A Life Of Service: Remembering Bernice Weissbourd

Bernice Weissbourd, activist, national leader of the family support movement, and founder of Family Focus, passed away last October at the age of 99.

Bernice was a champion for children and families throughout her life, dedicated to improving lives. She believed that strong families are the foundation of a just society, and she worked tirelessly to ensure that all families, regardless of race or socio-economic background, had the resources and support they needed, especially for new parents and their young children.

Bernice founded Family Focus Evanston in 1976, with the support of her husband Bernard and philanthropist Irving Harris. With Delores Holmes as its first Director, Family Focus quickly grew to become a nurturing environment where families could come together and grow, share their struggles and successes, and find the support they needed to build strong and resilient families. Now with 11 service centers across Chicagoland, Bernice and Family Focus have had a profound impact for 46 years on the lives of tens of thousands of families. Bernice will be remembered for her lifetime of activism, the family support movement and the foundation of early childhood development best practices.

Bernice's legacy lives on through the continued work of Family Focus and countless families whose lives she touched. She will be missed by her many friends and colleagues in Chicago and beyond and remains the heart of Family Focus.

Winter Wonderland

On Wednesday, January 18, Family Focus held its Winter Wonderland Celebration at Malcolm X College to bring team members together, ring in the new year, and to pay tribute to Bernice Weissbourd. In attendance were Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (IL-09), former Family Focus President & CEO Merri Ex, former Vice President of Policy for the Ounce of Prevention Fund Nancy Shier, and more than 150 staff.

The evening highlight was a memorial tribute to Bernice by Congresswoman Schakowsky, Merri Ex, Nancy Shier and Dara Munson, sharing their warm and happy memories of the woman who founded Family Focus while celebrating the impact she had on their lives.

After the memorial tribute, staff and guests enjoyed music and fellowship to celebrate accomplishments of the past year and look forward to the coming year.
Family Focus is pleased to welcome Erin Walton as Senior Vice President of External Relations!

Erin Walton (pictured) previously served as Executive Director of Resilience, a Chicago nonprofit that empowers victims of sexual violence. She also served at Chicago Child Care Society as Director of Quality Improvement from 1999 – 2007, and Development Director from 2009 – 2017.

Erin brings decades of experience in strategic development, fundraising, quality improvement and executive leadership. Erin also serves as a part-time lecturer at University of Chicago’s Crown Family School of Social Work. She earned her MBA from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University. Welcome, Erin!

Family Focus also announces two new Assistant Directors to join our teams in Aurora and Cicero. They will play a key role in driving the success and growth of our programs and participants.

Maria Aguilar is Family Focus Cicero Assistant Director. She has been on the Family Focus team since 2018, having been promoted from Healthy Families Supervisor.

Christina Campos is Family Focus Aurora Assistant Director. She came from the Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry, and previously served Family Focus as Lead Case Manager.

Each of these individuals brings a wealth of experience and expertise – welcome aboard!

Celebrating Black History Month: A Message From Dara Munson

As we celebrate Black History Month, I can’t help but be proud to mark a place in history as the first Black President & CEO of Family Focus. I’m honored to move forward the vision of our beloved founder, Bernice Weissbourd. She was a trailblazer, a history-maker and a pioneer in the family support movement. Her legacy will live on through the thousands of lives she touched in her 99 years, and the causes to which she dedicated her life.

During Black History month, we take time not only to pay tribute to those that paved the way for us, but we look to make our mark on the future. While we’ve come far, our work to advance the lives of children, youth and their families, is rooted in the knowledge that racial injustice and inequity still exist in America. Therefore, we are intentional in our efforts to eliminate racial disparities and advance collective liberation so that Black people, and all other marginalized communities, are empowered to thrive.

Our team at Family Focus works every day to improve the well-being of each participant in our programs, creating opportunities for inclusion and providing access to information, support and resources where they didn’t exist.

We know that we can’t truly meet our participants where they are without ensuring there is authentic representation throughout our organization of the communities we serve. These values are an integral part of all we do and are embedded in our strategic plan by which we will hold ourselves accountable.

