No retirement for Gwen Bailey while young moms still need her

COMMENTS

Gwen Bailey is the executive director of Youth Service, Inc., in West Philadelphia. (Kim Paynter/WHYY)

COMMENTARY
BY STACIA FRIEDMAN

Gwen Bailey, 64, isn't into "this retirement thing." As the executive director of Youth Service, Inc., a support service for vulnerable children and teens, Bailey plans to keep working at the same organization where she has been for 26 years.

"There must be clear voices of advocacy for children and teens — and there aren't many," says the East Oak Lane resident. Bailey was profoundly moved by "Kids for Cash (http://www.amazon.com/Kids-Cash-Thousands-Children-Kickback/dp/1595586849)," a book documenting how two Wilkes-Barre judges accepted $2.8 million in kick-backs in return for sending children, who had
committed minor infractions, to private juvenile detention centers. Talk back to the principal? Shoplift a CD at WalMart? Go directly to jail! (The Pennsylvania Supreme Court sent the judges to jail and overturned several hundred of these convictions.)

"Nobody spoke out," says Bailey. "Judges are responsible for acting in lieu of parents, but they do not always do what is best for the child. My goal is to continue to be a rational, compassionate advocate in a system where kids are getting the short end of the stick."

In addition to providing respite for teens who don't have a stable place to live, Bailey's organization provides a crisis nursery program for parents in danger of abusing their children. "Studies have shown that parents who are stressed out due to unemployment, poverty or drug addiction are more likely to abuse their children. We offer a safe place to leave their pre-school children whether there's a problem with domestic violence or the mother just needs a break."

"People don't understand," says Bailey. "You can't get a daycare voucher unless you are employed or a full-time student. A young mother who has four kids and is trying to find employment, doesn't yet qualify for daycare. She can't apply for jobs and leave the kids home alone. That's where we come in."

What keeps Bailey going? "The stories I hear motivate me every day," she says.

'Girls Count'

People recognize her by the pink button on her jacket. It says Girls Count. "That's for the Girls Justice League," says Bailey who serves as the League's board chairman. "We promote leadership skills for high school girls and we're also involved in a research project looking at the status of young women in Philadelphia. Planned Parenthood says the teen pregnancy rate is decreasing, but I don't think it is. There is no shortage of teen mothers to fill the programs for them in our high schools."

One of those programs is Teen Success, which Bailey runs at Youth Services, Inc. The program helps young women take control of their reproductive lives so that they can be good parents, complete school or a vocation program and make plans for their families. "One young woman traveled each week to our West Philly site from a lower Northeast
High School," says Bailey. "Adult after adult kept telling her that her life was over because she was pregnant. In her last group meeting, she spoke about the importance of the safe space at Teen Success for allowing her to be herself, get help, and be given a chance to try again."

As if her plate isn't already full, Bailey also sits on the advisory board of Drexel University's Dornsife Center, the first urban extension center run by a private university. "Drexel’s done a great job of partnering with the community," says Bailey, "They have special classes that are attended by Drexel students and people who live in Mantua and Powelton."

What does this busy executive and mother of a 25-year-old daughter do for fun? "My work is fun!" she insists.

"The stories I hear motivate me every day."
—Gwen Bailey
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