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Subject of My Heart: Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program

INTRODUCTION BY MARC FREEDMAN

INNOVATIONS profiles the work of creative organizations that engage older Americans in new and compelling ways to revitalize their communities. The series — part of the documentary project REINVENTING AGE — is published by Civic Ventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the aging of America into a source of individual and social renewal.

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*Subject of My Heart: Rainbow
Intergenerational Child Care Program*

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We want to thank the teachers, staff, and children at Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Center, especially Cecilia Hunt and Lilia Barreda, for allowing us to spend so much time in their busy space. Many thanks to Ariela Rodriguez, Linda Albe, Jose Pita, and Ramon Perez-Dorrbecker for their help. We also are grateful to Dolores Delgado for her patient translation and helpful insights.

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Here is a story of Cuban-born refugees—all older women—who speak little English, and live and work in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Miami. Much about American culture is foreign to them. Yet these women have a lot to teach us about work in later life and our outdated notions of aging in this country.

They are teachers at the Rainbow Inter-generational Child Care Center, established some 14 years ago to help working poor families in Miami's Little Havana. The women work hard to create something beyond a place for good care and early childhood education. They want the children—who often spend most of their waking hours at Rainbow—to have a sense of home, a feeling of family.

The women work part time and earn a small income, but the money is only one piece of what motivates them to show up week after week. They love the children, they thrive on connecting with each other, and they appreciate remaining engaged in something of real value to their community.

These strong sentiments echo what a much wider swath of aging Americans are now saying about their own expectations for retirement. As the country prepares for more than 76 million baby boomers to move into the next chapter in their lives—one that essentially constitutes a new stage between midlife and old age—research consistently reveals that people are planning to continue working in some form well after they exit their midlife careers.

To be sure, some will want to remain in the jobs they've occupied for years, but many more say they are looking for something different in this new stage: They want greater flexibility, more sane hours, and a kind of meaning that often eluded them earlier. In short, while the money will most likely come in handy, they want to work for reasons extending far beyond the economics. Along with a sense of purpose, these individuals say they are looking for “purposeful relationships,” the experience of coming together with others to accomplish work that's important and satisfying.

This new vision of work in later life is a hybrid living somewhere between the demands of a full-time midlife career and the avocation of volunteerism. It is an impulse that affords opportunities not only for enhancing later life and individual fulfillment, but also for helping to stem the devastating human resource shortages that have opened up across much of the social services and education sectors. The Rainbow Child Care Center is a concrete example of how this can happen successfully: meeting a pressing community need for stable, well-trained child care workers while providing a sense of renewal for the workers themselves.

The story of these teachers and their “Rainbow kids” unfolds in the fifth installment of Innovations. This ongoing series by some of America's foremost photographers, writers, and radio producers is designed to bring to life, and to light, the work of creative organizations with the potential to reshape what it means to grow older in this country—to help transform the aging of America into a new source of civic renewal.

—Marc Freedman

Subject of My Heart

Essay by Rob Gurmitt | Photographs by Alex Harris

BY ABOUT 8:45 ON WEEKDAY MORNINGS, MOST OF the kids who go to the Rainbow Child Care Center in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood are in their places for the day's warm-up. They stand in two loose circles – the 2- and 3-year-olds at one end of the center's space, the 4- and 5-year-olds at the other – while Lilia Barreda, the head teacher, calls out, "Good morning, everybody!"

"Good morning, Teacher!" they respond.

"How are you?" Lilia calls.

"Fine, thank you. And you?"

They all sing, "Good morning to you, good morning to you. . ." and when this ends, Lilia turns on a tape that launches them into the "Pledge of Allegiance" – for which the younger kids mostly place their right hands over their bellies – and a short account of the Golden Rule. A danceable version of "Make Good Friends and Keep the Old" follows, then Alvin and the Chipmunks' bouncy "Heads, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes," before the tape winds up with a relentlessly cheery "Hokey Pokey." The teachers gamely stick their arms, feet, and other body parts out and in, but the kids mostly stand in place, wildly swinging their arms back and forth.

There is something endearing about this plunge into romper room Americana. For one thing, it's about the only English you'll hear at Rainbow. The teachers speak Spanish, which is the sole language most of them know; some of

the kids are bilingual, but while they're at Rainbow, they use Spanish, too. More strikingly, the whole 15-minute warm-up routine springs from a culture that is foreign to pretty much everyone in the room. The kids are the children of Cuban, Central American, and South American immigrants, working men and women who are scrabbling for a toehold in the south Florida economy. The teachers, all of them, are Cuban-born refugees, women in their 50s, 60s, and 70s, who have taken on the job of preparing their young charges to navigate a society they themselves feel about as comfortable in as they do singing, "You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around" every morning.

