EVEN AS THE FOUNDATION has grown and developed new ambitious programs, it has endeavored to hew close to its original purpose—making a positive difference in the lives of young New Yorkers who might otherwise fall short.

That mission was one of the reasons Danielle Pulliam joined Pinkerton as a program officer. Trained as a computer scientist and management consultant, Pulliam, a Bronx native, was drawn to Pinkerton in large measure because, “It’s focused on New York City young people. It’s focused on my community. I was one of these kids that we’re helping now through the programs that we’re supporting, so I feel a connection as a native New Yorker.”

A program she feels particularly connected to is the Neighborhood Literacy Initiative in South Jamaica, Queens. The idea is to enlist institutions and individuals throughout the area in a program that promotes reading and aspires, as Pulliam puts it, to “get kids from zero to fifth grade in an area of South Jamaica, Queens that is struggling.” The collaborative of ten partners includes Reach Out and Read of Greater New York, an organization whose physicians prescribe reading as essentially a medicine that new parents provide to their children. “They do it because the doctor said to do it,” said Pulliam. The initiative also includes the Parent-Child Home Program, which provides home visitors from the community to assist parents of toddlers.

The Queens Public Library is another partner. The Foundation’s support allowed the South Jamaica branch to open on Saturdays and provided it with a full-time children’s librarian during the summer. “The whole idea is to create this...
A Commitment to Direct Service

The pinkerton story

Second graders are paired with fifth graders and they meet once a week for a forty-five minute session,” said Jennifer John, LINC’s deputy director. “They’re reading out loud to each other... It’s about them having a positive experience reading. They’re building a great relationship with an older student. And, long-term, the kids are having deeper conversations about books in their regular classrooms and elsewhere around the school.”

A local principal came to John and confided, “I’m hearing these conversations the kids are having while they’re waiting for the bathroom outside my office; and they’re basically [doing] what they call a turn-and-talk exercise—talking about a book, unprompted—just because they’ve gotten into it, and they’ve had this really great experience.”

“Our mission,” explained John, is to make “all young people proficient readers by third grade, because that really is the moment where instead of the focus being on learning to read, it’s reading to learn.” Parents are a key part of that effort: “We train them in our Very Involved Parent Academy.” One of those VIPs said John, took responsibility for a bilingual reading program at a local library branch. “It’s been going for almost two years... And that’s really important for us because we can’t be everywhere. And we can’t serve everyone. But once we train these parents to be volunteers on our behalf, we trust that they’re going out and spreading the message.”

As Dien points out, “The volunteers can be found not only in schools and libraries, but laundromats, salons and parks—truly taking reading everywhere.”

For Pinkerton Program Officer and amateur musician Erickson Blakney, the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance (ALJA) is a cherished grantee. A thoughtful Ohio native who worked in broadcast journalism before coming to Pinkerton, Blakney was struck by how seamlessly the ALJA integrates music and academics: “They’re working with kids in Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx... [And they] aren’t just teaching music. They’re teaching kids math. They’re teaching kids science. They’re teaching kids literacy... And when you speak to the students, you really understand there is something magical going on. The kids are just really taking to the instructors, and that somehow translates to their school work.”

ALJA is the creation of Grammy-award winning composer, pianist and band leader Arturo O’Farrill, who thought it important to teach big band Latin jazz to a younger generation. Executive Director Marietta Ulacia presides over its afterschool academic programs, which begin with a philosophy of inclusion: “Arturo and the organization had the philosophy that everybody can play music—it’s a matter of being exposed to it. He had the concept that you don’t teach people how to read or how to write for them to become writers; it’s just for them to be literate. And it’s the same with music. You teach music for people to become enlightened... We welcome everyone and we fundraise a lot to be able to make the programs free.

The majority of our kids are from poor neighborhoods. So it is Harlem; it is Bronx; it is Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, we work in elementary schools and those elementary schools are mostly Latino and African American kids and a lot of immigrant kids... We have another school that has Chinese, Latinos, Russians kids.
Believe in 2014, she wrote to Pinkerton. “A year after I sent a letter, Erickson called. I was in Cuba, in the School of the Arts, where the phones didn’t even work properly. So I never got the message. Finally, he called again and he said, ‘I’m very impressed with the letter that you sent me a year ago. And I would really love for you to apply for this program but the deadline is today; and I’ve been calling you and I don’t get any response.’” She told Erickson that if he gave her a week, she would submit a proposal. ‘And he said yes.’

We believe that persistence, patience, self-discipline and resilience—commonly known as “grit”—are important predictors of success.