

ST. MARY PARISH, LOUISIANA

Free To Grow

Building Community Strength in Rural America



FREE TO GROW

In 1992, **Hurricane Andrew** tore across the gulf and on to the shores of **St. Mary parish**, devastating many of the small wooden homes that dotted the area in **close knit clusters**. Hurricane Andrew followed on the heels of a **different kind** of devastation that had been brewing inside those same homes for several years: widespread **drug use** and **dealing**. Despite these problems, the communities of St. Mary parish still had and continue to have **resources** and **aspirations**. The strong, caring and intense **religious faith** of many residents helped sustain a **sense of hope** throughout the parish and **countered** some of the more negative influences.

INTRODUCTION

St. Mary parish in the Louisiana Bayou is an agricultural area that runs into the salty waters of the Gulf Coast. These same waters have been a source of industry and jobs (in nearby salt mines and offshore oil rigs), as well as a reminder of Mother Nature's destructive force. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew tore across the gulf and onto the shores of the parish, devastating many of the small wooden homes that dotted the area in close-knit clusters.

Hurricane Andrew followed on the heels of a different kind of devastation that had been brewing inside those same homes for several years: widespread drug use and dealing, fueled by the crack cocaine trade that had already infested larger cities. A highway bisecting the parish, combined with rural seclusion and a lack of any meaningful law enforcement presence, made the parish a convenient base for many different levels of the lucrative drug trade. In an area of rural poverty and decreasing job prospects, where unemployment is almost 10 percent and per family income hovers around \$25,000 a year, many residents were unable to resist the considerable temptations of the only growth industry for miles around. Within one generation, a few households at a time, the communities of St. Mary parish lost their foundation, just as their modest homes had in the face of the hurricane's strong winds.

The parish that today's adults remember from their childhoods is one that certainly had its problems. Rural poverty, after all, has been a fact of life here for a long time. Yet like many other Americans who yearn for a more idyllic past, the parish residents don't remember these problems as seeming so insurmountable or widespread. Families watched out for one another; the hallmark of relationships between parents and children was respect. "That's how we came up," recalled one resident. "Our parents gave us respect and we gave it back."

The drug problems of just a few decades ago, another resident explained, were characterized by "Wino Joe," the harmless neighborhood drunk who slept off a binge on someone's porch and was sent home in the morning with a biscuit, a cup of coffee, and compassion. Today's counterparts are teenagers who break into neighbors' homes to steal anything they might be able to sell to support their habits. A neighbor who objects is viciously beaten with a brick; there have been six attempted murders in a 10-square-mile area in the past three years. Parents do not intervene; they are either afraid, or compromised, or both. (It is drug money, after all, that pays many a worried mother's utility bill in this impoverished community.)

The drug trade was so common and entrenched in the parish towns, with so little fear of interference, that drugs were sold openly in mid-afternoon from one barbershop chair to the next. A fifth-grader at one of the local elementary schools, emulating his elders, set up a network to deal bags of rock salt—complete with a multilevel pricing scheme and an enthusiastic sales force. "It just aches your heart," said a resident, shaking her head.



FROM HOUSING TO HEAD START

Despite all these problems, the communities of St. Mary parish still had and continue to have resources and aspirations. St. Mary Community Action Agency (CAA) is one of the most important resources, with a history spanning nearly four decades. The agency takes pride in its many forms of community action: 58 programs (including Head Start) are organized into four main departments. Another resource has been the strong, caring and intense religious faith of many residents, which helped sustain a sense of hope throughout the parish and countered some of the more negative influences. “The churches are the biggest business in the parish,” one resident observed—“maybe not in terms of revenues, but definitely in terms of customers!”

A Neighborhood Watch map of the area shows this battle for souls in graphic detail, with two kinds of icons superimposed on the local streets: one for “hot spots” for drug dealing and violence (to alert police and residents), the other for local churches. The values were still there, a pastor explained, but “we just needed someone who cared enough to revive them.”

That revival came in several overlapping pieces that, together, are slowly turning the tide. First, local self-help associations sprang up to deal with the immediate reconstruction of houses shattered by the hurricane. Originally sponsored by a nonprofit, the Southern Mutual Help Association, these associations did much more than shore up houses (literally, for those that were rebuilt are immediately recognized by their height a few feet off the ground to prevent flooding). From the process emerged a wide variety of committed, active local leaders who saw the potential and hope for change. Local pastors were key to this effort, moving quickly beyond their focus on their congregations to larger community issues. A Ministerial Alliance formed an Unmet Needs Committee to continue to identify and address local needs, with a focus on housing but with attention to other issues as well.

At the same time, the St. Mary Community Action Agency, as part of a five-year strategic planning process, conducted a community needs assessment in which residents identified the issues most important to them. Prominent among these was a wish for the parish children to grow up in a safe environment—more like the one their parents had enjoyed years ago.

