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## **FOR PROJECT JOY YOUNGSTERS, VALUES ARE IN THE PLAYING**

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CAMBRIDGE -- Her decision was made in the middle of the night, right after bullets tore through her Dorchester apartment, missing her sleeping children by inches. Gang violence had finally reached her home, and, as Lucille Blidgen saw it, moving out was the only solution.

But even the best of solutions can create the worst of problems. In Blidgen's case, she had little money, was responsible for her three children and her sister's two, and finally ended up in a Cambridge homeless shelter, where she would stay for the next 18 months.

In the meantime, she said, she was "trying to get herself together" by going to school and working as a hairdresser.

The four oldest children were in school, and had a place to go during the day. But the youngest, Azhadique, (Arabic for "leader of peace") was two years old, and required day care.

The Salvation Army had day care at the shelter, but life was still not clicking for Azhadique, his fragile equilibrium rattled by bullets, his home life rocked by instability. "He was shy and introverted," Blidgen recalled. "He kind of stayed to himself a lot."

Then one day, Blidgen said, she saw her son run to a man in Central Square.

"My son was just smiling, and you could tell that he really loved that man, but I was thinking, 'Who is this grown man hugging on my son?' "

The man was Steve Gross.

Gross runs a program called Project Joy, which was started in 1989. Project Joy provides poor, often homeless children, between the ages of one and five, an hour-long period in a gym, where they learn old-fashioned values -- things like sharing space, cooperating with adults, helping others.

The brilliance of the program lies in its simplicity, Gross said: Children can and do learn while playing.

The program also involves the parents and tries to strengthen family bonds by increasing adult participation.

The combination worked for Blidgen. She immediately volunteered to help Gross after they met in Central Square and worked her way up to become a counselor.

He helped her enroll in development classes at Bunker Hill College. She also noticed a gradual change in her son.

"He was becoming more outgoing and talkative," she said. "He always loved being around people, but he really started talking more and being more expressive. As far as I'm concerned, Steve Gross is our guardian angel."

Gross, 29, is a likable fellow. He is short and stocky, and has a boyish face that masks his unwavering determination to help children be children.

"Many of our children come into our program not having much experience playing, exploring, laughing, and simply being a child," Gross said.

"I wanted to create a program that would establish a foundation for self-worth in the most vulnerable of children."

Gross has a way with children. He discovered that, oddly enough, while studying business at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

He coached junior high and high school kids in basketball and found greater fulfillment dealing with inner-city children than learning basic accounting principles.

He was a consultant with the Newton-based Better Homes Foundation and helped develop a program that used physical play as a way to encourage children to work in a group setting and overcome their fears.

That pilot program turned into Project Joy. Nowadays Gross sees about 175 children a week, which he believes is a tiny fraction of the number of children in need of such a program.

The children often come from battered women's shelters or welfare hotels and participate in, for example, a Head Start program.

Gross said that his program works in conjunction with others. "We want to be the best at what we do," Gross said. "It's almost impossible for any one group to take care of all of the needs of these children, and if we can just take one part of that, it makes everyone's life easier."

A visit to last week offered some evidence. Undaunted by the first snow, eight children came to the Cambridge YWCA by a bus provided by Cambridge Head Start.

Their trip to Project Joy is like an hour-long recess, and when the children got off the bus and saw Steve, their grins and giddy hugs spoke volumes.

Gross started the class by having the children sit in a circle. The gym floor was covered with a mat, and the children worked off their energy by playing on a combination of equipment -- a rope swing, a sliding board, a make-believe mountain made from huge cushions.

The play mountain exemplified one of the objectives of the programs. Instead of simply climbing on the cushions by themselves, the children helped each other up.

Gross caught another scene at the slide. A little girl had been waiting for her turn when a boy ran over and jumped in front of her.

The little girl began to complain, but stopped and waited her turn. Gross noticed the girl's behavior and gave her a thumbs up sign. "That's the way to play, Alicia," Gross said. "That's the way to share."

Later, the same little boy pushed another boy who, in turn, pushed him back. Gross saw that, too. Ever so gently, Gross told the one who pushed back, "use your words. It's easy to just push back. But use your words to tell him that you didn't like what he did."

Gross encourages the children to ask for help when they are afraid of, for example, climbing up a make-believe mountain. He also encourages the children to help others, because it gives the children a sense that they are somebody.

"One of the things that we are trying to do is break down the social message on the streets, which says that if you ask for help, you are weak," said Frank Censullo, a Project Joy counselor. "We believe that helping someone is incredibly empowering, and when children feel good about themselves, all things are possible."