

Giving needy families keys to city's rich culture sites

THE BOY had missed enough school to leave him struggling in class.

Watching him, even as a student teacher, Candice Anderson could tell that his problem had more to do with an unsettled and unsupportive home life than his intellect.

Which is why Anderson was alarmed when the boy's teacher told Anderson she was going to transfer him to a special-education class.

"I thought to myself, 'That's the rest of his life right there,'" she said. "I remember watching him get behind, and his parents were not really in a position to help him catch up."

"I was really taken aback that the decision this teacher was going to make because this child had missed a few weeks of school was going to affect the rest of this young man's life."

This happened in the early 1990s, when Anderson, 37, was student teaching while earning undergraduate degrees in psychology and black studies at Oberlin College.

Anderson cites that incident as setting her toward her career goal. Whatever she did, she wanted to help children — in particular those from low-income and disadvantaged families — get an education that would allow them to be, as they say, all they could.

She's still at it.

Anderson is executive director of Cool Culture, a Fort Greene, Brooklyn-based nonprofit that aims to help low- and moderate-income families use and enjoy the city's museums, botanical gardens and wildlife centers.

The idea is simple: A family trip to a museum or botanical garden is another opportunity for a child to learn.

"Walking through a botanic garden, the child can learn about plants and about trees and other things," Anderson said. "The family is a child's first teacher."

Founded in 1999 by Gail Velez and Edwina Meyers, Cool Culture is one of the unheralded jewels in the city's cultural community.

The group is a recipient of the 2008 Union Square Award, which honors worthy community organizations.

More than 80 of the city's museums, botanical gardens and zoos now honor the Cool Culture Family Pass, a card that gives free unlimited admission to as many as five family members per visit.

"This card is just like a membership card to the museum," Anderson said.

"Families generally have three barriers to enjoying these institutions: costs, information about the places and the perception that these places are not for them," she said. "We try to help them overcome those barriers."

Last year, the 50,000 families in the program made more than 45,000 visits to member institutions.

Passes are available to families referred by any Head Start or child care program across the city that serves disadvantaged families.

The families also receive tips on how to turn their trips into lessons.

The tips are distributed in handouts called Cool Culture Building Blocks, on the group's Web site (www.coolculture.org) in a monthly Family Time newsletter and a new electronic magazine. Each publication is available in English, Spanish and Chinese.

"This program is a national model of how to provide underserved communities with access to cultural institutions," Anderson said.

A resident of Park Slope, Brooklyn, Anderson was born in Phoenix but grew up in Silver Spring, Md.

"I had a charmed childhood," she said. "Montgomery County, Md., has the greatest number of educated black people per capita in the world, so racism was not something I had to worry about too much."



Candice Anderson, executive director of Cool Culture in Brooklyn. Photo by Jefferson Siegel



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I felt lucky to have the childhood I had," she said.

Her parents passed their love of books and learning to their only child. They also made sure cultural institutions were a regular part of her life.

"As I got older, they made sure I had opportunities to learn so I could identify my own interests and pursue them," she said. "We went to a lot of museums in D.C. They were free because they are part of the Smithsonian system and federally funded."

At Oberlin, Anderson thought she'd have a career as a clinical psychiatrist, but decided it was not for her.

INSTEAD, AFTER graduating in 1993, she moved to New York City.

"I knew it was a place where a lot of community organizing took place, where there was a lot of energy," she said.

Anderson worked for the Child Care Action Campaign, in part to satisfy her need to do meaningful work.

"My focus was on research and writing

reports on early education," she said. "I liked it, but I wanted to go closer to the ground."

After earning a master's degree in Urban Policy in 2000 from the New School, Anderson went to work for the Citizens Committee For Children of New York, covering child care, education and new services.

Anderson left after several years to take a job with the division of Child Care and Head Start within the city Administration for Children Services.

She has been with Cool Culture since 2006.

Cool Culture will hold its annual spring benefit May 14 at the South Street Seaport Atrium to honor the Shelly & Donald Rubin Foundation.

For information, check the Web site — www.coolculture.org — or call (718) 230-4186, ext. 305.

CORRECTION: The New York City Outward Bound organization was incorrectly identified in last week's column. I regret the error.

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