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Cora Greenberg Pleasantville

By Martin Wilbur

There may be no greater friend to children in Westchester County than Cora Greenberg.

Since 1994, Greenberg has served as executive director of the Westchester Children's Association, where she has helped lead the non-profit organization to sharply increase the number of children enrolled in Medicaid and Child Health Plus and advocated that pre-school aged children with social and emotional problems receive services in day care so they are not expelled.

The Westchester Children's Association has also worked to provide a greater safety net for those ready to leave foster homes when nearing adulthood, one more of its many projects.

But Greenberg rarely ever gets to interact with children.

"We're sort of a niche organization," said Greenberg. "We do a very specific thing. We don't work directly with kids for the most part. We almost never see kids. It's much more of an abstract, middle kind of work."

For Greenberg, the past 15 years has certainly been rewarding. While tackling one issue may take several years to complete--and there is no guarantee that the investment of time, energy and money will yield reforms--the Pleasantville resident has been able to see a wide range of successes achieved by the nearly century-old orga-

nization. It's work continues to be critical because there's not one municipality in the county that has a 0 percent poverty rate.

While impressively effective, the Westchester Children's Association is "the best kept secret," as Greenberg describes it, likely because it doesn't receive much publicity and shuns attention-seeking tactics.

"We want to and we do have a good relationship with the county government," Greenberg, 60, explained. "We reserve the right to be critical because that's our job but we're not interested in throwing bombs and getting headlines. That is definitely not our style. That's why no one's ever heard of us. We try to work with people in power because we really want to make changes."

Its mission, Greenberg said, is straightforward but often difficult and time consuming to complete--find out what children and teenagers need, publicize those needs to the public and policymakers and then work to make sure those needs are met.

Greenberg's longtime training in education and social work prepared her well to be at the helm of the association. After completing undergraduate studies at SUNY Binghamton, the Brooklyn native received a master's in elementary education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison before switching gears to earn a master's in social work at Hunter College.

Greenberg sought work in community



organizing, a term popularized during President Obama's campaign, which, as she explained, is essentially advocacy. In Greenberg's case, she gravitated to children's advocacy in a variety of capacities in the city, including a stint as associate executive director of the Project Reach Youth, a multi-service youth and family organization in Brooklyn.

After she and her husband, Sandy Bayer, moved to Pleasantville, in time for their now 23-year-old daughter, Lucy, to enter kindergarten, the three commutes a week to Brooklyn became too much for Greenberg. She looked for a job in Westchester, answered an ad in The New York Times for her current position and has been advocating for children of Westchester ever since. Formed in 1914, the Westchester Children's Association is the oldest independent child advocacy organization in the United States.

Much of Greenberg's time is spent meeting and organizing and cajoling the movers and shakers into action.

"My husband said he can't believe I found a job where they pay me to schmooze and shoot my mouth off," she said while laughing. "(It's) the interaction with people and the engagement of ideas. I'm very well suited, so I've really enjoyed my time here. It's been great."

Of course, there is never a shortage of issues to be considered and work to be done. Very often, there's consensus regarding what general topic to pursue, but the key is to effectively frame the argument or target a very narrow focus. Helping children in day care centers with emotional and social problems was introduced after a series of children's mental health issues were explored.

"We try and pick something that no one else is taking the lead on," Greenberg said. "We think that's the best way we can have an impact given who we are. We're very small so we try to triage because we know when we pick an issue, we're going to stay connected to it for a number of years. Something that we have the expertise and the wherewithal to do something with."

Despite the difficult economic times, the organization has been able to stay solvent and have enough money to fund its projects and five employees. Its donors are dedicated and are equally committed to the cause.

For now, retirement isn't in Greenberg's plans. She hopes to stick around at least until the Westchester Child Association's centennial in four years, then will re-evaluate her future. By then, the couple's 17-year-old son, Henry, now a Pleasantville High School senior, will almost be out of college.

With all the accomplishments over the years, Greenberg continues to enjoy her work.

"Really the best thing is the people I get to work with, who are working on making life better for children, (and) are a fantastic group of people," she said.



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