



Nile Sprague

# Hope Is Born in Bethlehem Centers

BETHLEHEM CENTERS ARE A SAFE HAVEN FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN NASHVILLE, TENN.

by GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO and NILE SPRAGUE



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Children, below and on opposite page, learn and play in safety at Bethlehem Centers' child care programs in Nashville, Tenn.

Bethlehem Centers is not only important for the community of North Nashville; it's an important part of U.S. race relations history. It was founded in 1894 when Sallie Hill Sawyer, a black woman, and Estelle Haskins, who was white, joined forces to start a settlement house for women and children.

The center has evolved over some 118 years to offer services, including a three-star early-childhood education program, an after-school program, a seniors care program, and it facilitates the local Meals on Wheels program. The century-old objective set forth by those extraordinary women remains the same.

"Our mantra, our battle cry is social justice," said Mary McKinney, president and chief executive officer of Bethlehem Centers. "The focus of Bethlehem Centers is to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty."

This is no small task. Bethlehem Centers sits directly across from the John Henry Hale public housing community in North Nashville, Davis County. "According to the most recent census, North Nashville is the poorest area in the state of Tennessee, having the highest crime rate, particularly violent crime," Ms. McKinney said. "We know the ticket out [of poverty] is education."

## Teaching children, shaping the future

"Teaching is not a job. It's a calling," said Robert Hassel, who teaches 2 ½ to 3 year olds in Bethlehem Centers' Busy Bees program. "I'm not simply teaching rote skills, I'm preparing citizens and future members of society. I'm not only shaping minds, I'm shaping hearts."

One of the people behind the scenes working hard to provide support for Mr. Hassel and the other staff members is Rachel Parker, director of early



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childhood education. “My job entails making sure that the childhood center runs smoothly, that we’re educating our children, caring for them, keeping them safe, as well as making sure we’re well staffed and that everyone’s needs are met.”

Ms. Parker is proud of her child-care center’s three-star rating — the highest assessment from Tennessee — which acknowledges the center’s strict adherence to state guidelines regarding low child-to-teacher ratios and maintaining a clean and healthy environment in the facilities. “It denotes that we have devoted our utmost to our child care center,” Ms. Parker said. “There are many child care centers that offer zero or one-star child care, so it is important that we provide affordable three-star child care in this community.”

Parents often discover the center and all it has to offer by chance when they bring their young children to Bethlehem to get immunization shots. And when the children are too old to attend the child care program, the after-school program is waiting for them.

### Passing the torch

Bethlehem Centers’ after-school program has saved lives. California transplant Thriashaun Stephens, 19, is an example.

“My mom didn’t have a stable job, and we didn’t have a stable living environment,” Mr. Stephens said, recalling the fork in the road he faced when his family relocated to Tennessee and life turned upside down. “We moved seven or 10 times in one year. We’d adapt to a place, I’d meet friends, but I couldn’t get close to them because I knew we’d move.”



Mary McKinney, president and chief executive officer of Bethlehem Centers in Nashville, Tenn.

Bethlehem Centers provided some of the stability Mr. Stephens needed even after his family secured a more permanent home in Nashville’s John Henry Hale public housing. As he grew older, he witnessed too many of his friends slip into drug and alcohol abuse or other destructive life paths. It was his mother who had the foresight to enroll him into the after-school program along with his siblings.

“At first I thought this was just a new place where my mother could get rid of us, and I thought I wasn’t going to like it. But when I arrived everyone was open, and we had year-round activities,” Mr. Stephens said. He participated in the program five days a week from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. “It kept me busy after school instead of hanging out like the rest of my friends.”

One of Mr. Stephens’ closest friends lived next door, and, like him, came from a large family.

“He was just like me,” Mr. Stephens said. “His stepfather and mother welcomed us to the community. He attended Bethlehem Centers like me, but he didn’t love it. And the older we got, I started seeing a change in him. He started hanging out on the street. He wasn’t into school and education and the things I was into. One day I was heading to the center and asked him if

he was coming. He said no and went to hang out with friends I told him weren’t good for him. They went to another part of town and got into an altercation with another gang. The other gang shot at the car, and my friend was the only person who got hit. He got shot in the head. He died minutes later.”