Yet it works. Partly, this is because good child care is good child care, no matter what language it occurs in. Like many other child care programs, Rainbow's provides a mix of day care – a place for parents to be sure their children are safe and cared for while they're off working – and early childhood education. Kids there learn what books and reading are; they can tell you about the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, the pilgrims, and the Fourth of July; they learn numbers, shapes, and colors; they develop fine-motor skills with art projects, and do "gross-motor" activities out on the playground. They get subsidized breakfasts, lunches, and snacks, and for two hours every day, they nap. In its curriculum and its daily activities, in other words, Rainbow looks a lot like any other well-ordered child care center in the country.

“I have zero staff turnover. Is there a child care center in the country that can say they have zero turnover? They transform this center into their personal life place.”

Where it differs is in its teachers. None of them set out to make child care their career. Some spent decades teaching elementary school in Cuba; others are retired seamstresses or sales clerks. They are all of an age when the sheer brute labor of spending the day with energetic young children would seem to hold little appeal, especially for the \$6 or \$7 an hour they get paid. Yet they don't leave. “I have zero staff turnover,” says Cecilia Hunt, Rainbow's director. “Is there a child care center in the country that can say they have zero turnover? They transform this center into their personal life place.” Indeed, they bring to their work not just the calm and patience you'd expect from older people, but a boundless, steadying emotional warmth. They are, in a way, these children's grandmothers.

They are not perfect at it. There are tussles over toy cars that go unnoticed, and clean-up sessions during which blocks spend more time flying through the air

than necessary. They don't always have the close rapport with parents at drop-off or pick-up that younger staff might develop. Yet, says Cecilia Hunt, “I would never change this arrangement for younger people. There is a certain way of looking at kids. One is a ‘professional’ way, with kids ‘as the subject of my interest.’ The other way is with kids ‘as the subject of my heart.’ That's what these older teachers have.” They know the children who are struggling, and make an extra effort to hug them throughout the day, or rub their backs if they seem unsettled, or take them onto their sheltering laps. They know the boy whose parents wake him up every morning at 5 because they have a long way to drive, and when he starts to flag at 11 a.m. they make sure he's got quiet space to himself. They know that many of these kids get scant time with their parents—maybe an hour before drop-off, which can be as early as 7 a.m., and a couple of hours after pick-up, which can be as late as 6 in the evening—and they do their best to make up for it. “They spend all day here,” says Julia Perez, one of the teachers, speaking of Rainbow's children. “They need to feel like they're in a family.”

THERE ARE, ACTUALLY, TWO RAINBOW INTERGENERATIONAL Child Care Centers. The one in Little Havana has about 40 kids, in a semi-divided space that isn't exactly cramped, but certainly makes use of every inch it has available. The other is across the Causeway in Miami Beach, in a cavernous old city rec center. The 60 kids

there are more ethnically mixed than those in Little Havana, reflecting the international diversity of the housekeepers who clean Miami Beach's many hotels.

Both centers are run by Cecilia Hunt, who in turn works for an organization known as the Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers of Dade County. The Little Havana Rainbow Center is housed, somewhat incongruously, behind the chain-link fence that guards LHANC's overcrowded parking lot.



Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program

The Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program serves more than 100 young children, many from working poor families, in two areas of Florida's Dade County. Since the program's beginning 14 years ago, the employees have been women in their 50s or older who earn a small income and typically work four-hour shifts. Rainbow offers care and early childhood education from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. each weekday. The child care centers, part of a much larger nonprofit, community-based organization, are located in Little Havana and Miami Beach buildings that also house senior centers.

The Rainbow program has been recognized with numerous awards for excellence and was a 1998 semifinalist for the distinguished Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Getting Started

The Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program started in December 1988 when the doors opened on a center in Miami's Little Havana, a community comprised largely of Cuban immigrants. Less than four years later, a second center was opened in Miami Beach. The Rainbow Centers are part of the Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers of Dade County, Inc. (LHANC), a community-based nonprofit with services that otherwise focus mainly on older adults. Both child care centers share a building with a senior center: LHANC operates the senior center in Little Havana, while Jewish Community Services of South Florida runs senior services in the Miami Beach building.

