

BROOKLINE TAB

Community Newspaper Company

www.Brooklinetab.com

Thursday, July 13, 2006

Protectors of play offer fun and games - and therapy

Steven Gross has always loved to play. A Needham native, when he was a student at Needham High, he played football, basketball, baseball and ran track. In his senior year he won the role of Conrad Birdie in "Bye Bye Birdie." Even today, when he sits down to talk, he's bursting with exuberance, unable to stay still. He comes across as a big happy kid.

This is a major asset in his very serious line of work. He lives in West Roxbury with his wife Kerrie, their 15-year-old son, Mookie (which he promises is a nickname), and their Chihuahua, Jimmy. He is the director for the Children's Trauma Recovery Foundation and the founder and executive director of Project Joy, a private, non-profit organization that earmarks play as, in Gross' words, "the single most important activity in the life of a child."

Gross came to that realization, and his career, in a roundabout way. While studying business at UMass Amherst in the mid-1980s, he was also working at summer camps and coaching basketball, which he found to be both challenging and very rewarding. One day, there was an epiphany.

"I wondered if I really wanted to be in business, working for a big company doing marketing," he recalls. "I thought my passion was really working with kids."

Gross was intrigued by the school's activity-based program. It used physical games and sports and cooperative play as a way of helping kids work through depression or anxiety, or who might be withdrawn or have poor social skills.



Gross kept the business major, but added a minor in education. Then he got a lucky break.

"I worked at a summer camp that was owned by a psychologist," he says. "He had a school-year program in Newton called the Academy of Physical and Social Development. And I was offered a position there."

"Instead of sitting and talking, we would engage in activities," he explains. "We could work with kids in a natural context. That's where I realized that play is the international language of children. It's where children are most comfortable."

The kids at the Academy were mostly ages 6 to 12, and came from upper-middle class environments. They attended regular schools, then took part in the Academy's after-school programs.

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They were kids whose parents had some concerns over their development, or had identified some social or emotional issue they wanted to work on - low self esteem, poor social skills, anxiety, hyperactivity.

"I started to see that this was amazing stuff," says Gross. "If you conduct play groups in a really structured way, and you connect with children, you empower children, and you do things where there's no winning and losing. We did collaborative play, where kids need to interact together in order to be successful."

It wasn't long before the seeds of what was to become the Brookline-based Project Joy were sown.

"I started to wonder why such an amazing program should be reserved for children whose families had means," says Gross. "There was nothing like this for kids who couldn't afford tuition or were living in very challenging circumstances. So Project Joy's idea was to take this model of using play as a way to help kids with their development, and bring it to the most vulnerable children, who didn't have the resources to pay for this kind of program - kids in shelters or housing developments, kids who were homeless."

Gross started Project Joy in 1989, and it hit the ground running.

"At the beginning, kids would come to us from Head Start programs and homeless daycare centers, and we, there were seven of us, would run therapeutic play groups with them. We'd see them for one or two hours a week, and then they'd go back to their daycare classes.

"But the work we did with the kids wasn't always supported by the centers," he adds. "The teachers there, who worked with the children for 40 or 50 hours a week, didn't have the same knowledge or resources that we had.

So we started talking to those childcare professionals; we talked to them about the importance of healthy play, and how it could shape the kids' social and emotional development."

Gross realized that he and his organization could cause more positive change if their energies were directed at the teachers, rather than at the students. They would actually train the teachers in the curriculum developed at Project Joy. And they would do it at no charge.

"So now we take the teachers, create these learning retreats in Maine, and teach them about the therapeutic value of play, and about barriers to healthy play that children experience. We teach them different ways they can use movement and games and storytelling and play within their classroom as a way to help children with their development."

Most of the kids these teachers are dealing with are preschoolers. Gross regularly points out that "if a child has no self-esteem or social skills or impulse control, and all of a sudden they're in kindergarten or first grade, they can't learn or connect or begin their journey."

He estimates that there are currently about 60 teachers in the Project Joy program throughout Metro Boston who impact close to 800 children a week that participate in some type of Project Joy group.

And he and his staff attempt to instill the same enthusiasm and high spirits in the teachers that he displays.

"The only way you can implement healthy play with children is for you yourself to be playful," he insists. "You need to feel joy, community, empowerment. You can't transmit those unless you have them in your life. So we have to focus on teachers tapping into their own playfulness, community, creativity.

"Our goal is to ensure that nothing gets in the way of healthy play for kids," he adds. "We have to protect to rights of children to play, and to play in such a way that it helps their development, that it's not just a break from work; it is work. Play is the work of children. It's how they rehearse for the challenges of life."

