

Final Turn

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MORE ANNA HOUSES *By Donna Chenkin*

Transformation of a dream often begins with acts of imagination that elevate a starting vision of change above the intimidating presence of things as they are. When the Belmont Child Care Association was incorporated in 1998, a child care center was just such a dream. Yet, if such a dream is passionate and clear, and if it can call a great many people into its service, the dream may ultimately shape the future.

We have seen the difference made when the Belmont Child Care Association and its supporters gave attention to creating an organizational culture of collaboration and excitement about growth and development. The Belmont Child Care Association has been able to create a community of supporters and has encouraged others into activism in support of our dream, which is today a reality, Anna House.

When we first opened our doors in January 2003, we had five children. Now we are filled to capacity with a waiting list. We are now able to ensure that the children of the Belmont and Aqueduct employees have an early childhood center that is safe and full of play, adventure, and investigation. The Belmont Child Care Association has helped create a community where adults and children experience a sense of connection and new possibilities.

Before Anna House was built, the children were usually left with older siblings, who would miss school, or with adults who were insufficiently prepared for this responsibility. The unique nature of the backstretch prevented the workers from using existing child care centers. Our parents start work before sunrise, and tend to the horses seven days a week. In addition, the employees could not afford the high cost of private child care.

How did this all come about? In 1998 a group of concerned horse owners, trainers, and racetrack employees had a strong desire to give back to those who make racing possible. This group, with the support of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, started the Belmont Child Care Association. Thanks to a chance meeting at a dinner party at Suzee and Jerry Bailey's house, a dream was to become a reality. At the

party was Michael Dubb, a Long Island developer and philanthropist, who overheard the conversation about the desire for a child care center at the track and offered his support. To use his words, "It became a passion for me." The New York Racing Association donated the land on which the 7,500-square-foot center was built. Horse owners Laura and Eugene Melnyk pledged \$1 million to the project. In appreciation, the center bears the name of their then 2-year-old daughter, Anna. A strong board of directors was relentless in its determination to succeed, and ground for Anna House was broken in April 2002, and the facility opened in January 2003.

Today, 50 children, ranging in age from six weeks to five years, are cared for at Anna House. Their day starts with a nutritious breakfast, followed by educational and fun-filled activities. The children go outside to the Lemon Drop Kid Playground, donated by the late Thoroughbred owner Jeanne Vance. At mid-morning, the children have a nap, and then a hot lunch. At 1 p.m., the parents return for the children who were well taken care of while their parents worked worry free.

Since June 2004, Anna House has graduated 35 preschoolers. They are now in the local elementary school districts and reports on their progress have been rewarding. Our children feel confident about their futures,

and are well prepared for their schooling.

We all know the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young child, for that is the time their character is being developed. If the children of our racing community are afforded the opportunity to develop their capacities to their fullest, if they are given the knowledge to understand the world and the wisdom to change it, then the prospects for their future are bright.

Across this great nation of ours there are many racetracks where other "Anna Houses" could be built for the children of backstretch workers. The local horsemen's associations and other interested organizations should join together to raise funds to build and sustain these early childhood education centers. The Belmont Child Care Association would be happy to share its experiences with any parties interested in improving the lives of the children of the people who work on the backstretches of the tracks. 🐾



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