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Finding Solutions Newsletter

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AWAKE AND ENGAGED... By Bill Bolling

People making a difference

After more than 30 years of feeding the hungry, I often get asked how I found my calling, how I got the idea to start a food bank, and how I have managed to stay in the work for such a long time. I like these questions because they give me a chance to look back and reflect.

I feel very fortunate that I have been given, and have taken, the opportunity to follow my passion to make things better - to take the stuff of life and transform it to serve those most in need. I have come to understand my life's work as that of transformation, and I've learned that food can be an essential tool in transforming lives.

The path wasn't always easy, and it hasn't always followed a clear line. It took me more than 10 years of adulthood to know myself well enough to set my own direction - to be confident enough to put my vision into action.

In 1976 I helped start the first community kitchen in Atlanta for the homeless at a local church. Over time we were feeding more than 400 people a day. I learned patience, the art of facilitation, and the need to take the long view for the work ahead. And then came the idea for a food bank. I was aware that 25% of the food produced in this country was being thrown away. And I was working with people who had little access to nutritious food. My idea was simply to create a bridge between the surplus food and the people who didn't have enough to eat.

I was naïve enough that I didn't even stop to think I couldn't do it. This began a whole new phase of my education on how things work.

I began asking the kinds of questions which did not endear me to those representing the status quo. Why do we

About this issue...

Bill Bolling (pg.1) is the first author in a new series featuring individuals who have managed to combine their desire to be among those who make a difference in the greater community with their "day jobs." He describes the long journey he took to "take the stuff of life and transform it to serve those most in need." Be sure to read more about this series and your part in giving it life. (pg.4).

Josh Golin challenges us to put the book back in the book fair (pg.2). Find out how you can start a commercial-free book fair in your local school and why you should!

There is a school in Brooklyn, NY (pg.5) where the pre-school students are learning to share with and care about others through "special learning." Caroline Batzdorf describes this innovative program and introduces us to educators who truly are making a difference in their community.

"It's A Girl Thing" is an award-winning program in NYC founded in 1996 by neighborhood mothers, workers, activists and others dedicated to ensuring that youth in the community learn to use critical thinking to help others and grow into productive and happy adults. Abraham Paulos (pg.6) describes the program and some of the outcomes realized.

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have hungry people when there is so much surplus and unmarketable food? Why is there homelessness when we have plenty of homes? Why don't people have access to health care when there are plenty of doctors and hospitals? I couldn't understand why the haves kept getting more, while the have-not's continued to get less. These are questions that have continued to guide me through a life of service.

In choosing to feed the hungry and work for those who have "no voice" I have had to constantly adjust my thinking and my strategies. I have had to work against the odds and against those who said it couldn't be done. I have had to learn to understand and speak the language of business, of government, of academia, of the faith community, of the mass media, and of the community of people I serve. I have had to be willing to learn some of my greatest life lessons in places I first feared to go.

"What matters is that you stay awake, stay engaged, and keep questioning the status quo."

I wouldn't trade anything for the experiences this work continues to bring – I thrive on both the challenges and the rewards of working with many different people from many different sectors of community. This connection with others helps and informs me in my life and work. It

is a life full of grace, hard work and strong ties to community.

Ultimately, it really doesn't matter which door you walk through or which opportunity in life you decide to pursue. What matters is that you stay awake, stay engaged, and keep questioning the status quo. Be open to discovery. And remember that you can make things better exactly where you are. It doesn't require special circumstances, a secondary education, great wealth, or special powers. As Martin Luther King has said, "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love."

In our society, individuals and groups often misunderstand and distrust each other. Building back trust in institutions, in government, and in each other is essential if we are going to realize our highest potential and move forward. We must embrace change, be the change, follow our passions, and face our fears of failure. And know that we never have to work alone. There are others with the same questions, the same passions, and the same commitment for change.

I would suggest that real freedom is not having more choices, but in knowing what we are called to do and having the courage and will to do it.

Bill Bolling is the Founder and Executive Director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. He may be reached at bill.bolling@acfb.org.



PUTTING THE BOOK BACK IN BOOK FAIR...

By Josh Golin

Last year, Caroline¹ sent her seven-year-old son to his Scholastic school book fair with five dollars and a note to his teacher that she wanted him to pick a good reading book. Instead, he came home with a Batman drawing book and three thirteen-inch flexible pencils.

Caroline was understandably upset. She didn't blame her son for his choices – it's not surprising a young boy would be drawn to a Batman book or gimmicky pencils. Nor did she feel that she could really expect the teacher to monitor all of the children's purchases. Instead, she started wondering why these products are

offered at all a fair whose ostensible purpose is to promote reading.

