side reawaken, Lucas says. He cites Renacer's partnership with UIC Neighborhoods Initiative as fundamental to its success. "Without them, I couldn't do what I do," he asserts. For example, the connection with UICNI garnered Renacer three computers from UIC's College of Education that enabled the organization to start a computer center. UIC's Health Policy Center funds a student newspaper project through Renacer, and the School of Public Health partnered with Renacer to develop a course that teaches students to work with community residents in identifying problems and assets within their communities. "None of this would have been possible without the contact with Neighborhoods Initiative and Great Cities," Lucas states.

And while Lucas could stop with those accomplishments, he presses on, never turning his back on community residents who seek his counsel or assistance. He is particularly proud of the relationship he's fostered with gang leaders from the neighborhood. "We have a gang summit every month, to try to work out conflicts. And the gangs call me before they go down with a plan to get my advice," he explains,

adding that homicides are down in the area, a statistic that he's thankful to have contributed to.

Although Renacer recently packed up its offices and moved to a new location (709 S. Western, 312/942-9793), Lucas says his primary goal remains the same. "I just want to keep doing what we're doing. Those who have affected change in this world made huge sacrifices, and we've got to keep pressing forward, because the problems out there belong to all of us."