



## CHAPTER FIVE

# A Commitment to Direct Service

**E**VEN 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

Olivia Morgan and colleagues from the National Dance Institute perform “I Wish.”



Thomas Nguyen pours liquid nitrogen at the New York Hall of Science.

community, this culture of literacy, to embed the idea that reading is important,” said Pulliam.

The effort has enlisted a range of players, including local businesses (who give discounts to participating parents), neighborhood schools, and senior citizens (who volunteer as tutors), as well as high school and college students (who serve as mentors). The initiative also brings summer programs to schools. “Its purpose is to stave off summer learning loss,” said Pulliam.

Students have “academic enrichment in the morning. Afternoon activities build on what they learned in the morning.” Students also go on field trips and participate in other education activities. Those students, reports Pulliam, “are now doing better than kids who were on grade level and did not have the support.”

A Pinkerton grantee called Literacy Inc. (LINC) was enlisted to coordinate the initiative. LINC also runs its own literacy programs in poor communities around the city. In the Manhattan neighborhood of Inwood, it works in several elementary schools. “We have what we call our reading partner program where sec-

ond 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.”

**F**OR 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.

That school is phenomenal. Every year, they do a multicultural festival highlighting the different nationalities that they have, and that makes it very interesting.”

A former dancer and guitarist, Ulacia trained in Cuba’s prestigious Amadeo Roldán Conservatory before coming to America where she formed her own dance company and later worked for several cultural institutions, including the Museum for African Art in New York.

It was at the museum that she first encountered Pinkerton. When she came to ALJA 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.”

**D**EPENDING ON THE LOCATION, the afterschool program may focus purely on music or may also cover other subjects, including math and science. Students are given instruments to take home, which they keep, free of charge, for the year. “And we don’t only teach the instrument. Thanks to Pinkerton, we started to expand the program to music theory. That makes a difference. It’s not just playing. It’s that you know the music and you play it,” said Ulacia.

“We have a girl who plays with our youth orchestra, [which] is called Fat Afro Latin Jazz Cats. Her family is from the Dominican Republic. When she started, she was very shy. . . . She started getting improvisation lessons because she could play music but she could not improvise. And being in the orchestra was about learning jazz improvisation, being able to do a solo in front of everyone else. She was the only girl. And now she has been accepted into three conservatories. So today you see her play and she’s fierce. Now she plays the flute at orchestra level. It changed her life. . . . She became a music major instead of just being a girl who played the flute a little bit.”

Program Officer Jennifer Correa has seen similar transformations in the

STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) programs she oversees. She recalls speaking with the educational manager at an organization that initiated an afterschool STEM program with the help of the Partnership for After School Education, a Pinkerton grantee. Initially the manager doubted they could generate much student enthusiasm for STEM subjects. But, to her surprise, the students were eager to learn.

“When I went on my site visit I saw a whole building full of kids doing STEM activities,” said Correa. “In one classroom, they were experimenting with oobleck, which is this gooey substance [made of cornstarch and water] that when you squeeze it it’s hard, when you let it go it just drips off. In another space, kids were building parachutes for eggs. They were doing an egg drop to see if they could build a structure strong enough to keep the eggs from breaking. And in another class, kids were building a windmill and wind boats, then testing them to see how far they could go and redesigning them. It’s great to see an organization that a year ago thought science was too intimidating all of a sudden filled, from top to bottom, with kids just engaging, enjoying and really understanding what it takes to be a scientist or engineer.”

When Correa was younger, she had much the same experience. She got an internship in 1998, right after graduating as a teen parent from high school, as an “Explainer” in the Science Career Ladder program (funded by Pinkerton) at the New York Hall of Science. Correa, who went on to earn a baccalaureate and a master’s degree, was eventually put in charge of the entire cadre of high school and college Explainers, something she had previously thought unattainable. Before starting work at the science museum, recalled Correa, “I didn’t think that science was a thing that I was capable of doing, or that there were career opportunities beyond being a mad scientist or doctor. . . . But when I walked in, I saw an amazing place with lights and colors and kids learning. . . . It just seemed like fun.”

Creating opportunities—and a sense of fun and adventure—that allow young people to transcend unfortunate circumstances and transform into better versions of themselves is what Correa and her colleagues strive for, as they endeavor to assist a growing population of young New Yorkers—some of whose stories are told below. ♦

**WHAT WE BELIEVE**

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

**Rocking The Boat.** Through building and sailing wooden boats and carrying out environmental studies, South Bronx youth gain skills and confidence



JOAQUIN COTTEN



**Harlem RBI.** Mixing softball, baseball and academic work, Harlem RBI teaches goal setting, problem solving and persistence



**Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center.** Utilizing music, dance, theater, voice and martial arts to help Bronx youth realize their potential

PATRICK KOLTS