

# United Way, ExxonMobil, Bright Beginnings Set the Stage for Child Care Excellence in Houston Area

In 2002, the Bright Beginnings program was founded by ExxonMobil and the United Way of Greater Houston with the intent of creating a model child care program to improve the quality of the care and early education for children in some of Houston's most neglected areas. The commonality among the four directors on the cover is participation in that program, called Bright Beginnings. Although their centers are different and serve diverse family populations with a variety of program characteristics, each one of these directors share a belief that children can be supported in achieving developmental milestones in high quality child care. They each exhibit a passion for children, and they all recognize the value of openness to change, personal leadership, and recognize the value of collaboration with others to achieve their visions.

## Hattie White, Director His Place Child Care Center

In 1991, two public school teachers, who were themselves products of economically disadvantaged homes and of minority backgrounds, joined forces. They understood the challenges of achieving a quality education and had personally witnessed the benefits that a quality education had made in their own lives and in the lives of the

children they taught. They resigned from teaching, withdrew their teacher retirement funds, and began a home school for children ages 0 to 5 with a dream to make quality child care in a Christian community a reality for children.

Since 1991, His Place has changed the physical location of the school a number of times, moving from one home in Houston's Eastwood Community to another and finally to its present location in 1993. Though the physical location may have changed, the dream of quality early childhood education in a Christian environment has remained steadfast and has been the guiding force of the school for the past 16 years. Noteworthy is the fact that His Place has approximately 90% Hispanic enrollment, offering a sometimes-overlooked community access to high quality child care. In addition, although fewer than 8% of programs nationally meet the rigorous requirements for NAEYC accreditation, His Place is proud to be one of them, having achieved accreditation in the spring of 2005.

The mission of His Place is to prepare children for successful entry into kindergarten in a Christian environment, while pursuing excellence in child care. The school believes that children learn best in an environment where they



On our cover: (clockwise from top left): Mitzi Bartlett of House of Tiny Treasures; Kathy Greenway of Charles Ray Ogden Children's Center/Child Development Laboratory School; Rose Marie Avelar of Los Niños Early Childhood Program; and Hattie White of His Place Child Care Center, Inc.

feel loved and there is a love for learning; when the curriculum reflects a hands-on, play-based, multi-sensory approach that addresses the developmental needs of each child — physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual; and where the center, families, and the community work together in partnership and combine resources to make learning a real-life experience.

## Mitzi Bartlett, Director House of Tiny Treasures

It is hard for me to believe I am in my fifth year at SEARCH's House of Tiny Treasures. I will always remember the first day I started. It was a little overwhelming. What had I done? These children and families were homeless. What did I know about being homeless?

I soon realized that all families, including families who experience the trauma of homelessness, are similar. They love their children; they want them to be healthy and to succeed in life. The House of Tiny Treasures helps families realize the dreams they have for their children through a holistic approach to early childhood education. The 13 teachers, a family service coordinator, a play therapist, an art therapist, and a speech therapist all have the same mission, which is to provide early childhood education, therapeutic services, and resources to homeless children in order to prepare them for school. Further, the center educates families to advocate for themselves and their children and to navigate community resources to help them in creating stable, functional lives with their children.

This mission has its challenges. Traumatized children need to act out their feelings and that can mean a hectic day for the staff. The skill and dedication of the teachers and staff is what helps the children realize that they are safe. The teachers provide developmentally appropriate education, assessment through observation, curriculum with reflective thinking, and predictable daily routines. Children begin to trust and, with the help of the play, art, and speech therapists, learn once again to enjoy childhood.

Providing comprehensive services, therapists, dedicated teaching staff, quality early childhood education, and

## Background on Bright Beginnings Initiative

The Bright Beginning program provides funding for child care centers in neglected areas of Houston to begin the transformation to high quality care and early education programs. In conjunction with Houston's Collaborative for Children, intensive staff training and development, scholarships for pursuit of associate, bachelor, and master degrees, wage supplementation, comprehensive curriculum, leadership development, parent involvement, and appropriate indoor and outdoor equipment are made available. In addition, Bright Beginnings offers extensive teacher training in innovative, developmentally appropriate curriculum, and teaching methods with opportunities to interact frequently with child care consultants on-site in their classrooms. Finally, the program provides intensive leadership development opportunities for center directors.

