In a rough part of the US capital, Robin Berkley is leading one group’s efforts to unlock the children’s potential.

By David Karas / Correspondent

WASHINGTON

After earning her master’s degree, Robin Berkley spent more than a decade working on education policy and programming. But her focus started to change when she met a young boy named Devin.

Her job at the time was with Education-Counsel, a consulting firm in Washington. Once a week after hours, she’d walk from her office across the National Mall to tutor Devin. And she discovered a passion for working directly with some of the youths she served through her policy efforts.

“I just got really moved by working with children and getting to go from the 50,000-foot ether, where you’re basically trying to support, inform, and influence people at the state level, to seeing the end result,” Ms. Berkley says.

She met Devin through Horton’s Kids, a Washington nonprofit that facilitated the tutoring sessions for Devin and works with other youths from the Wellington Park neighborhood, one of the city’s most violent, under-resourced communities. She began as a volunteer for the organization in 2011 and has served as its executive director since 2014.

Founded in 1989, Horton’s Kids seeks to empower young people in Wellington Park, each year serving some 500 children in K-12 through academic support, youth development programs, and assistance with basic needs. The organization aims to alter the trajectory of youths growing up in a community in which, according to the nonprofit, 80 percent of adults lack a high school diploma and the average annual household income falls below $10,000.

“What is happening in Wellington Park is systemic and is multi-generational,” Berkley says. “If you don’t disrupt that in a positive way, you’re going to keep wasting incredible talent.”

So Berkley and her team have designed services around the needs of children in Wellington Park, which she acknowledges are many.

“The average kid coming out of Wellington Park is humming at a higher level of base stress than the average person, and certainly much higher than the average [child],” she says, noting that such stress can have a snowball effect on learning and development. “We’ve really tried to be thoughtful about how we can cut off some of these challenges and mitigate them as soon as possible.”

The programs that Horton’s Kids offers don’t have any selection criteria: Children can decide what to attend and what supports they need. Key to the organization’s service delivery is its Community Resource Center, which is based in the neighborhood and designed to be a one-stop shop for youths. The space, which has bullet-
proof glass for safety, provides consistent access to fresh produce, other healthy food, books, and computers – the only source of such necessities for some children and families. Various partner organizations also deliver services from the center.

‘An extension of the home’

“I think it really boils down to the power of being on-site,” Berkley says. “The fact that kids walk by us on their way home from school has made it very easy and convenient for kids to come in. We like to think of ourselves as an extension of the home.”

Children can choose between two levels of support. All participants can receive food, fulfillment of basic needs, access to the library, homework assistance, and the opportunity to take part in many enrichment activities. Some 170 of the current youths, Berkley says, also receive intensive support based on more acute needs, such as assistance with getting to and from a doctor’s office and ongoing case management services.

The entire approach has yielded results: Participating children are twice as likely as their peers to graduate from high school, according to the organization’s records.

At its core, Horton’s Kids is about relationships, Berkley says. And that is borne out in the story of Karin Walser, its founder.

One Horton’s Kids supporter is Joseph Davis, a partner at the international law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP. He’s also chair of the firm’s Greater DC Community Foundation advisory committee, whose mission is to support educational and enrichment programs for underserved youths in the Washington area.

Last year, the foundation selected Horton’s Kids as its principal grantee, which means the nonprofit will receive the majority of the foundation’s grant money for at least the next several years. Currently, it’s also a partner in hosting Horton’s Kids events, assists with supplying volunteers, and works on bringing children to the firm for various learning opportunities.

In an email interview, Mr. Davis discussed the importance of the nonprofit’s work.

“Horton’s Kids serves some of the most at-risk children in the District. It provides a place of safety and learning, but it is much more than that,” he says. “The staff knows every child who comes to the center and participates in its programming, and makes an effort to consider all of the needs of the children and their families. [The organization’s] holistic and individualized approach to addressing the challenges these kids face is extremely impressive and effective.”

Davis also recounts meeting Berkley and the impression she made. “Robin was a terrific advocate for the children that Horton’s Kids serves,” he says, “and her obvious passion and dedication to those children played a major role in our decision to select Horton’s Kids as our principal grantee.”

Doing better in school

In comments made by youth participants and provided by Horton’s Kids, several note how the program has helped them improve their academic performance. (Last names of participants have been omitted to protect their privacy.)

“I know the children in our program, and I know how special they are,” Berkley says. “I want them to have every opportunity for success just like my own kids. That’s kind of what drives me.”

Three other groups helping children

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