

Bronx social worker and ‘lifetime learner’ Joan DiBlasi has no plans to retire soon

Goal is to keep kids and their families together

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Richard Harbus for New York Daily News

Social worker Joan DiBlasi is surrounded by little ones taking part in programs at Astor Services for Children & Families center in Eastchester.

When Joan DiBlasi became a social worker more than 20 years ago, most children in need of help would be placed in foster care, a group home or an institution.

Now, as assistant executive director for Bronx programs at Astor Services for Children & Families, DiBlasi makes sure that parents are active members of their children’s therapy, and that they can address problems as a family.

“Keeping children at home with their families becomes a major goal,” said DiBlasi, 68. “When I first started, the whole philosophy of care was to relocate people from urban areas into suburban areas. Now, we’re really looking at the community to provide the resources to keep the family together.”

With four program locations and satellite offices in five Bronx schools, DiBlasi has overseen major milestones at the nonprofit, which runs centers in Highbridge and Eastchester.

She and her staff work with very young children — including those expelled from pre-school because of extreme behavior issues — and she proudly described being able to “graduate” 19 youngsters this year who successfully

completed therapy, and are ready to move on to kindergarten.

“These kids would have sat home,” she said.

Now, with a grant from the Robin Hood Foundation, “We’re trying to develop a program that follows kids for 12 years for that goal of high school graduation,” she said.

DiBlasi grew up in a working-class family in Rockland County, and her 12-year Catholic school education provided a foundation “in right and wrong, with a little bit of philosophy thrown in.” She went to community college, and then received a master’s degree in social work from SUNY Albany in 1973.

About 30 years later, the self-described “lifetime learner” received her Ph.D at a university in London.

Among the Ossining resident’s passions: Irish drumming, with a specialty in playing the bodhran.

DiBlasi hopes to one day incorporate her music into her social work.

“You don’t walk away from an interest in what makes society better,” she said, adding that she continues to be pleasantly surprised by her young clients.

“We remain in the poorest congressional district in the country,” she said, “so despite that, there is a great resilience and hope among the children and families that we work with.”

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