

Meet Cover Director Karen Ko Denise Louie Education Center Seattle, Washington

In their search for a place to belong, children and families are looking to early childhood programs to become the new neighborhoods — places where connections are made, where bonds are formed, where “everybody knows your name.” Some programs have even been created out of that need for neighborhood. Such is the story of the Denise Louie Education Center in what is known as the International District in Seattle, Washington.

In the late 70’s the highway expansion of Interstate 5 and the construction of the Kingdome cut the International District in half and split the community. When protests failed to garner sufficient support, families and businesses came together to look for ways to retain a sense of community in spite of the upheaval, to protect the neighborhood. And the idea to create a child care center to be that place of community was born.

The Center began serving children and families in 1977, targeting Asian families who needed a place where teachers and other staff could speak their language, filling the gap created when families left their extended family in China. “And so,” said director Karen Ko, “the Center rolled along for eight years.”

In 1985 the director at the time and other key decision makers realized that here was a whole population of families with low incomes and children of color who were not being served by Head Start. They began negotiating with existing Head Start agencies with the goal of providing Head Start services to children the Center already served. Eventually they secured a contract to begin a Head Start program to serve 36 children. The Center also contracted with the state to provide the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), a state-funded preschool program.

Today the Center provides services to 180 children in its Head Start and ECEAP programs and 18 children in its full day child care program. Currently, Head Start and ECEAP services are also provided at the Center’s Beacon Hill location.

Karen Ko came to Denise Louie four years ago with a strong background in social services. “When I speak about child care I feel this sense of urgency. I’ve worked in many areas of social service, but in early childhood it feels like we can do something now. There’s a sense of hope that we can make a difference.

“One of the strengths of Denise Louie is that by combining private, state, and federal funding, we are able to keep our child care program operating. Much administrative support is paid through federal and state funding. The benefits to teaching staff include training opportunities mandated through Head Start in which all our staff can participate. We also are able to hire a nurse, a mental health specialist, a disabilities coordinator/nutritionist, and an education coordinator.

“Bringing all of these services and families together is more natural; it’s more like a community. In a city there are different income levels, different cultures. We strive to create an environment in our program that is like that larger community and to celebrate all that diversity. This is a good role model.

“Our next project is to create a village within the International District that will provide a wide range of services, more like a naturally occurring community. It will be an assisted living facility, including space for our program.

“We hire diverse staff based on the cultures of the children enrolled. This multi-lingual staff provides some interesting challenges. We have refugees from Communism and refugees who are Communists, brought together. In order to work together we must find a common ground amidst our diverse cultural and political perspectives. For us, our mission statement is our bottom line. That’s where we come together.”

*Cover
Director*