

# URBAN FAMILY CENTER

## 50 Years of Caring for Our Community



In 1972, more than 8,000 families were homeless in New York City—a number that had quadrupled in just a few years. At the time, the city’s response to this housing crisis was to put up families in “welfare hotels”—notoriously cramped, dirty, and unsafe quarters that did little to help children thrive.

Henry Street Settlement’s Urban Family Center was the nation’s first apartment-style transitional shelter with onsite social services. It is located at the former site of the Lavanburg Homes, a six-story alternative to tenement housing built in 1927 for low-income families.

Today, 82 families, living in their own apartments, receive extensive social support, helping them find permanent housing as well as access to Henry Street’s services from employment to mental health care to summer camp. UFC has helped more than 6,000 families find permanent homes.

### Our History

In the early 1970s, Henry Street Settlement recruited Danny Kronenfeld, a social worker and instructor at Columbia School of Social Work, to design a new shelter model—one that promoted families’ dignity and independence. The Urban Family Center would consist of individual apartments where families could get back on their feet. Henry Street’s director, Bertram Beck, then hired Kronenfeld as a live-in social worker at the center, where he stayed for 13 years, raising his own children at the site.



Photo: C. Suddarth Kelly, 1992

Since then, UFC has continued to innovate, creating a resident-led self-help group for women who had survived domestic violence, developing onsite employment opportunities and a training program for workers in other shelters, and hiring employment counselors. Its onsite, live-in workers conduct intakes 24 hours a day, ensuring that families suddenly displaced do not have to wait in dingy, bureaucratic holding areas.

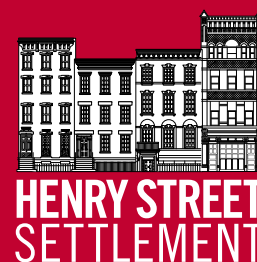
In 2018, Kronenfeld (who died the following year) recalled, “We were... a real collective, in that we met every day to try to figure out the best way of helping a family live a more stable life than what they had come from.”

When Kronenfeld became executive director of the Settlement in 1985, Verona Middleton-Jeter, long a social worker at the Urban Family Center, became director. In the 1980s, issues shifted; more families were facing homelessness due to gentrification and eviction. The center’s model attracted visitors that included Princess Diana, and Middleton-Jeter helped adapt the model for the larger New York City shelter system. UFC continues to nurture families’ strengths with a full complement of social services, including the Crespi-Robert Connectivity Lounge to help people in their job searches and an aftercare program for former residents. Youth programming to ensure normalcy for young residents, from afterschool homework support to a Girl Scout troop, has always been a priority.

“UFC was the model,” says Geniria Armstrong, who became program director in 2002 and later vice president for Transitional & Supportive Housing. “We prided ourselves on treating the people we serve with respect and dignity and providing crisis services in the moment.”



Photo: Marc Goldberg, 2021



# A Place of Innovation

Urban Family Center was the first family shelter of its kind in the United States. But that is not where its innovations ended. The center has evolved continually to meet the needs of its residents.

## Residents Form a Self-Help Group

During the late 1970s, the number of residents who had survived interpersonal violence began to grow. Director Verona Middleton-Jeter thought it would be beneficial to have a support group for those moving out of the shelter and into permanent housing. “It was a tough transition,” says Middleton-Jeter’s successor, Geniria Armstrong. “You got a small allotment from public assistance to set up a home, but it wasn’t enough.” The support group, made up of shelter residents, gave each family a starter kit for their new apartments. With a grant, Henry Street was able to hire members of the original support group, who were trained to stay on and serve as peer supporters.

## Men’s Group Is Formed

During the 1980s, a men’s group at UFC met regularly. On Saturdays and Sundays, while the police blocked off Baruch Place and children played in the street, fathers made sure the cars stayed out. It was a joyful setting, with children eating icees and chips, jumping rope, and playing basketball.



The Crespi-Robert Connectivity Lounge helps residents find employment.

## Youth Services Promote Children’s Wellbeing

UFC’s Youth Services program works to ensure young residents’ right to thrive and experience joy during what can be a challenging time in a family’s life. Team members provide homework help, discussion groups, and an onsite Girl Scout chapter, among many other services.

