

# Northern Home caters to children

By Jim Sturdivant  
Tribune Correspondent

From a campus perched high above the Schuylkill River in Roxborough, Northern Home for Children CEO Mark Handelman can see the towers of Center City, neighborhoods in Lower Merion and traffic tie-ups on distant I-76. His plans for the 154-year old institution, however, are just as far sighted.

"You want to go where there's a need and a gap in service," Handelman said of the school's mission, which since before the Civil War has revolved around providing social services to children.

Founded in 1853 by Elizabeth Hutter, the campus, originally called the Northern Home for Friendless Children, housed orphans of Civil War sailors and soldiers and remained a residential facility for poor and neglect-

ed youth until about a dozen years ago, when the focus switched to outpatient and off-campus services.

"The greatest population that we serve are kids who have behavioral health problems, or are child welfare cases," Handelman said. "Most kids today with those kind of problems are being dealt with in the community, so we went out into the community."

Today, Northern Home offers a variety of services and programs to more than 2,000 children each year through the city-funded Services to Children in their Own Homes (SCO) program, a satellite facility in Strawberry Mansion, at its historic 6.5-acre campus on Ridge Avenue and in 34 public schools.

At-risk kids are bused to the Roxborough campus for an after-school program offering sports and games, a meal, home-

work assistance from tutors, community group meetings and arts and horticulture activities. The program is designed to be therapeutic and preventative, "so these kids don't need more intense mental health services," Craig Wagner, the institution's director of behavioral health services, said.

Kevin Weber, Northern Home's director of recreation, said the program serves between 25 and 30 children each day.

"We're trying to get kids involved in working on their behavior and academics," he said, touting a new initiative that allows participants to become volunteers helping other youth. At the moment, though, he was most excited about a steel drum band workshop.

"The kids are really getting into that," he said.

Handelman would like to

See Home - Page 2A



Shidia Johnson with daughter Shaniya in the new residential facility for young children.

## Home From Page 1A

expand afternoon offerings by providing assistance to children with developmental disabilities such as autism, noting that lower-income caregivers often cannot afford speech and occupational therapy beyond what is mandated in the schools.

Additionally, the school recently moved back into providing residential services thanks to the construction of a new building, the Caroline

Alexander Buck Residence Hall, which opened in 2004. The \$2.5 million project constitutes the first phase of a campus upgrade that includes planned renovations to two historic campus buildings designed by noted 19th century Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer and the opening of a new community center and day care facility serving the immediate neighborhood.

Living in the residence hall are eight single mothers and their babies, beneficiaries of the

institution's Generations program.

"We're housing them in transitional housing with the idea of helping them get work, take care of their kids and move into independent living," Handelman said. Plans call for the program to expand to serve 16 mothers and up to 24 children.

For 16-year-old resident Shidia Johnson, sitting in a sunny common room in the dormitory-style facility, the program offers a chance to be the best mother she can to her three-month-old daughter Shaniya.

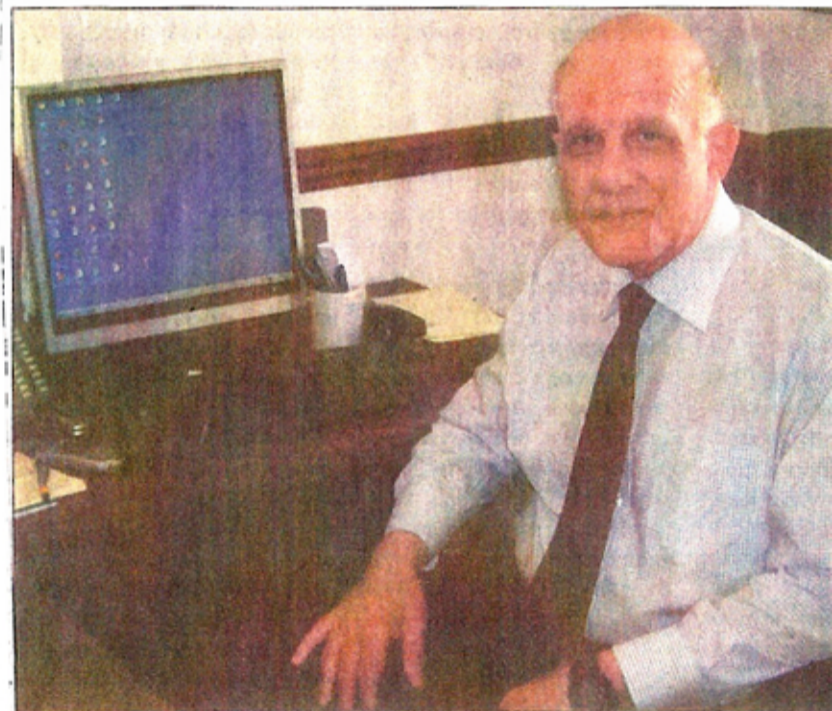
"What I like about it is they help you with a whole lot of things," she said. "We have group meetings about sexual relationships and 'Mommy and Me' and all these other (support) groups."

Residents help cook, clean and do laundry, earning "Baby Bucks" for good behavior and group participation that they can use to buy baby clothes and other items at an on-site store.

Programs such as these have garnered praise, and long-term financial support, from local foundations and companies like Wawa, whose CEO, Howard Stoeckel, will be honored as part of a May 9 fundraising dinner at the Union League. Handelman hopes the dinner will become an annual event.

"There are a lot of providers of services for kids in Philadelphia, but what I've discovered is that this place really has a reputation of quality service," he said.

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Northern Home for Children CEO Mark Handelman.