New York was recovering from a near financial collapse and also coping with a so-called crack epidemic. Geoffrey Canada, an educator and youth worker who became head of the Harlem Children’s Zone, recalls returning from Boston in the 1980s to a Harlem that “was just chaos and despair—abandoned buildings, trash, graffiti, filth.” There was a sense “that this place was coming apart at the seams.”

The July 1988 issue of Life magazine carried a cover line reading, “When Crack Hits the Neighborhood.” Inside, a special report took the reader on a journey: “The Red Hook housing project in South Brooklyn has faced its share of problems common to the inner city—crime, unemployment, teenage pregnancy—but the community always pulled together to battle the difficulties. Then three years ago crack hit the Hook, and today every one of the project’s 10,000 residents is either a dealer, a user or a hostage to the drug trade.” The story quotes a resident saying, “There are only two kinds of people left in the project—they and us. They have guns and money and run the streets. They kill each other and anybody in the way.”

Crack was a form of smokable cocaine whose use exploded in the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, crack had become commonplace in cities across America. New York City, as Life observed, was among the urban centers hit hard by the drug. And that was only one of its problems.

New York’s financial crisis came to a head in 1975, when the city teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. The city’s finances were in such dire shape that des-
We believe the single most important element in a young person’s life is often the consistent presence of a caring adult.

Friends of Children, helping at-risk children, through mentorship, become successful, productive citizens

LOVE. Latinos on the Verge of Excellence, a mentoring program empowering young women to do their best in school and in life.