## Hand Mailers Project Provides Job Training

In 1987, UFC opened the Henry Street Hand Mailers project, employing 45 Urban Family Center shelter residents each year to operate a fast-paced bulk-mail business. Residents earned money, and with the job training they received, many were able to gain permanent work. The program, with a small staff, ran for at least 10 years, until changes in mail sorting practices rendered the business unprofitable.



Photo: Ken Wittenberg, 1996

## Live-in Workers Are Key to UFC Philosophy

UFC was the first shelter to provide 24-hour crisis services. “The thought,” says Geniria Armstrong, “was that if someone is having a crisis—say an intra-family fight or an apartment flood—you can resolve it in a timely manner.” The live-in workers—one for each of UFC’s five buildings—do much more: they ensure that families may be taken in to the shelter any time of the day or night, avoiding a night in a bureaucratic office or a congregate shelter.

**1977**  
UFC begins providing specific services for survivors of domestic violence.

**1985**  
UFC social worker Verona Middleton-Jeter becomes director.

**1987**  
The Henry Street Hand Mailers project employs residents to operate a bulk-mail business.

**1991**  
Helen’s House opens for homeless mothers with young children.

**2002**  
UFC social worker Geniria Armstrong becomes program director.

**2007**  
Henry Street opens a supportive housing residence.

**2015**  
Henry Street begins aftercare initiative, following families for two years post-homelessness.

**2020**  
Princess Diana’s visit to UFC is reenacted on the Netflix series *The Crown*.

**1972**  
Settlement director Bertram Beck hires social worker Danny Kronenfeld to start the Urban Family Center (UFC), the nation’s first apartment-style, temporary housing with onsite social services for families.

**1986**  
The Shelter Management Training Program promotes UFC as a model for New York City shelters.

**1989**  
Princess Diana visits UFC to bring awareness to issues of homelessness and domestic violence.

**1997**  
Henry Street assumes operation of the Third Street Women’s Shelter.

**2003**  
Henry Street’s Workforce Development Center, which in part grew out of UFC’s employment services for residents, opens at 99 Essex Street.

**2012**  
Hurricane Sandy leaves UFC flooded and without power or heat. Some 108 families are evacuated. Henry Street employees continue working with families at their evacuation sites.

**2019**  
Social worker Raihana Bosse becomes UFC program director.

# A Place of Change

The residents of Urban Family Center have been uniquely affected by cataclysmic changes that have affected our larger society, and New York City in particular.

The largest societal shift has been the lack of affordable housing as New York City has become an extremely expensive place to live. Traditionally, housing specialists at UFC, working together with the New York City Housing Authority, helped many residents get expedited certification to live in public housing. Today, wait times for NYCHA apartments are long.

Residents leaving UFC often find housing outside of Manhattan, with apartments in Staten Island and the Bronx becoming the primary options.

