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Sixty Years of Instilling Hope, Restoring Morale and More

By Andrew Malekoff

This year marks the 60th anniversary of North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center. I wonder if its founders, a small group of parents, could have imagined in 1953 that six decades later the Guidance Center would be taking more than 100 calls a week from parents concerned about their children's emotional well-being. The callers tell stories about children and teens who are troubled, in trouble or causing trouble. Handling their first call sensitively is a hallmark of the Guidance Center. That first person-to-person contact makes all the difference in whether a parent chooses to take the next step forward towards hope or retreats into a sense of despair.

In the early 1950's, the north shore communities of Long Island were experiencing rapid change. What was once a bucolic landscape peppered with small villages and large estates was being converted into a vast array of suburban developments. The last remaining farms were leveled as roads. Housing developments and schools suddenly popped up, many clustered near the most prominent new roadway, the Long Island Expressway.

According to Bob Smith, who penned a reflection on the first 50 years of the Guidance Center, "In the beginning there were the parents; a generation of mostly young professionals and middle-class workers who had come of age in the great depression, been tempered by the crucible of war, and then came marching home to an increasingly troubled urban environment. These young men and women came to the suburbs in search of a safer, healthier place to raise their children." The new residents had come with little children or the expectation of children. They came as a single generation, not as an extended family. The priority of the suburbs became raising children.

The Guidance Center's beginnings were rooted in a community-based model, where progressive-minded suburban activists organized to establish a children's mental health clinic for members of the community in need of such services. The message to new suburbanites was that, despite their relocation into more affluent communities, mental health problems were not confined to the underprivileged and poor.

Smith recalled that the founders, "made it understood that the oft repeated remark – 'wherever you go – there YOU are' was, in fact, true; that the need for services crossed financial, educational, ethnic and class barriers. And that the suburban environment, because of its isolation, might even be more stressful for these young families than the urban environment might have been, with its close-knit neighborhoods and extended families for support." This remains true today, despite dramatic changes in the intervening years.

Sixty years later, we are blessed to have modern technological innovations such as the Internet and cell phones that provide us with the capacity to make connections anywhere and anytime. Yet, instant access and social media are no replacements for more intimate face-to-face interaction, the essential medium of a community-based agency.

The 100-plus calls we receive every week tell different stories, yet are similar with characteristics of demoralization such as a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, inability to cope, self-blame, feelings of worthlessness and a sense of alienation. Perhaps the most enduring quality of the Guidance Center, over 60 years, is its ability to connect with struggling families of all backgrounds, up close and personal, and to instill hope and restore morale.

Happy 60th Anniversary North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center!