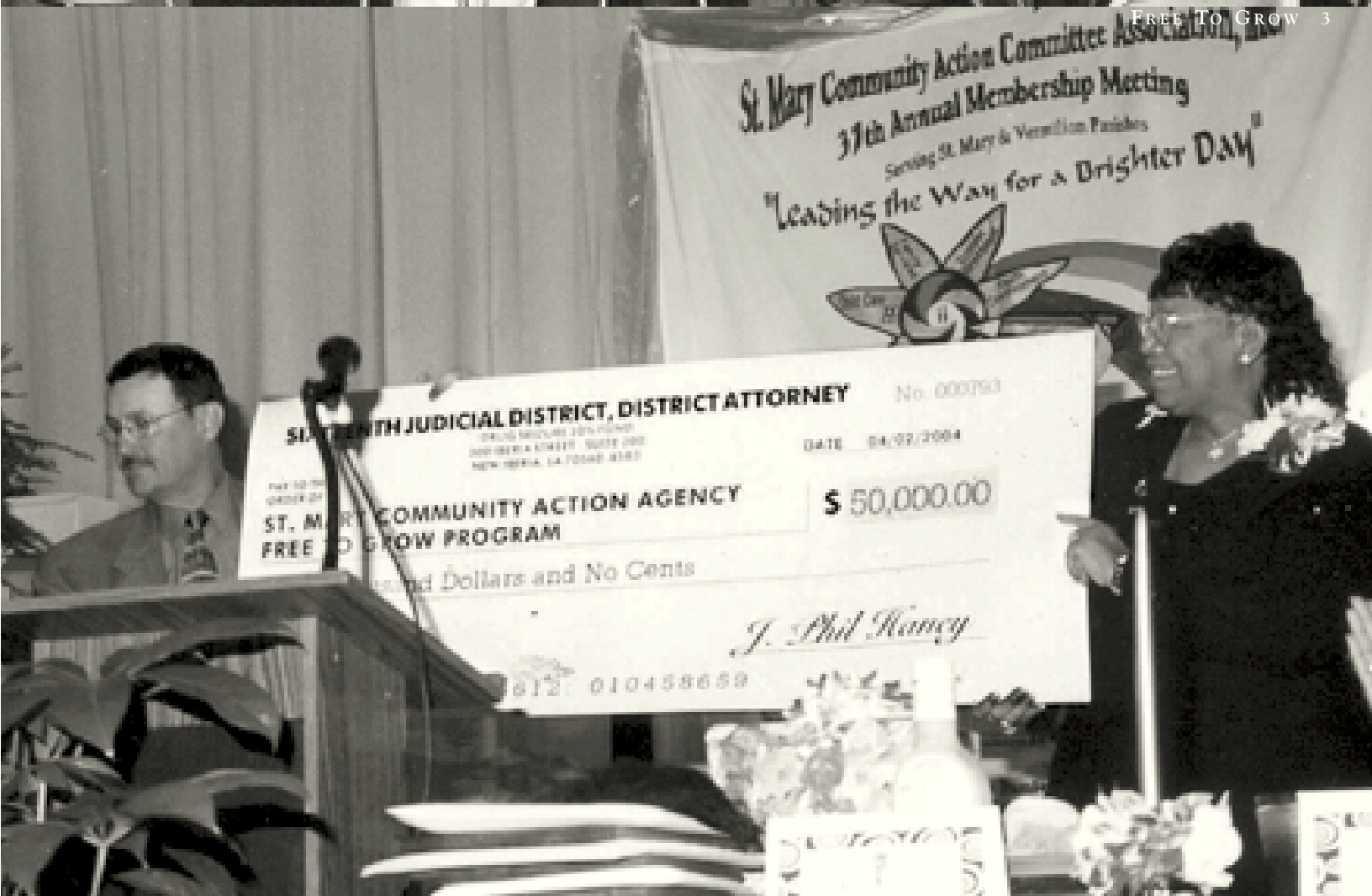
CHANGES IN THE ST. MARY CAA APPROACH

The Ministerial Alliance’s Unmet Needs Committee and the St. Mary CAA’s community assessment reaffirmed each other: The community was crumbling, literally and otherwise, and people were losing hope. Clearly, even though both groups were tapping every resource and talent they could, more was needed. But what? Into this difficult but promising situation came a national initiative that offered hope, ideas and concrete support. Called Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities, the program is administered in local Head Start agencies and is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and supported by Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health.

At first, the Head Start staff at St. Mary CAA wondered whether they were a good fit for the ambitious Free To Grow program—so much so that they came perilously close to not applying. Even after they were awarded funding and launched their first year of planning, Free To Grow seemed to the St. Mary CAA staff to be too complex and too different from the agency’s usual way of doing business. Staff saw the Free To Grow requirements for documentation and planning diagrams as extra work that had little to do with their core mission of helping children and families.

All of this changed after a three-day retreat away from the agency’s many daily demands, held in September 2003 for the agency’s board, staff and Head Start policy council.

Free To Grow's **focus** on **families** and the **community** resonated with staff. "My work is not just **preventing** substance abuse," commented one staff member, "but **building** healthy families."