One of the integral components of the after-school program is mentorship. “Growing up I didn’t have a father. It was just my mother and my siblings, but Mr. Flemming brought me in and sheltered me like I was his own son,” Mr. Stephens said. “He taught me how to be a good person, and that education was the key to success.”

Steve Flemming, 40, director of Bethlehem’s Family Resource Center and youth programs, has been affiliated with the mission institution for three decades. Like Mr. Stephens, Mr. Flemming also grew up in John Henry Hale public housing surrounded by the same challenges, and he witnessed similar tragedies. “There were all kinds of temptations in our community. Whether you saw someone on the street corner selling drugs or a big dice game going on in the middle of the neighborhood, you were always tempted to take part,” he said.

Mr. Flemming started coming to Bethlehem Centers at the age of 5. “I felt safe. I felt I was with people I could trust,” he said. At 14, he was offered his first job. “My mother worked a couple of jobs to make ends meet. We didn’t have the material things, but we had the necessities. When I turned 14, I was able to pay for my own clothes and lifted that burden from my mother.”

When it was time for higher education, Bethlehem Centers helped him se-



Above, Steve Flemming, right, mentors youth in Bethlehem Centers’ after-school program. Below, after-school program participants learn computer skills at the center.



cure four scholarships so he could attend Wilberforce University, the nation's oldest historically African American college, in Wilberforce, Ohio. He graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in child psychology and social services — then returned to Bethlehem Centers to give back to the place that had given him so much.

Leading by example, Mr. Flemming instills in the youth the absolute importance of an education. He glows when speaking of Devon Porter, 14, a ninth grader in the program. “Devon is a product of John Henry Hale com-

and stays in positive partnership with people, I know he will continue to be one of our true victories.”

But the victorious rarely succeed without help. “During my senior year of high school it was hard to get scholarship money,” Mr. Stephens said. “Mr. Flemming was able to get me a scholarship through Bethlehem Centers. He wrote a great letter of recommendation for me, and I now attend Tennessee State University.”

When Mr. Flemming was a teen, he too found a positive role model at the center who imparted the same values

morals and values. We clicked because of the things we have in common.”

Mr. Anderson now serves on the centers' board of trustees, but he remembers clearly the time he spent in the center as a youth. “Bethlehem Centers was where you escaped to so others couldn't find you,” he said. “When you grow up in a housing project you get associated with a gang of guys. People expect you to be 20 to 30 people deep. So you'd come here to get away.”

Meeting students from the local university who came to volunteer and mentor youth at Bethlehem Centers changed Mr. Anderson's life, he says. “One of the students said that you could be poor and still go to college. Once I found that out, it helped me figure out my life. I wanted to be a positive statistic for my neighborhood,” he said.

Mr. Anderson now has a master's degree and is continuing his education. “Graduating with a 3.8 GPA and being from the 'hood is unheard of,” he laughed. “Now I'm working on my doctorate degree in health care management simply to come back here and get the right information to the people.”

Mr. Anderson smiles when talking about Mr. Flemming. “It's amazing,” he said. “Just a handful of us got out. Some of the guys we grew up with never got out of Tennessee. I've got friends I send money to who are incarcerated, friends whose funerals I've attended.”

And what does Mr. Stephens want to do when he finishes his degree at Tennessee State? “I want to come back to Bethlehem Centers and hopefully take Mr. Steve's place,” he laughed. 



Robert Hassel teaches 2 ½ to 3 year olds in Bethlehem Centers' Busy Bees program.

munity and is a product of the Say Yes to Success after-school program for the past three years,” Mr. Flemming said. “Currently, he's an honor roll student, a go-getter who strives hard and puts a lot of energy and effort into everything he does. And as long as he stays focused

and principles. John Robert Anderson, 52, did for Mr. Flemming what he is now doing for Mr. Stephens, Devon and many other young people in the community.