Caroline is not alone. An increasing number of parents and educators are concerned about the products sold at fairs organized by Scholastic, Inc., the nation's leading book fair company. They note the presence of non-book items such as posters, key chains, toys, fashion accessories, and electronic media. It's a little hard to figure out how bracelets, videogames, or whoopee cushions (I'm not making that up) promote literacy.

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Parents are also upset by the number of books that are linked to television programs, movies, and toys, including such titles as the Cartoon Network's *Scooby Doo and the Frankenstein Monster*, *Disney Princess Promises*, and *Lil' Bratz: Beauty Sleepover Bash!* Books that are media tie-ins don't introduce children to new worlds or new ideas. Instead, they simply reintroduce children to the stories and characters that many of them are all too familiar with from screens, toys and cereal boxes. By selling these books, schools promote media programs and whole lines of associated products—even as we know that heavy television viewing is linked to childhood obesity and lower academic performance.² According to a Scholastic representative, 35-40% of the books sold at a typical book fair are linked to a movie, television show or video game.³

Operating under what Juliet Schor calls a “wholesome halo” – its reputation as a quality educational publisher – allows Scholastic to escape much of the criticism aimed at other major in-school marketers like Channel One.⁴ But Scholastic book fairs are big business. Last year, they generated \$404 million in revenue for the company while providing the cover for major companies such as Disney and Nickelodeon to peddle their wares to children in schools.

In other words, book fairs have become yet another way for corporations to prey on children. That's why an increasing number of parents and educators have turned away from Scholastic and are working with independent booksellers to hold “Commercial-Free Book Fairs.” At a Commercial-Free Book Fair, you won't find video games, makeup, SpongeBob or the Disney Princesses. But you will find lots of new and classic children's books whose wonderful stories and characters are satisfying in and of themselves, not a means to sell other products to children.

Providing an alternative for children who are already inundated with marketing for media-linked products is

just one of the benefits of a Commercial-Free Book Fair. Commercial-Free Book Fairs also help schools and communities:

- Raise funds in a manner consistent with its educational mission by promoting literacy instead of the latest media programs for children.
- Promote literacy.
- Enrich classroom and library book collections.
- Provide books to students—including the opportunity to purchase books for those who may not have the funds to buy them.
- Support local businesses.
- Start a much-needed discussion about the presence of corporate marketers in schools.

Best of all, a Commercial-Free Book Fair allows parents and educators to change the commercial culture of schools by doing something positive. Scholastic officials claim that media tie-ins and non-book items are necessary to get “reluctant readers” interested in books, but reports from schools that have held Commercial-Free Book Fairs belie that myth. Here's what Jeff Melnick, a parent from Cambridge, Massachusetts, had to say about his school's first Commercial-Free Book Fair:

“What a thrill it was to see 4-year-old kindergartners and 13-year-old middle schoolers hit our school lobby this week and show real excitement that it was time for the book fair. With books provided by the locally-owned Porter Square Books, we demonstrated that, given the chance, K-8 kids will embrace the opportunity to look at – and even buy! – all manner of books, from bilingual versions of *Puss in Boots* to classics and recent titles from major Young Adult authors like Walter Dean Myers. With virtually no media tie-ins to the books, and no free key chains promoting television

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KIDS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE® FINDING SOLUTIONS NEWSLETTER
A PROGRAM OF WORLD HUNGER YEAR (WHY)

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Jane Finn Levine, Ed.D. and Larry Levine
1 Borodell Avenue, Mystic, CT 06355

(860) 245-3620, FAX (860)-245-3651, email: kids@kidscanmakeadifference.org,
<http://www.kidscanmakeadifference.org>

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characters, our school's Fall Book Fair fulfilled our wish that such school activities can support curriculum and equity while also limiting cross-promotional opportunities for major corporations."

At CCFC, we've created a guide to help you hold your own Commercial-Free Book Fair. The guide includes simple tips to help you change the culture of book fairs in your school, as well as a glossary of independent book-sellers who support book fairs. We hope that you'll download it and share it with others in your community. Because isn't it about time to put the book back in book fair as we work towards making our schools commercial-free?

CCFC's Guide to Commercial-Free Book Fairs is available at <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/bookfairs/home.htm>.

¹Caroline has asked that I not use her last name as she is currently trying to get her school's book fair changed and does not want to appear critical of her school's administration.

²P.L. Donahue, R.J. Finnegan, A.D. Lutkus, N.L. Allen, and J.R. Campbell. (2001). *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading 2000*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 2001-499, pg. 14.

³Grace Bu, Scholastic Sales Representative in Los Angeles, phone conversation with CCFC volunteer Rebecca Weiker, August 2, 2006.

⁴J. Schor (2004). *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and New Consumer Culture*. New York, Scriber, p. 97.

⁵<http://library.corporate-ir.net/library/85/851/85107/items/213836/InvestorAnalystMeeting.pdf>, p.16. Accessed November 30, 2006.