The Little Havana Rainbow Center was established after LHANC staff noticed many older adults bringing their grandchildren along as they socialized over lunch at the senior center. Under the Older Americans Act, however, the organization was supposed to be using federal dollars to provide meals only for seniors. This, along with the recognition that

the grandparents didn't have a place they felt comfortable leaving the children, prompted Josefina Carbonell, the organization's president at the time, to create an on-site child care option. From the start, LHANC staff hired older women to work with the children.

When it first opened, the Little Havana Rainbow Center drew children who often came to the senior center with their grandparents, but this changed over time to include a broader group of young children from the community. The children are cared for at Rainbow from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. five days a week; this includes three meals a day and early childhood education.

The Little Havana center teachers—all of them Cuban immigrants—and the children share Spanish as their first language. Most of their daily interactions are in Spanish, although teachers use English for literacy activities with the 4- and 5-year-olds. Drawing much from their own Cuban background, the teachers incorporate traditional songs, foods, and celebrations into the everyday routine of the center.

With senior services in the same building as the Rainbow Center, both the children and the older adults benefit from intergenerational activities planned around most holidays and other special occasions, such as the children's graduation to elementary school.

The decision to have uniforms for the teachers and the children also distinguishes the Rainbow program. The women at the Little Havana center requested uniforms, something they were accustomed to seeing in their native Cuba. Uniforms on the children help to "even things out," says Rainbow Program Director Cecilia Hunt, and avoid competition among families from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The uniforms make the women and children easily recognizable to those visiting the Little Havana senior center, as well.

Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers of Dade County

LHANC started in 1972 as a single senior center serving hot lunch. In the 1960s, elderly Cubans and their families began arriving in South Florida in huge numbers. Their adult children found work, and the elders, who spoke no English, were isolated at home during the day. LHANC was founded to provide these older adults a way to access resources and meet other Spanish-speaking elders in their community. The steady rise in Cuban immigrants continued in the 1970s,

and LHANC began expanding to serve the increasing needs in the community.

The organization—headed for many years by Josefina Carbonell, now the Assistant Secretary for Aging in the Department of Health and Human Services—has grown to 19 centers that serve the health, nutritional, and social service needs for thousands of South Florida older adults. For those who need it, LHANC provides rides to and from the centers, using a fleet of vans and buses to meet people at their homes throughout Dade County.

LHANC's 14 senior centers offer a broad range of services: They have breakfast and lunch, counseling, U.S. citizenship and English language classes, emergency funding for utility bills, and a full complement of health services, including preventive screenings and classes. Members enjoy dancing, bingo, dominoes, or other social activities at the centers. LHANC also has some programs for adults of any age, including help finding employment and pro bono legal assistance and immigration services. For those who have difficulty getting out to a center, the organization has a home-delivered meal program, home health aides, and others to help with housework and errands. This is particularly important, for example, to Cuban immigrants who settled in Little Havana and want to remain in the neighborhood even as their children are moving to suburbs outside Miami.

In addition to the senior centers, LHANC runs three adult day care centers for those who cannot care for themselves at home. This allows caregivers—typically other family members—to work full time while the elders are at the center.

The two Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Centers round out LHANC's services. The organization's administrators, including President Ramon Perez-Dorrbecker, have offices in the Little Havana building, along with the senior services and the Rainbow Center.

More than 500 people volunteer with LHANC. They might serve or deliver meals, assist with adult day care, or run social activities. The centers also employ many older adults as social workers and case managers, with responsibilities such as connecting people with appropriate services and translating legal documents. LHANC staff have found that those who walk through the doors usually feel more comfortable with the older adult case workers than they do accepting help from younger staff.

In 2001, LHANC served more than 54,000 people. Anyone 60 or older living in Dade County can become a member; social workers assess each person to determine individual needs for services. Most members are living below the poverty level; a majority are Cuban-born, but LHANC also serves a diverse South Florida population, including many Central and South American immigrants, and African-Americans.

Staffing and Operations

The Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program has one administrative staff member: In her role as full-time program director, Cecilia Hunt has worked with the child care centers for more than 10 years.

Hunt believes the key to the program's success—and something that sets it apart from most other child care centers—is hiring older women to work with the children. Most of the women are permanent part-time employees of LHANC who work four hours a day during one of three shifts and earn \$6 or \$7 an hour. The head teachers work full time and make about \$8 an hour. According to Hunt, staff turnover and absence are rare, and when someone is off work, another part-time teacher usually covers her shifts. The official teacher-to-child ratio is 1-to-8 for 2- and 3-year-olds and 1-to-10 for the older children, although overlapping shifts often increase the number of available teachers.

