

THE URBAN FAMILY CENTER

40 Years of Sheltering the Homeless

In 1972, a revolutionary and bold social experiment was launched on the Lower East Side. What emerged was Henry Street's Urban Family Center — one of the nation's first homeless family shelters. Still operating 40 years later, the Urban Family Center (UFC) model has proven the most effective solution to house homeless families in New York City and in cities across the country.

What distinguished the UFC was that families were housed in clean, self-contained apartments with kitchen facilities, and that social services were offered on site 24-hours a day to help families move into permanent housing. This is still true today.

In the early 1970s, New York City housed homeless families in welfare hotels — dirty, sordid places rife with crime, drugs and hopelessness. In addition to the high social cost — families were separated or whole families were crowded into a single room and children rarely attended school — the financial cost was high, as the city paid exorbitant fees to hotel owners.

Two events splashed the practice across the front page. In the first, a child died after falling down an elevator shaft in a welfare hotel on 79th Street. In the second, a welfare worker placed a family in the Waldorf Astoria to demonstrate that the money the city was spending on welfare hotel rooms could pay for a room at New York's premier luxury hotel.



Top: Throngs of Lower East Side residents lined the sidewalks for a glimpse of Princess Diana when she visited the Urban Family Center in 1989. Right: Danny Kronenfeld and Verona Middleton-Jeter in the courtyard of the Urban Family Center.

To quell the public uproar, Mayor John Lindsay demanded a solution. The city turned to Henry Street. Bertram Beck, Henry Street's Executive Director, immediately hired Danny Kronenfeld, an instructor at Columbia University School of Social Work, to head the project. In September 1971, using his own research, and ideas from Simeon Golar, head of the New York City Public Housing Authority (NYCHA), Kronenfeld completed *An Alternative to Welfare Hotels: A Plan for the Creation of a Temporary Family Residence*. The first tenants would move into the Urban

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Family Center just a year later. Kronenfeld moved in, too, as the director of the shelter, a position he held for 13 years until becoming Executive Director of Henry Street in 1985. Verona Middleton-Jeter, who succeeded Kronenfeld as Executive Director in 2002, was among the first live-in social workers when the UFC opened.

In the 1980s, when homelessness again hit the front pages, the UFC became the model for the shelter system established by New York City. It received international acclaim in 1989 when Princess Diana visited what she called one of the most effective programs for homeless families.

Today, the Urban Family Center (the first of Henry Street's four shelters) houses 82 families. Several staffers, including social workers, live in the buildings and provide the supportive services families need to receive benefits, get jobs and find permanent housing. They help families enroll children in local schools and connect them to all the services offered by Henry Street — youth programs, health care, job training and more.



Theresa Kehoe, holding her youngest brother in 1975, on the Williamsburg Bridge.



then...

In 1974, 12-year-old Theresa Kehoe was living on the streets in New York City with her brothers and parents until the family found sanctuary at the Urban Family Center. She recalls the help her family received, activities like art club and chorus, and the friends she made. After the family moved to her mother's native England, Ms. Kehoe lived there for 33 years, married and had a son. She recently moved back to the United States and reconnected with her UFC social worker — Verona Middleton-Jeter, who went on to become Henry Street's Executive Director.

and now...

When Shakima Antonetty moved into the Urban Family Center in March 2011, her apprehension was assuaged the moment she arrived. "I just had a good feeling. The environment was peaceful," said Ms. Antonetty. The mother of two daughters, Tahjanay, 8, and Tahliyah, 2, found sanctuary at the shelter — and much more. "They helped me find child care and a job as a customer service representative for an insurance company," she said. Best of all, on the day the picture (below) was taken, she moved out of the shelter to a home of her own.



Shakima Antonetty, with daughters Tahjanay and Tahliyah, on her last day at the Urban Family Center.