Josh Golin (jgolin@jbcc.harvard.edu) is the Program Manager for the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE OR ARE YOU THAT SPECIAL PERSON?

This issue is the start of a series devoted to bringing to our readers' attention stories of individuals who have decided to make a difference in the greater community. We hope that you will find inspiration in what people are doing to make a difference in the world.

In future issues, you will meet others like Bill Bolling (highlighted in this issue) who have answered the call to "be all that they can be!" We are interested in hearing from you about other people (including yourself) that are making a difference. Please contact us at kids@kidscanmakeadifference.org and let us know.

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BROOKLYN PRESCHOOLERS ADDRESS HUNGER...

By Caroline Batzdorf

What does it feel like to be hungry? How can I share with someone who doesn't have enough? The most simplified aspects of hunger and sharing have been put in a curriculum for children who are just learning to understand their own hunger. The children at Rivendell Preschool, a Montessori inclusion school in Brooklyn, NY, are learning to share with and care about others through "service-learning," an aspect of the curriculum intended to foster spiritual development and compassion in children.

For the third year running, Rivendell Preschool students are participating in preparing lunches for the clients of Christian Help In Park Slope (C.H.I.P.S.), a local soup kitchen. (C.H.I.P.S. is the subject of the book Uncle Willy & the Soup Kitchen by Dyanne DiSalvo-Ryan.) This is an opportunity for the children, who range from 18 months to 6 years, to contribute to the broader community while learning about themselves.

In recent years, many schools have been making community service a standard part of their curricula. That said, it is somewhat rare for sustained community service to appear at the preschool level. The educators at Rivendell feel a moral obligation to encourage caring for others and the knowledge that people may live differently.

"This may be consciousness-raising for some of the parents too," comments Linda Schick, a long-time teacher at the school and currently its educational director. While the curriculum did not set out to guide whole families regarding hunger and poverty in this increasingly more affluent neighborhood in Brooklyn, the fact that these are young children makes the effect almost inevitable. "The parents are partners in this endeavor. They are in the outside world," points out Lissy Vomacka, a teacher.

As adults, we are often aware of the grim details of hunger, and our very human response is to recoil in fear, avert our eyes, feel guilty and take out our cheque books. The Rivendell curriculum requires that families set aside the fear and look at the hunger and

poverty in the immediate community. Theresa Salvanti, a teacher, reflected that "the curriculum that extends from C.H.I.P.S. has increased the children's awareness of what it means to be hungry, and that all people are hungry at one time or other. It has also increased my own awareness of social issues in the Park Slope community."

Once a month, the 18 months - 2.6 year-olds bring oranges and apples to school. They place them in a large bowl in the middle of their classroom, count fruit, and discuss the words "a lot," "enough," "plenty" and "sharing." They talk about feeling hungry and eat a little of the fruit. Then they share their plenty with older friends in other classes, and the remainder goes to the food collection for C.H.I.P.S. lunches.

Children 2.6 - 6 years contribute a range of foods to the lunches: mustard, lunch meat, cheese slices, bread, apples, oranges, and crackers. Last year, they also made a different blend of applesauce each month. They ate some and prepared the rest for C.H.I.P.S..

On a typical C.H.I.P.S. work day, each child brings his or her offering. The children often count the items as they arrive and sometimes tally the results. Then, while one group decorates lunch bags, another group makes sandwiches, and a third assembles the bag lunches. Parent volunteers supervise the work and deliver the lunches to C.H.I.P.S. for distribution to needy clients.

While it has not been possible for the school children to visit C.H.I.P.S., one of the teachers was invited to C.H.I.P.S. to take photographs of all the activities. The photos have been made into a book that carefully illustrates what happens to the lunches once they leave the school.

For many years, Rivendell did a Thanksgiving canned food drive for C.H.I.P.S., but without much follow through for the children. So, as a natural extension of this existing relationship, the children learned more about C.H.I.P.S. in the final stage of a Heifer fundrais-

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ing project that was organized by a couple of parents. With a little of the money raised, the class bought enough supplies to make fifty sandwiches. By the next fall, the lunch making had evolved into a regular, monthly aspect of the curriculum. The C.H.I.P.S curriculum continues to evolve as teachers and parents work together to make it ever more meaningful and successful for all involved.

How much do the children understand about hunger and poverty from the Rivendell curriculum? It is hard to measure, but when asked what they thought about

the work they were doing, this is how some children responded:

“The people who eat the sandwiches don’t have any money to buy food.”

“I like making sandwiches and packing bags. I think about the people who will eat the food.”

Caroline Batzdorf is a mother of three young children in Brooklyn, NY, and part-time public policy researcher. She may be contacted at clbatzdorf@earthlink.net

IT'S A GIRL THING...

