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Grant gives agency new life

Denied funding, education program was set to close



Willy

Kilomo (center) tutors Natalia Tamayo, a ninth-grader, in algebra at Choice Thru Education in Chelsea. On the left, Marcela Dominguez, also a ninth-grader, works on her homework. (Michele McDonald/Globe Staff)

By John Laidler

Globe Correspondent / October 16, 2008

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Last fall, the future looked grim for Choice Thru Education, the four-decade-old Chelsea nonprofit that has helped thousands of low income young people finish high school and attend college.



That summer, Choice Thru Education learned that the US Department of Education would not be renewing its funding because of a computer glitch involving the department's own website. Without the money, the Chelsea agency faced the likelihood of having to shut its doors.

One year later, Choice Thru Education's prospects are again bright. A surprise five-year funding pledge by the Summer Star Foundation for Nature Arts and Humanity has allowed the group to avoid closure and placed it on firm financial footing for the next few years.

"We are calling it the rebirth of Choice Thru Education," said Susan Clark, the organization's founder and director.

The agency had a chance to celebrate its rebirth at a recent ceremony at its Pearl Street building at which the foundation's gift was formalized. Among those on hand were current program participants, about 100 "graduates," and the foundation's president, Shalin Liu, who Clark calls "our angel."

Founded nine years ago, the Greater Boston-based foundation supports the creation of arts and nature-related educational enrichment programs for children.

Clark began Choice Thru Education in 1966 as an Upward Bound program. Created as part of the War on Poverty, Upward Bound is designed to help low income youth complete high school and pursue post-secondary education.

Choice Thru Education pursues that mission through after school tutoring and high school equivalency test preparation, and a six-week summer program at Wheelock College that includes, classes, workshops, and field trips. The agency also helps students apply for college, and in general seeks to build self-esteem and motivation.

"I've always felt that once you have some motivation, you can take off on your own," Clark said.

The website glitch occurred in November 2006. Choice Thru Education was trying to submit an application for \$1.2 million in federal money to fund its program for four years starting with the expiration of its grant in August 2007. But the application kept bouncing back, Clark said.

Aware of the website problem, the Department of Education extended the filing deadline for a day, to Nov. 7. After several days of trying, Choice Thru Education finally succeeded in sending its application at 5:16 p.m. on Nov. 7, and received an automated response from the department saying it was reviewing it. As a backup, the Chelsea agency had also sent a copy by mail to the department, postmarked Nov. 6.

The following May, Clark said she was stunned to receive a letter from the department stating that it had determined the application was ineligible for consideration "because it was submitted after the deadline." It said the electronic filing had been received 46 minutes past the deadline, and that the copy in the mail had also been late.

US Senators John F. Kerry and Edward F. Kennedy and US Representative Michael J. Capuano all wrote to the Department of Education urging that Choice Thru Education receive its funding. But the effort failed to sway the department.

"It was such a bizarre situation," Clark recalled. "We were 46 minutes late because of their computer glitch, and then they waited six months to tell us they didn't even bother to read our proposal."

Clark said that with the loss of the federal money - which had been Choice Thru Education's primary source of funding from its inception - she realized that fall that the agency could not continue much longer.

"We were definitely at a point of saying this might be it," she said.

It was a Nov. 2 article in the Globe that brought the agency's plight to Liu's attention. Moved, she decided right away to help.

Even more than academic support, what low-income children need is for "a grownup to show they care," Liu said. The action by federal officials, she said, seemed to send the opposite message.

Liu said she had her financial adviser, Kathleen C. Wallace, contact Clark and tell her "You are not alone and that we will be talking to you some more."

After a thorough review of the program, Liu agreed to award the funding, a decision conveyed to Clark in December.

"They are really like a family," Liu said of Choice Thru Education. "You can sense that family, its strong bonds. And they care about each individual. That is the true meaning of education," she added, "helping children be the best they can be."

At the foundation's request, the amount of the grant has not been disclosed. But Clark said it is enough to keep the organization going over the next five years, during which time she plans to reapply for federal funding.

"I can't say enough about them," she said of the foundation. "They've been so understanding, so supportive of what we do." ■

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It's a wonderful thing to see when someone cares enough about our children that they are willing to step in and make a difference. It truly takes a village to raise a child. An investment in our kids is an investment in our future.

Congratulations, and thank you, to those who fought to keep such a worthwhile program going into the future, and best wishes for the kids in the program who WILL make a difference in

our
communities.
by bkw