## Facing Emergencies: From Hurricane Sandy...

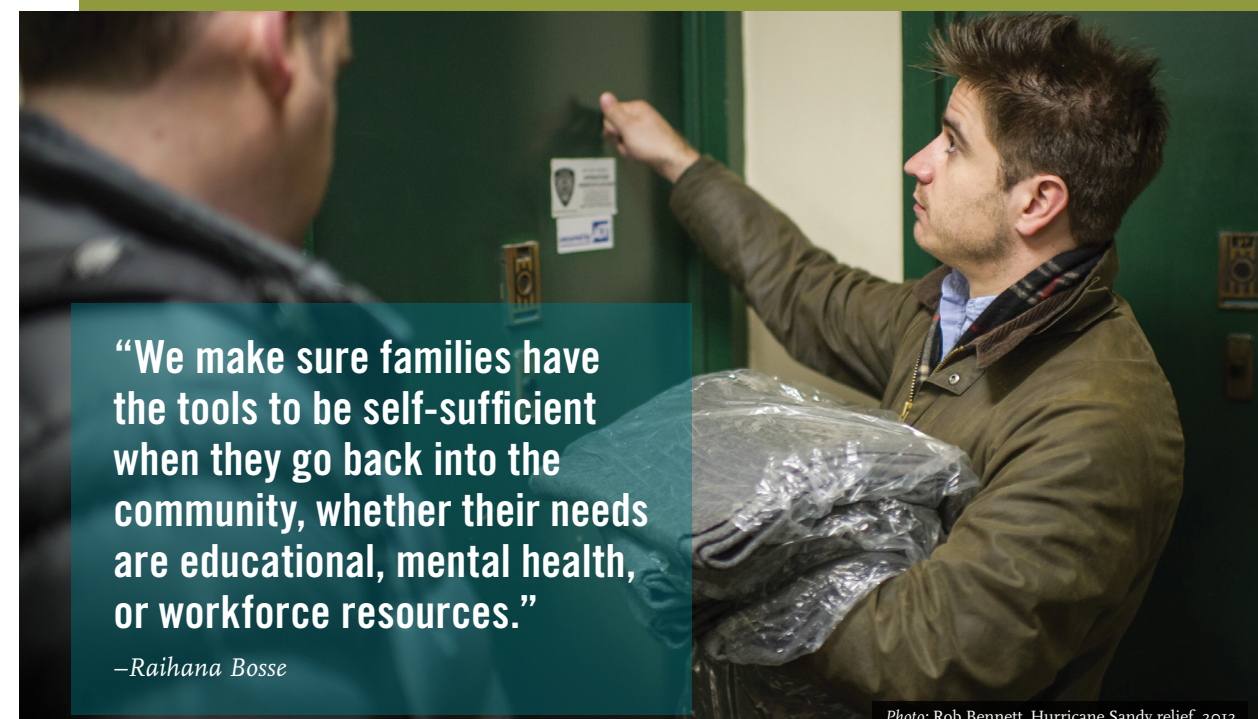
On October 28, 2012, Henry Street received a warning to clear the shelter: a severe hurricane was headed straight for lower Manhattan. Residents were transported by school bus to a public school that was serving as an evacuation center in Midtown. Those who could stay with a relative or friend were encouraged to do so.

Hurricane Sandy was “devastating,” Geniria Armstrong says, filling the UFC basement with water and damaging the first floor. A handful of staff worked in the dark to figure out how to get the lights back on, while the rest of the staff went to the evacuation center to provide services there. At the same time, Henry Street distributed more than 20,000 meals and thousands of bottles of water and blankets to Lower East Side neighbors and opened the Senior Center as a designated city warming site. It took a week for the electricity to resume at UFC. Construction to protect the buildings from water surges is still ongoing.

## ...to COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns struck, UFC team members switched gears overnight. For months, they provided three meals a day to residents, ensuring that they could stay home and stay safe. They worked tirelessly with New York City public schools and teachers to make sure children had the technology they needed to attend school remotely. And, they have continued to keep residents up to date with information on testing and vaccination.

“Urban Family at that time was almost like a laboratory. Henry Street allowed us to try different things, because no one had ever done it. We couldn’t pull up an article or call another shelter director... That helped us develop a more humane approach to working with families.” —Verona Middleton-Jeter



“We make sure families have the tools to be self-sufficient when they go back into the community, whether their needs are educational, mental health, or workforce resources.”

—Raihana Bosse

Photo: Rob Bennett, Hurricane Sandy relief, 2012

“We wanted to make sure that the help [families] received was respectful and mindful that yes, you were in crisis, but you also had strength.”

—Verona Middleton-Jeter



Photo: Bonnie Hildebrand, 1972



Aftercare Program, 2022



Photo: Ken Wittenberg, 1996

**“People walk through our doors broken, at their lowest point, and they leave on solid ground. The fact that they have come here is a strength, and we say, let’s build on that. Let’s talk about your dreams and see how far we can get while you’re here.”** *–Raihana Bosse, UFC Program Director*

## UFC Leadership



**Danny Kronenfeld**  
(1972-1985)



**Verona Middleton-Jeter**  
(1985-2002)



**Geniria Armstrong**  
(2002-2021)



**Raihana Bosse**  
(2019- )

Urban Family Center  
Domestic Violence Survivors Shelter  
Helen’s House

**Henry Street Transitional & Supportive Housing Residences**

East Third Street Women’s Residence  
East Third Supportive Housing  
Stanton Street Houses



Henry Street Settlement | 265 Henry Street | New York, NY 10002