The results of these efforts have been extraordinary. They include:

- 127% quality improvement in infant/toddler classrooms in centers that have participated in Bright Beginnings for five years (as measured by the Infant/Toddler Rating Scale) and 52% improvement in centers that have been in the program for two years or less
- 97% quality improvement in preschool classrooms that have participated in Bright Beginnings for five years (as measured by the Early Childhood Rating Scale) and a 70% improvement in centers that have been in the program for two years or less
- 60% increase in staff retention
- Completion by all participating directors of at least 13 hours in ECE
- NAEYC accreditation by three of the participating centers (directors Hattie White and Mitzi Bartlett, whose programs were accredited in 2005, are seen on this *Exchange* cover)
- The Texas Association for the Education of Young Children named Hattie White, Director of His Place, Early Childhood Administrator of the Year

supporting family cohesiveness is expensive. Homeless families who attend the House of Tiny Treasures do not pay tuition or fees. Therefore, the school collaborates with the community, faith-based organizations, corporations, foundations, colleges and universities, and individuals to help find the resources to fund the program. Through such collaborative efforts, several

teachers have completed their early childhood degrees, we have purchased equipment and supplies, we have provided staff with additional appropriate training, and in addition provided daily essentials for families such as clothing and shoes. Such collaborations, and the dedication of the teachers and staff, helped us achieve NAEYC accreditation in 2005.

Collaborating with others and working with families in poverty has helped me realize that early childhood educators make a difference. A difference is made when we provide families with quality early childhood education, help teachers obtain research-based professional development, and raise community awareness about the needs of all children and families. This insight prompted me to become more involved with the early childhood community as president of the Houston Association for the Education of Young children, a board member of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children, and a member of the advocacy group, "One Voice."

Often, as individuals, we don't think we can make a difference. We can make a difference. I am convinced that working together with people who share a passion for young children, as my colleagues in the Bright Beginnings program and I have done, makes a difference in the lives of the families we serve.

**Kathy Greenway**  
**Charles Ray Ogden Children's**  
**Center/Child Development**  
**Laboratory School**

I have worked at the Charles Ray Ogden Children's Center/Child Development Laboratory School for two years, although this is my 31st year in the field of early childhood education. The center provides flexible, full-service child care for the children of students, faculty, staff, and the community and is licensed for 65 children, ages six weeks to five years of age. In addition, it serves as an observation and laboratory setting for students enrolled in Child Development, Education, Psychology, and Health classes at the college.

Our school philosophy is to provide responsible, nurturing care and early

education using positive guidance techniques in a developmentally appropriate setting that fosters the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of young children. We aim to support enrolled families in the education and development of their children, share a model learning environment, use positive guidance techniques with the children, act as role models for parents and college students, enhance the young child's natural creative abilities, and promote children's social skills through child-initiated activities.

The center collaborates with the Child Development/Early Childhood Education Department and mentors students from San Jacinto College and other community colleges as they observe and participate as interns in the classrooms. The school has been affiliated with United Way/Exxon-Mobil Bright Beginnings for two years, participating in special training events with nationally known early childhood specialists, receiving educational scholarships, salary incentives, materials and equipment, and furniture and playground renovations. Participation has also made it possible for our center to pursue NAEYC accreditation.

Recently, teachers Lorna Patterson, Phyllis McCannless, and myself attended *Side by Side Working Institute on Mentoring Teachers* held in Seattle, Washington, presented by *Exchange* authors Margie Carter, Deb Curtis, and Ann Pelo. We had many "ah ha" moments that inspired us to implement what we had learned. As Lorna stated, "I've learned that if we just take time to step back and observe and study what children are doing, we learn so much from them. Remember to think outside the box when working with young children."

**Rose Marie Avelar, Director**  
**Los Niños Early Childhood Program**

The East End barrio, one of Houston's oldest, is located very near the center of the city's central, bustling downtown area. It is home to over 80,000 Hispanic residents, many of whom are first- and second-generation Latino families with intra-family friendships and acquaintances with neighbors, their children, and grandchildren. The East End was my home as a child. Even though I went away to school, moved from the area and worked in public schools for 25 years in other parts of Houston, I happily came back to my roots to work for Community Family Centers as Director of the Los Niños Early Childhood Program, where I see old family, friends, and acquaintances as well as new faces and families that our center serves every day.

Community Family Centers is a non-profit agency dedicated to serving the multiple needs of the East End barrio. One of its primary goals is to address and enhance quality of life for families through "wrap-around" services that include access to food through the Houston Food Bank; medical services weekly through the Episcopal Charities mobile clinic; HIV and drug abuse prevention counseling; family and individual counseling, as well as outreach counseling to pregnant teens through the local high schools.

The Los Niños Early Childhood Program is the supportive arm of a Family Literacy Program implemented in collaboration with Houston Community College and Texas Education Agency. East End demographic data details a population of residents of whom 45% are under 25 years of age with a ninth grade education or less, a majority of whom do not speak English. Parents attend ESL and GED classes Monday through Friday for three hours in the morning or the afternoon and their children attend Los Niños. While parents are learning, a highly competent, loving staff experienced in the best traditional and Montessori practices teach their children.