“John Anderson is a unique guy,” said Mr. Flemming. “We grew up in the same community. A big brother, he led by example. He exhibited great Christian

**Gabriel Ramos-Rocchio**, is a writer who lives in New York City and **Nile Sprague** is a photo journalist based in Mendocino, Calif.

## An Answer to Prayer

CHILD CARE IS A GREAT CONCERN  
FOR WORKING MOTHERS.  
BETHLEHEM CENTERS LIGHTENS THAT LOAD.

by **MICHELLE BRINSON**

Michelle Brinson found excellence in child care for her son Jadon at Bethlehem Centers in Nashville, Tenn.



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My son was a little over a year old when I found myself in a difficult situation: I had to put him in day care, and I had to do it fast. Deciding whom you will trust your child to — your most sacred responsibility in the entire world — is a big decision. It's not something I was comfortable doing on short notice. But I didn't have a choice.

I scoured the Internet and after call-

ing several day cares, I quickly discovered this was going to be harder than I expected. The ones I could afford were disappointing to say the least. They were either in dangerous parts of town or looked rundown. The quality day cares were way more than I could afford as a single mom. I was very discouraged.

I mentioned my situation to a co-worker who told me about Bethlehem

Centers. All three of her children were enrolled at the center, and she was very happy with the care they received. I perused the center's website, made a couple of phone calls and scheduled a visit.

Bethlehem Centers is just a few blocks from my work, and it had an opening. After sharing my situation with the director, Bethlehem Centers

Children learn and play in Bethlehem Centers' child care programs, which received Tennessee top three-star rating.



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was willing to work with me regarding a weekly fee I could afford. These factors alone made this an ideal situation.

My visit sealed the deal. The first thing I noticed was how everything was on a child's level. Funny how I never thought how big the world might seem to my little boy. Yet at Bethlehem Centers they made the environment conducive to little ones. I met the staff and toured the facility. It was during naptime, so most of the boys and girls were sound asleep. It was quiet and peaceful.

I made several observations during my visit. First, it was a safe environment. I couldn't just walk into the building; someone had to let me in. This was comforting as I thought about my son's



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safety. Second, the staff was warm, friendly and caring. As a mom, I think one of the things I worried about the most was if the person caring for my child would love him and take good care of him. I definitely saw this to be the case for all the children. Third, there was a lot of paperwork to complete. However, I quickly learned that Bethlehem has had a three-star rating, the highest rating awarded to day care centers by the state of Tennessee, for several consecutive years. The center was very thorough, which means lots of paperwork. This was reassuring and only increased my confidence in the quality of care they provided.

Fast-forward to today. I am now a 43-year-old single mom who works full-

time for a nonprofit ministry serving the homeless of Middle Tennessee. My son Jadon just turned 3. His father continues to battle an addiction to drugs and does not play an active role in his son's life. I am the sole provider for my son, but I can't do it alone. Bethlehem Centers was and still is an answer to prayer.

I have a good job, but it is with a nonprofit, and I'm definitely not getting rich on what I make. I am not the recipient of any government assistance. I don't receive day care vouchers. I'm not on food stamps. I don't live in a housing project. Financially, things are constantly a struggle. I take on freelance jobs, as I am able, just to make ends meet. I'm extremely grateful Bethlehem Centers was willing to work with me based on what I was capable of paying under my present circumstances. I have friends who pay more than double what I do for day care and yet do not receive the same quality of care as Jadon does at Bethlehem Centers.

Jadon and I love Bethlehem Centers. He has learned so much since that first day. He looks forward to going to "school." He loves the teachers, his friends and all the things they are teaching him. I love that he's happy when I drop him off. In fact, some days he's having so much fun he doesn't want to leave. Bethlehem Centers is a huge blessing to us, and I am extremely grateful. 

