

## What's Working for Kids

### Building on Assets: Steans Family Foundation

By Julie Parente



**T**he North Lawndale community faces challenges familiar to many Chicago neighborhoods: high unemployment, low family income, run-down housing, crime. But the community has seen signs of revitalization in recent years. There is new housing, a new shopping center, four new early childhood centers and new community networks working to address local problems.

Some of these improvements have been spurred by the support of the Steans Family Foundation, which has been working closely with North Lawndale residents and service providers for eight years. The foundation partners with the community to build on its strengths and put in place the necessary infrastructure to provide all residents with a better quality of life.

“We try to build the capacity of the community,” Executive Director Reginald Jones said. “It’s working to strengthen the current infrastructure and, where there are voids, to build the proper organizational structures and community structures to make positive change.”

Relationships form the heart of the foundation’s work. “We say we never lead with money,” Associate Executive Director Susan Munro said. “It’s much larger than grant making. We’re out in the neighborhood. A lot of what I do is introduce people to one another. People learn about others doing similar work so they can collaborate.”

The foundation started small by funding quality-of-life projects of \$250 to \$2,500 each—block parties, gardens, youth employment initiatives, clean-up days. Grantees were chosen by a review board made up of fellow residents. In 2002, the initiative became its own non-profit organization, the North Lawndale Small Grants Human Development Corp.

Other projects supported by the foundation include:

- Save Up! Individual Development Account Program that encourages residents to save money for home ownership and post-secondary education.
- Educational reform initiatives such as professional development of teachers and principals, tutoring and youth leadership programs.
- Early childhood programs that meet the child care, medical and mental health needs of young children and their families.
- Housing and economic development efforts to provide affordable housing and job training.
- Individual and organizational capacity building that provides management and leadership training opportunities.

Grantees are encouraged to partner with others in the community to receive funding. For example, an effort to increase the availability of quality early childhood options involved the Carole Robertson Center for Learning,

Lawndale Christian Development Corp., The Resurrection Project and the Illinois Facilities Fund. As a result, the Jubilee Family Development Center was built and the Carole Robertson Center for Learning doubled the size and capacity of its other North Lawndale site.

“(The foundation is) part of everything, part of the fabric of the community,” said Gail Nelson, executive director of the Carole Robertson Center. “They came in with a community focus and

listened to the community before rolling things out. ... We were a segmented community, doing our own thing. They really created the conditions under which we were able to build and sustain relationships. It’s had a huge community impact.”

Jones said it’s important to address needs by building on existing community assets and connecting to external resources that can provide additional support.

“It’s like the old saying—it takes a village,” he said. “Everyone has a role—parents, neighbors, teachers, community leaders and the faith sector—in fostering positive community change.”

*For more information, contact the Steans Family Foundation at 312-467-5900 or [www.steansfamilyfoundation.org](http://www.steansfamilyfoundation.org).*



Young children get creative at the Jubilee Family Resource Center.