

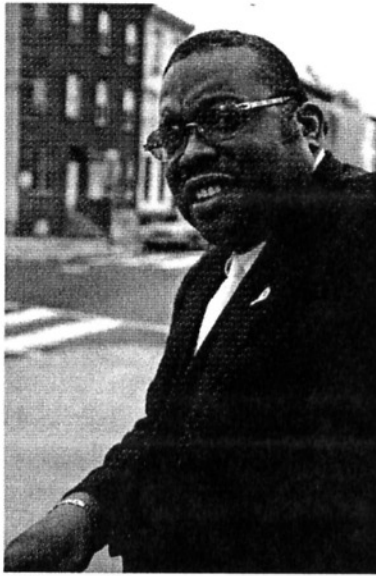
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Saving the children

Through a neighborhood counseling program, Gary Hall boosts families.

An editorial profile of someone who exemplifies two civic virtues: giving time to address community needs at the grassroots and using expertise to build long-term solutions to those needs. To nominate a Citizen Hero, call 215-854-5943 or e-mail editor@phillynews.com.



Citizen Heroes

A salute to civic treasures

As an administrator at Huntingdon State Prison nearly 30 years ago, Gary L. Hall saw a vexing problem: an increasingly disproportionate number of African American youth being incarcerated, particularly from his native North Philadelphia.

With a commitment to civic activism honed during the tumultuous 1960s, Mr. Hall left his rising career to address the root causes of the problem in North Philadelphia.

He did not choose an easy time: the bitter period when warring youth gangs were ravaging the city.

Mr. Hall, armed with a bachelor's degree in law enforcement and corrections, and a master's in counselor education, returned to the city to work for the Philadelphia Crime Prevention Association at the Nicetown Boys and Girls Club, a recreation center that is a longtime anchor for youth in North Philly.

Three years later, in 1979, after receiving a \$25 donation, Mr. Hall founded Community Advocates Association for Children and Youth (CAACY), a volunteer, in-home counseling service for troubled children and their families.

Setting up shop in a converted rowhouse at 23d and Oxford Streets across from the Philadelphia Housing Authority's Norman Blumberg apartments, Mr. Hall provided counseling and social-service programs that included truancy prevention, drug-resistance awareness, tutoring, and help for pregnant teens and teen parents.

Under him, CAACY has improved the lives of more than 25,000 troubled children and their families.

CAACY has trained more than 100 counselors since 1979. With an annual budget of \$900,000, the agency has contracts with the city's Department of Human Services. It also receives money from charitable groups.

"For me, in the beginning, it was about serving teen parents," says Mr. Hall. "As volunteers, we put our emphasis on battling teen pregnancy and helping girls who had become pregnant. I had gotten tired of seeing young people from the inner city going in and out of prison. I wanted to do something to prevent them from going to jail."

Mr. Hall is rightfully proud of the many positive results he has seen through his work at CAACY: "Ninety percent of the children from PHA that we serve do not go into the juvenile justice system or the Department of Human Services."

That success comes from careful planning. "We don't just go in rapping," he says.

A tall, stout man with a broad smile and deep laugh, Mr. Hall is a fixture in the Brewerytown section where CAACY is located. People there praise "the Pope of North Philadelphia," as some call him.

Mr. Hall has received numerous community service awards, but it's how his work is viewed in the community he serves that brings him the most satisfaction.

Dorothy Rush, vice president of the old Philadelphia Board of Education, describes Mr. Hall as "working hard to show young black men and women how to be good citizens. He works to protect children and get other people in the community to help with his mission.

"With him it was always about helping other people's children to do something satisfactory and positive, like what young people need to know about sexually transmitted disease and avoiding the penal system. Other people weren't doing that 27 years ago."

Amelia Taylor, 18, a graduate of Strawberry Mansion High School, says the advice she received from Mr. Hall in CAACY activities inspired her to pursue attending college next year. "I want to become a psychologist so I can help young people like CAACY helped me."

Mr. Hall, 52, lives in the city's Fern Rock section with his wife and two children. He credits much of the CAACY's success to his religious roots. A deacon at First Baptist Church of Huntington Valley in Lower Moreland, he says: "It's clear in my mind that all I have been through is the result of my rediscovery of God."

His dedication to children and their families makes Gary Hall a hero and a leader - and admirably loyal to his cause and his city. Philadelphia needs more people with those traits.

"There is a lot of invisible leadership in the community and that is important to acknowledge," says Christine L. James-Brown, president of the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania. "What is important about Gary and his work is his consistency in his commitment to children.

"I think communities are often abused by people who come in and say they are going to do something and disappear. He is someone the community knows they can turn to and trust."

And if a city doesn't have a foundation of trust, it's hard to imagine it rising to the skies on prosperity's wings. So let us say "amen" to the Gary Halls of the city - and to Gary Hall himself.