

## Meet Cover Director Theadora de Soyza Miriam de Soyza Learning Center Inc. Bronx, New York

Sporting a bright pink swimsuit, Maria is held at the edge of the kiddie pool. She pulls back from the feel of water on her toes, rejecting this new sensation. But an hour later, she sits happily in the pool, splashing the water with eager hands, her face filled with delight. She just needed a little time and some gentle encouragement; she is a child with special needs. And her needs are being met here at the Miriam de Soyza Learning Center Inc. in the South Bronx, an early intervention program for children needing extra time and some special attention. Like the other children here, and their parents, she is encouraged to try new things, enjoy new experiences, and to connect with others, both adults and children.

“The heart of early intervention,” says Theadora de Soyza, founder and director of the program, “is the opportunity to change. Children who come here do change. There are dramatic stories of change, and also little ones. Parents see these changes in their children and it helps them see their children in new ways. This gives them support in their parenting, and it gives them hope. We believe that the changes that begin here will bring about changes in the community.”

“This program is an opportunity for these children to blossom,” says Dallas de Soyza who provides transportation for the children and direct support, “I take care of Ted so that she can take care of the children.”

When their daughter Miriam was born with Down syndrome in 1971, Theadora and Dallas asked doctors and social service providers, “Show us what to do. How should we care for our child?” They were told to treat her as any other child, but they knew she needed something more. The responses and advice they received was so insensitive, their experiences so harrowing, that they were driven to put an ad in the paper, bringing other parents and their children together. They became pioneers in early intervention in the Bronx, opening their first program, These Our Treasures. A program for infants and toddlers with special needs was something new; people wanted to

visit and see this new type of service. Most of the children had Down syndrome because this is often detected at birth, whereas many other disabilities surface as children grow older.

Theadora wrote a proposal and received her first \$21,000 developmental disabilities grant. She stayed with These Our Treasures until 1979 when she felt compelled to respond to appeals from the community of the South Bronx to provide these early intervention services for their children. The Learning Center lived in five different locations before settling in to the Morrisania Multi-Service Center where it is now.

Today she writes the grants and proposals that fund her entire program, which has an annual budget of \$1.2 million. The speech therapy, physical therapy, and psychological services that children receive, in addition to all services provided by the Learning Center, are free to parents. In addition to the five hour program for infants and toddlers, there are two afterschool programs, one for children in the program and one for schoolagers. “With proper care and early intervention a lot can be done for our children.”

Parents choose the Center from a list of programs serving children with differing abilities. The Center does not feel able to serve all abilities; they do not enroll children who are blind, deaf, or severely delayed. Most of the children have emotional problems, many were prenatally exposed to drugs, some have Down syndrome.

“I want these children to have new experiences; I want them to be active and explore their environment. So we take them swimming; older children in our afterschool program spend a week at Rocking Horse Ranch and have a wonderful time.”

There is also a parent component to the program. Parents are required to spend a certain amount of time in the Center with their children. On the day I visited, Angela’s mother talked softly about her children and

# *Cover Director*

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her life with nearby teachers, as she fed Angela, whose three year old brother played nearby. Parents find support here, relationships build through the time they spend together with other parents of children with special needs. Parents also participate in recreational activities, some with children and some without.

Home visits reinforce these linkages between home and school and offer children special and individual attention while parents see learning situations and activities demonstrated for their child's particular personality and needs.

Ratios must be kept low, three teachers for ten children, even lower for the babies. Staff tend to stay. They come with training in special education and find a supportive, rewarding environment for using their skills.

"I would like to run an integrated program, but licensing and funding make it difficult at this time," says Theadora. The Miriam de Soyza Learning Center exists to nurture and to foster the bonding of the family and child through providing the necessary support systems of a multi-sensory educational program for the child, training for parents at the center and at home, direction for parents to find additional services, family therapy, and just plain human empathy during stressful periods. We provide avenues of acceptance and love for these children and their families."

So how did Theadora get to the South Bronx? "I worked with Black and Hispanic children in Harlem and the South when I was in the convent, so I have a special love for these children. I wanted to work with tough teens, I guess because I was a tough teen, so for a while I worked with gangs on the Lower East Side." And now her commitment to children and families with special needs blossoms in the South Bronx, and the benefits of her labors of love extend far beyond the walls of the classrooms into the community.