**Michelle Brinson** is a 40-something single mom to 3-year-old Jadon, which means *thankful* in Hebrew. Ms. Brinson works full time writing and doing marketing for Nashville Rescue Mission in addition to her freelance writing business ([www.michellebrinson.com](http://www.michellebrinson.com)).

## Honoring Our Mothers and Fathers

BETHLEHEM CENTERS REACH OUT TO SENIORS WITH FOOD AND RELATIONSHIP.

by **GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO** and **NILE SPRAGUE**



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Mary Hudson McEwen helped found the Meals on Wheels nutrition program for seniors at Bethlehem Centers in Nashville, Tenn.

At 92, Mary Hudson McEwen still cooks her own meals. She also makes sure 180 other seniors eat through Bethlehem Centers' Meals on Wheels program.

Ms. McEwen helped found the Meals on Wheels program at Bethlehem Centers in 1982. "The center has been the backbone of the meals program since it started," she explained. "It was supposed to be an outside thing under the Bethlehem Centers' umbrella, but they took on a whole lot of responsibilities backing us up when we first started. Without Bethlehem Centers it could never have survived."

Like many of the volunteers and staff members, Ms. McEwen discovered Bethlehem Centers at a young age and

wanted to give back. "When I was about 8 or 10 years old, my brother and I would walk from east Nashville to north Nashville to get cod-liver oil, which was given free to keep children from getting rickets, because we didn't have vitamins," she said. "That's how we came to find out about Bethlehem Centers."

Working as a cashier at a local school, she was asked to be a cook at Camp Dogwood sponsored by Bethlehem Centers, which she accepted. "And when I retired," she said, "they asked me to work for Meals on Wheels."

Ms. McEwen has many memories of service and growth at Bethlehem Centers, but one concerning fundraising is

Karen Washington, right, packs Meals on Wheel lunches to deliver to seniors in Nashville. Below, Ms. Washington, and left, Margaret Whitfield and her sister Millie Washington visit a senior after delivering a Meals on Wheel lunch.



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and I knew the other one wouldn't live much longer."

Ms. Bell and many of the other drivers understand that they're working with aging people who look to them not only for food but for a caring and compassionate human relationship. That's part of what they love about their work. Margaret Whitfield, her sister Millie Washington and her daughter Karen Washington all drive for Meals on Wheels and love it. "We deliver lunches to needy seniors. I think it is the main meal of their day. But some of the people don't have visitors, so you're not only bringing them lunches, you're visiting them," Ms. Whitfield said.

"The volunteers will call me up and talk about conversations they had with the recipients," Ms. Bell said. "I remember two women who delivered to a lady who had a little ankle biting dog and a peach tree in her backyard. On that particular day the volunteers had delivered a peach cobbler dessert, and they got to talking with the recipient about how much they loved peaches. The following week when the volunteers arrived to deliver the recipient's meal, they found that she had taken her cane and knocked down as many peaches from her peach tree as she could and gave them a fresh bag of peaches, and they were just in awe. Imagine a 90-something-year-old picking peaches for those volunteers."

That's is the kind of beauty and grace very much present in our world, fortified by places like Bethlehem Centers where people go to work, volunteer, learn and grow. 

**Gabriel Ramos-Rocchio**, is a writer who lives in New York City and **Nile Sprague** is a photo journalist based in Mendocino, Calif.



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especially poignant. "We asked some of the clubs to make donations to the feeding program, and the president at that time wouldn't follow through on it, saying scholarships were more important. To make a long story short, the year before she died she had to be on the Meals on Wheels program. She left a little money to the program in appreciation of what she had received, saying she had no idea what the program was doing when she said no to funding it."

Brooke Bell is the director of seniors' programs at Bethlehem Centers, but she began as a driver for Meals on Wheels.

"When I first started, I had two routes, and on one of the routes were these two sisters. One was 95 and the other was 100," she said. "They lived in this huge house but stayed in one bedroom with twin beds. They had the best attitude, yet I was the only person with whom they'd interact. Because of their age, they couldn't go out into the world. Those two sisters were in a horrible house fire, and there was no one to get them out. One lived two days,