The Rainbow employees come to work every week for far more than the small wage they earn, says Hunt: They enjoy relating with each other, they love the children, and they appreciate staying engaged in their community.

The women all have the required training and certification for their specific roles at the child care center. Rainbow has

arranged for some group trainings, but most new employees now seek classes at local schools. In addition to initial certification, the child care workers are required to attend annual in-service training, ranging from 12 hours to 40 hours depending on their previous training and role at the center. Rainbow's director runs in-service trainings during the children's nap time and occasionally on Saturdays. Topics include a wide range of subjects: from first aid, nutrition, and AIDS in children to brain development and the effects of domestic violence.

The child care workers care for more than 100 children, mostly from working poor families. Families pay based on their income, from \$4 to \$60 a week. The Rainbow program has a contract with Dade County Child Development Services to place children from low-income families in the first available spaces; the agency covers much of the cost for their care.

Families wait up to two years to get a child placed at the Miami Beach center, which has capped its waiting list at 200. Little Havana has more child care options in the community, both licensed and informal, so children may wait only six months or less to start at the Rainbow Center there.

Both families and potential employees most often learn about Rainbow through word of mouth and general knowledge of LHANC services. The program also

hires older women through the Federal Senior Employment Program, which places seniors in jobs in their community and pays a stipend for their on-the-job training. This year four women in each Rainbow Center work 20 hours a week through the employment program. The director screens these employees for one year before deciding whether to hire them permanently.

Rainbow teachers have always been women in their 50s or older. Currently, the youngest staff member is 60 and the oldest is 78. The Little Havana center has 14 Cuban-born teachers, and Miami Beach has 19 from diverse backgrounds. Before joining Rainbow, some were retired teachers or factory workers, others had never worked outside their home. Many have grandchildren of their own. Some are married, some widowed, and others have never married.

The "Rainbow kids" range in age from 2 to 5. In Little Havana, the 44 children are Cuban, South American, or Central American; all speak Spanish, and some are bilingual. The Miami Beach center has a racially and ethnically mixed population of 60 children.

Costs and Funding

The annual operating budget for the Rainbow Intergenerational Child Care Program is \$415,000, which covers the costs for both the Little Havana and

Miami Beach centers. Approximately two-thirds of the budget funds personnel costs for the program. The remaining funds are budgeted as follows: 14 percent for food, 10 percent for administration, 5 percent for supplies, and another 5 percent for transportation, repairs and maintenance, utilities, and other miscellaneous costs.

According to Hunt, the decision to hire older women, mostly part time, means that the Rainbow program is generally less expensive to run than other child care centers. Only the few full-time staff members receive medical benefits, and little funding is needed for substitutes since the part-time employees step in when others are absent.

Federal, state, and local funding, as well as fees that families pay and a small percentage from private sources, support the Rainbow Centers. Specifically, much of Rainbow's food costs are reimbursed through a federal child nutrition program. The program also receives fees from the county's Child Development Services for children eligible for the support—currently about one-third of those participating at Rainbow. A community development block grant to Rainbow subsidizes scholarships for eligible families at the Miami Beach child care center.

Funding designated for the Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers through the Older Americans Act is not available to cover Rainbow program costs.

Expansion

In 2003, the building that houses the Miami Beach child care center will undergo major renovations. LHANC is relocating the Rainbow Center during the one-year project, which will include plumbing and electrical work along with other needed changes to the child care facility.

Staff have explored the possibility of opening child care centers near other LHANC senior centers, such as Hialeah and Westchester. The major challenge, Hunt says, is securing initial capital—particularly appropriate space and basic equipment—to establish new centers. For now, any expansion plans are on hold while they temporarily relocate the Miami Beach center and complete the renovation project.

Reading

Elaine De Valle, "S. Florida woman picked for U.S. job: Elder advocate Josefina Carbonell is to be nominated assistant secretary of health and human services," *The Miami Herald*, June 8, 2001.

Shari Rudavsky, "Day Care Trend: Age and Youth," *The Miami Herald*, June 28, 1998.

Diana A. Terry-Azios, "Easing Childcare Woes: Bicultural daycare centers help Latinas juggle parenthood and work," *Hispanic Magazine*, Dec. 1, 2000.

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