

Puerto Rican Family Institute celebrates 50 yrs. of help to thousands

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Originally Published: Tuesday, June 8th 2010, 5:30 PM

Updated: Wednesday, June 9th 2010, 9:21 AM



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Maria Elena Girone, president of The Puerto Rican Family Institute, is the "civic godmother" of the Puerto Rican Day parade.

Yanira Cruz expertly burped one of her 3-month-old twins as the baby's sister, in a matching yellow Pooh jacket, watched with big brown eyes from a double stroller.

Balancing the care of twins is just one thing Cruz learned at the Puerto Rican Family Institute, which helps 50,000 people each year and celebrates 50 years this month.

As part of the anniversary, the institute's president, Maria Elena Girone, has been named "civic godmother" of Sunday's National Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Last week, the institute hosted a gala at The Plaza hotel, and the group's members are bringing banners to places in each borough, such as community colleges, with photos and details from programs the organization offers.

"We want to bring the Puerto Rican Family Institute to every corner of heavily populated areas of New York City, so that they know where to go when they have problems, when they need something for their children," Girone said.

Since its founding in 1960, the institute has stuck to a



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Yanira Cruz, left, picks up child-care tips for her twins, Yaimar (l.) and Yariana, from Michelle Pomerantz (r.), a family case planner at the Puerto Rican Family Institute.

mission of keeping families together. Fifty years ago, the group had 15 employees and a \$250,000 budget. Now, nearly 600 employees operate in offices around the city, and the group's budget exceeds \$60 million.

In Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, the institute's programs include a mental-health clinic, case management services and foster care prevention programs.

"It's like a chameleon that changes according to changes in the city," Girone said.

The group's founders, 20 social workers concerned about city services for Latinos, wanted to keep children with their parents. Handling matters from counseling to money, the group tries to be the glue that strengthens families, particularly when children are at risk of being taken from parents and put into foster care.

Now, Girone said, a newer focus is early childhood education. The group operates Head Start programs in Williamsburg and Bushwick, Brooklyn, to nudge children ages 3 to 5 toward absorbing and learning.

The Head Start programs are one reason that donors like the Panasonic Corp. of North America support the institute.

Penny Joseph, director of Panasonic's corporate outreach programs, said the company has supported the institute for more than a decade, drawn to the way it pours donations directly into helping Latino families.

"What makes them wonderful and unique is a very high percent of the money goes back into their programs and services," Joseph said.

Institute Head Start programs are also available in three cities in Puerto Rico. Knowing the community, both on the island and in New York, allows the institute to better serve the population, Girone said.

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