Together, let us honor the legacy of those who came before us by continuing to fight for a fairer, more just world.

Celebrating New Assistant Directors and SVP of External Relations

Family Focus is pleased to welcome Erin Walton as Senior Vice President of External Relations!

Erin Walton (pictured) previously served as Executive Director of Resilience, a Chicago nonprofit that empowers victims of sexual violence. She also served at Chicago Child Care Society as Director of Quality Improvement from 1999 – 2007, and Development Director from 2009 – 2017.

Erin brings decades of experience in strategic development, fundraising, quality improvement and executive leadership. Erin also serves as a part-time lecturer at University of Chicago’s Crown Family School of Social Work. She earned her MBA from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University. Welcome, Erin!
Please join us! Family Focus Highland Park (formerly known as Family Network) will be hosting its 40th Anniversary Celebration, “40 And Focused!”, on Thursday, March 9, 2023 from 6 – 8 PM at Gino’s Upstairs (410 Sheridan Rd, Highwood, IL).

In 1983, Family Network started as a drop-in center for moms with babies and toddlers in the Highland Park Presbyterian Church basement. Martha Freeman was the first Director, following in the footsteps of Bernice Weissbourd and Delores Holmes, who established this family support model in Evanston a decade earlier. In 2002, Family Network joined Family Focus.

The anniversary celebration will be a special evening honoring Jim Gottlieb and the memory of Donna Gottlieb, who passed away last year. Donna was a preschool teacher in Highland Park and after retirement, she served as the volunteer receptionist for 20 years at Family Focus Highland Park. Donna was the face of Family Focus to visitors, children and parents; being a Spanish speaker herself, she especially loved the Dual Language and Right From The Start programs. We look forward to sharing fond memories of Donna and her work from over two decades.

Join us for good food, great music, raffle prizes, and more – scan the QR code below to purchase your tickets, or visit https://www.family-focus.org/hp40-tickets/

Celebrating New Board Members

Family Focus is delighted to welcome these five new board members: Felipa Aguirre (Wintrust Mortgage), Christiane Bock (Alliant Insurance Services), Michelle Macklin-Burton (Urban Planning Consultant); Elizabeth Zachara Davis (Chicago Public Library Foundation), and Richard Flowers (United Airlines).

Their expertise and perspective will be invaluable in helping us achieve our mission and drive the strategic direction of Family Focus. We are grateful for their commitment!
Family Focus highlights Loukessa Hawkins (pictured), a compassionate, dedicated, and talented social worker serving North Lawndale. Loukessa has dedicated many years, as a pre-school teacher and as Home Visiting Program Coordinator, to support children and families by offering a helping hand, a listening ear, and kind words. Her expertise and professionalism supports young parents and the development of their infants and toddlers.

It can be easy to forget just how many lives and livelihoods were turned upside down during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for families which were already struggling. Through it all, Loukessa has been a beacon of hope for Lawndale – developing new curricula and facilitation strategies for parents and children, building relationships and trust with and between families, creating parent support groups, and more. Her core responsibilities, including connecting parents with local resources and public benefits, have never been more important, and her deep understanding of the barriers that families face have made her an invaluable Team member.

Loukessa's commitment to her work, her warmth and empathy for our participants, is a testament to her character. Thank you, Loukessa, for your tireless efforts in supporting the Lawndale community!

Please Join Us!

Family Focus will host the annual Dream Builders Dinner on Thursday, May 4, 2023 from 6 – 9 PM at the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago. We are thrilled to announce that Juan Salgado, Chancellor of City Colleges of Chicago, will be our special guest and honoree. This will be a special evening celebrating what is possible with strong leadership and partners. We will pay tribute to our beloved founder, Bernice Weissbourd, and we will showcase the strong partnership between Family Focus and City Colleges and our shared work providing education and career pathways that support the whole family.

Join us for an uplifting evening! Ticket and Sponsorship information is at our website: https://www.family-focus.org/2023-dbd/

Dinner Chairs
Dennis & Kathy Abboud
Margarita Carrillo-Cobo & Juan Cobo
Francia E. Harrington & Vern Broders

Special Thanks
To all of our donors and partners, including: