Inkerton tapped into the new thinking by reaching out to several of those deeply involved in the field. At one point, Executive Director Joan Colello invited Sister Paulette to a Pinkerton board meeting to discuss youth development. “It wasn’t codified. It wasn’t anything,” said Sister Paulette; but her views nonetheless reflected a deeply-felt philosophy that was mirrored by the work of Cahill, Murphy and others in the field.

“We’ve always worked with young people and families on the margins, and we’ve always seen the best in them. We always believed that change happens through caring relationships. We believed that young people are not going to think well of themselves unless we first think well of them and have very high expectations and help them achieve all that they can be. That was our approach to the work. . . . And Joan admired the work we did.”

Colello and George Gillespie, now the board chair, routinely hosted board dinners and lunches with thought leaders that were, in essence, seminars on youth development. Among the guests were not only Sister Paulette and Geoffrey Canada, but Gary Walker, president of Public/Private Ventures, Marc Freedman, founder and CEO of Encore.org, and John Dilulio, a political scientist (widely known, and often scorned, for coining the term “superpredators”) who headed the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Those sessions “were a way to engage the board in the latest thinking about youth development, juvenile justice, social and emotional development, cultural enrichment and the like,” observed Rick Smith.

For New Yorkers involved in youth welfare, the mid-1980s was a pivotal period.
thing called Evening and Weekend Programs. He got a pool of money and decided that in troubled neighborhoods he was going to open up schools [during the] evening and weekends. The concept of using schools for after school services seems routine today, but it was not routine in the eighties. There was a huge struggle, Paulette and Murphy led it, to actually get the schools open and allow youth organizations like ours to use schools after school.”

In the wake of Michael Griffin’s death, “Koch opens up a number of schools, maybe eight or ten, provides extended services until ten o’clock at night, six days a week. We start running these extended evening activities. And we had all of these kids coming in. . . . We could program for elementary kids from 3 to 6 in the afternoon, then have middle school and high school kids come in from 6 to 10, to keep the kids off the streets,” said Canada, who was then at the Rheedlen Foundation.

Despite Koch’s efforts, the city remained, in Canada’s words, “a tinderbox about to blow.” In 1989, as Mayor Koch geared up to run for his fourth term, an especially shocking racially tinged incident put the city on edge. In April of that year, a young white woman was brutally raped in Central Park. Five teenagers—four black and one Latino—were charged with the crime, which became widely known as a “wilding” incident. The city’s media went berserk, with condemnations of the teenagers coming from all quarters. Developer Donald Trump took out a full-page ad in several New York newspapers demanding the death penalty. Muggers and murderers, he railed, “should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, should be executed for their crimes.” The collective rush to judgment resulted in convictions of the young men that were overturned some 12 years later when the Manhattan District Attorney turned up evidence—including a confession—indicating that another man, a lone individual, was responsible for the crime. The wilding frenzy was not the only racial grenade to rip the fabric of the city that year.

In August, in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, a mob of young whites killed a 16-year-old black boy because they believed, wrongly, that he had entered their neighborhood to date a white girl.

As the Daily News reported the story on August 25th, “Fueled by jealousy and hate, a gang of up to 30 white teens—armed with a gun and baseball bats—shot and killed a black youth they mistakenly thought was dating a young white woman in their Brooklyn neighborhood, police charged yesterday.” The report provided graphic details of the assault: “[The] white teens chased a small group of blacks through Bensonhurst and chanted, ‘Let’s club the n-----,’ before one whipped out a gun and shot the helpless youth in the chest late Wednesday.”

Protesters rally against racial violence in Howard Beach and other New York neighborhoods.

While the attack and the concomitant rise in the city’s fear of violence and racial conflict did nothing to unite the city, it did lead many to believe that perhaps only someone like David Dinkins, a moderate black man, could calm the troubled waters. Dinkins won both the primary against Ed Koch and the general election against Rudolph Giuliani. He hired Richard Murphy as the city’s youth commissioner. From the perspective of youth development experts, this was akin to hiring the lottery.
The combination of Dinkins and Murphy offered an opportunity to expand on the work begun under Koch. For Cahill, Murphy’s move to the corridors of municipal power offered an opportunity to test, in a real world environment, the theories she and her colleagues had been developing. Early in his tenure, the newly named Commissioner Murphy persuaded Mayor Dinkins to invest money targeted for a prison barge to be spent on youth services instead. John Kelly, of The Chronicle of Social Change, recalled the occasion in an article published shortly after Murphy’s death in 2013. Instead of “spending $5 million on a prison barge, a floating tribute to the city’s choked corrections system” wrote Kelly, Dinkins invested the money in Murphy’s vision “of establishing schools that would be open to youth and parents beyond the classroom hours.”

That decision, said Canada, was informed by the work Murphy and others had started under Koch: “We knew the impact of keeping these buildings open because we had this experience in the 80s.” The programs’ structures evolved from the countless conversations Murphy and the others had through the years. “Richard and I were talking about how we needed to make this be much more than a program, that we needed to make this be something that would bring some hope to these neighborhoods,” said Cahill. “We came up with Beacon, [a metaphor for] lighting up the neighborhood.”

As part of her work for the Youth Development Institute, Cahill and her colleagues produced small pamphlets, with Pinkerton support, that became guiding texts for the Beacon Programs and for the youth development movement writ large. The booklets carried such titles as “Core Competencies for Youth Work” and “The Handbook of Positive Outcomes for Youth.” One, “A Guided Tour of Youth Development,” laid out many of the movement’s core ideas, embracing what it called a “holistic” approach to young people—which meant paying attention to the entire individual and to the circumstances and communities that affect them. This translates into such things as soliciting and acting upon young people’s ideas, involving them in service projects in their communities, acknowledging their cultural perspectives or backgrounds, and generally expanding their horizons. “What we really thought of was ... not solely services, but how you staff so the whole orientation is to surround young people with both supports and opportunities . . . for taking part in new things, trying on other kinds of identities,” said Cahill. The Good Shepherd Beacon—one of the first 15 to be funded—opened in Red Hook in 1991. As described in a Good Shepherd publication: “It provides year-round, evening and weekend activities engaging thousands of young people and their families annually.”

The Pinkerton capital grant to Good Shepherd (for South Brooklyn Community High School) was approved in 1999. It was “pivotal,” said Sister Paulette. It allowed construction of the school to begin and also paved the way for grants from other institutions, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The school, located in Red Hook, was completed in 2001. The “second chance” transfer high school, a separate facility, now accommodates some 150 students who have dropped out of (or were struggling in) a regular public school. Those students are given academic instruction while surrounded with supportive social services. The participants are generally older and bigger than their previous classmates, and some have been mocked for failing. Many felt abandoned by their former schools, said Sister Paulette. “What you will hear young people say is that nobody knew if they were there [in regular school] or not. They felt unnoticed. They weren’t programmed properly. They got in with the wrong group and it was too hard for them to break away . . . For many of them, dropping out of high school was not their first experience of not attending school regularly. Many of them would say that they had other black holes in their education.”

South Brooklyn Community is a small school where “teachers and the principals can really focus on teaching and learning. . . . We have counselors with very small caseloads of like twenty to twenty-five students, unlike a large anonymous comprehensive school, where you might have two guidance counselors.” They also have peer counselors—a “young person who looks like them, who has lived sometimes their own experience.”

The results have been spectacular. Despite the prior deficits in its students’
We believe that young people must be held accountable for their actions, but that incarceration is rarely the most effective tool. As a result, we support programs for court-involved youth that build skills and a sense of responsibility . . . , often with the help of trusted “credible messengers,” young people who have faced and overcome similar challenges.