By Abraham Paulos

I walked in with a slight sense of surprise; I have been to many community-based organizations and they often have a drab air that you encounter when walking into their facilities. However, this generalization could not be further from the truth when used to describe the Lower Eastside Girls Club! It was vibrant, colorful and active with a feeling of dynamic change and optimism. As I sat down on the comfortable black couch the space reminded me of a hip art gallery that you might frequent on a Friday night. The space, however, was a little too small to house the ambitious and positive mission that the Lower Eastside Girls Club has been delivering and is continuing to deliver. Fortunately, this will change in 2007 when the construction of a 47,000 square foot facility is underway.

I was welcomed with warmth by the effervescent and talented Renee Laster (who inspired the title) during the visit. “If this wasn’t here I would probably still be fighting to get out of high school and be at the house doing nothing, seriously doing nothing,” 21 year old Renee said about the Lower Eastside Girls Club.

The young women who participate in the Lower Eastside Girls Club (LEGC) programs reflect the northeast corner of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Most live at or below the poverty line, and all of the girls

lack the advantages that children of middle to upper-class families enjoy: the conventional opportunities to social and economic success, a significant and recurrent voice in the community, an ability to navigate the educational system, and parents with the time and the capacity to actively support their livelihood.

The neighborhood the LEGC serves is a 50-block area that houses 27 NYC public housing complexes. More than half of the area residents (55.9%) have incomes that fall below the poverty level. The barriers that seriously inhibit community residents from achieving social and economic success include high rates of poverty, crime, school drop-out, unemployment, a shortage of affordable housing and population density, all aggravated by limited access to nutritious and healthy food.

LEGC is a private grassroots organization founded in 1996 by neighborhood mothers, workers, artists, and community activists dedicated to ensuring that youth in the community learn to think critically and act positively, learn to care for themselves and others, and grow into productive and happy adults. In less than a decade, the LEGC has grown from a small, volunteer-led organization into a recognized leader and innovator in the field of youth and community development.

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Lyn Pentecost, who was one of it's concerned neighborhood mothers who helped found the LEGC and is currently the executive director, said, "its unique in the sense that it is open to any girl who wants it. It's different because it's not just a one issue organization. One of the programs that we take seriously is You Are What You Eat; Feeding Brains and the Soul. Also the entrepreneurial aspect of some of the programs invites girls to be financially responsible with a product that happens to be nutritious."

For the past three years (2002-2005), they have run a neighborhood Farmers' Market. Farmers from the North East, assisted by teenage girls trained and managed by the Girls Club, sold their produce to the largely black and Latino residents from the nearby housing projects. The girls even developed and operated an education kiosk in a local farmer's market every week.

The Girls Club has created an in-school entrepreneurial/health and wellness curriculum that results in teen-run, after school juice/smoothie and healthy muffin cafes. *The Sweet Thing Bake Shop*, an entrepreneurial training program and earned income initiative, has had great success. According to Renee, "the Bake Shop, is a lot of hard work but we run our own business. I learn a lot about myself like the fact I have a lot of patience; it makes me more unselfish." The LEGC has established "Juice Joints" that serves healthy snacks and beverages at two schools and are staffed by participants in the training course so that they may practice and develop business skills. They have also launched a program for Girls Club members to introduce WIC mothers from a nearby health center to locally produced agricultural products.

In October, the Girls Club launched its latest venture: The Intersn@ck Café, an after school healthy snack program in the form of a smoothie and Muffin Bar ad-

acent to their internet drop-in center. Each day more than 75 teen and pre-teen girls arrive at The Girls Club Center for classes. Famished after a long day, the girls walk in embracing junk food snacks from the nearest 'bodega' ranging from "Dipsy Doodles" to champagne soda.

The Intersn@ck Café is a project designed to address several goals to counteract the multiple issues concerning the community. The project introduces healthy snack habits to a mostly inaccessible adolescent and young adult population, thereby reducing health risks. By educating an urban community about the environmental component that explains food production, nutrition, and physical health, the program addresses the poor nutritional health of low-income adolescents and their families. It will provide job training and opportunities to an under-employed population of teens and young adults and enable them to enter the nutrition and health based professions.

When Lyn Pentecost brilliantly said, "We offer social change instead of social services," the statement solidified the reason why LEGC won the Harry Chapin Self Reliance Award (HCSRA). The HCSRA is awarded as a cash grant to outstanding grassroots organizations in the U.S. that have moved beyond charity to creating change in their communities. Winners are judged outstanding for their innovative and creative approaches to fighting domestic hunger and poverty by empowering people and building self-reliance. The grant will be used for the Intersn@ck café, which is an excellent model of such a self-reliant approach. The program exemplifies social change and self-reliance, two vital components to make our world a better place.

Abraham Paulos is the Communication and Technology Assistant at WHY. He may be contacted at Abraham@worldhungeryear.org.

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