With the luxury of some time for true reflection and some distance from the crush of the usual workload, everyone began to see Free To Grow in a different light—as a possible benefit instead of an onerous burden. “We saw how Free To Grow could affect everything we do,” said one staff member, “from housing, to child care, to health and social services, as well as our old and new partners.” Another described her “Aha!” moment this way: “Free To Grow seemed like water on a seed—it would let us go a lot further.” The staff knew they had accomplished a great deal with very limited resources (and a lot of “sweat and tears,” another added), but Free To Grow was a way to expand their impact—to show how “little becomes much.”

Inside St. Mary CAA, Free To Grow became part and parcel of every program (not just Head Start, where it originated). Its focus on families and the surrounding community resonated with staff. “My work is not just preventing substance abuse,” one commented, “but building healthy families.” The agency took its commitment to substance abuse prevention seriously and practiced what it preached, implementing a new drug-free workplace policy with drug testing.

Cross-training of staff and agency-wide use of Free To Grow family and community assessment forms (adapted from a FTG program in another state) helped make the case that every agency program was serving the same clients and the same community. Referrals became more routine as case managers and counselors saw more and more connections between their own work and that of their colleagues in another part of the building. Family Services staff became more

alert to signs of drug use and domestic violence in the families they served—and much more willing (and able) to discuss and address these issues.

One example of this change in perspective involved a mother who had dropped off her child in the Head Start classroom, only to be seen cowering in the hallway, sobbing. When the Head Start staff tried to console her, they learned that she was being abused at home and was afraid to return. In the past, the Head Start staff would have sympathized with her, but might not have seen the resolution of her problems at home as one of their many responsibilities. Looking at her situation through a broader Free To Grow lens, though, they took prompt action, connecting her to counseling and shelter services. “She never did go home,” a staff member proudly recalls.

In this same way, Free To Grow has connected both existing and new agency programs: a fatherhood initiative, parenting classes (complete with graduation ceremonies, gowns and certificates—often the only graduations the participants have experienced), a donated car program to help ease transportation burdens, and classes and counseling to get those who have dropped out of school back on track with a GED and better job prospects.

The upshot for agency staff is that Free To Grow is no longer seen as a complex program with hoops to jump through for the benefit of external funders. It has truly become incorporated into everything the agency does, across all four departments and 58 programs.



Accused of being “**narcs**” only made staff more determined than ever to **change** ideas about the true **sources of danger** and degradation in their community: drugs and the widespread **acceptance** of them.

TAPPING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Outside the agency, relationships with the surrounding community and with old and new partners changed too.

As a result of its long history of work in the parish, St. Mary CAA itself already enjoyed a solid reputation and a great deal of trust. Many community residents (and many staff members) had personal experience with the agency as Head Start parents or as participants in one or more of the agency's dozens of programs. However, other "community" programs had come and gone quickly over the years, leaving some residents suspicious about participating in a new initiative like Free To Grow—even though it was based within St. Mary CAA's Head Start program. And some of the program's new partners—particularly law enforcement—were not initially welcomed by community members.

A DELICATE PARTNERSHIP WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

The negative attitudes toward law enforcement came from two different directions—the residents who felt abandoned by the police and sheriff's departments, noting that patrols were few and far between despite the rampant violence and drug dealing, and the residents who wanted to be left alone or felt the criminal justice system was inherently unfair and biased. The Free To Grow approach requires local partnerships with law enforcement regardless of whether or not this is a popular decision. Fortunately, this aspect of the program happened to dovetail with the

views of the district attorney, who helped build trust in the community by showing up in person at town meetings to explain the criminal justice system and how it could work for residents as an ally instead of an adversary.

At these meetings, the D.A. and other law enforcement professionals answered questions about the types of drugs known to be in the area and how to detect signs that children or other family members might be using or dealing them. For example, some community residents were aware of crack cocaine use, but didn't know about the area's methamphetamine labs. The D.A. answered questions from parents about how to resolve situations in which their children may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time and also launched a treatment diversion program for first offenders.

An important part of the dialogue was helping residents learn how they could safely report drug-related activities. Even with reassurances, reporting a neighbor's or relative's drug use was a difficult line for many residents to cross—although many eventually did so, leading to drug busts of major local dealers. Initially, the Free To Grow staff were accused of being "narcs" for working with a mistrusted police force, but this accusation only made the staff more determined than ever to change their friends' and neighbors' ideas about the true sources of danger and degradation in the community they shared: drugs and the widespread acceptance of them. In response to the common complaint that "Free To Grow is just coming to lock our people up," staff insisted that, instead, they were there to offer positive alternatives to the behavior that was destroying so many families. Now norms have changed enough that there is wide support for a local ordinance that will hold parents responsible for break-ins committed by their children.

While the district attorney and other law enforcement representatives have been tremendously supportive of Free To Grow's



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goals and changed community attitudes about the role of law enforcement and the court system, there is still work to be done. Residents still feel that there are not enough police patrols (although this has improved) and response times remain slow in the parish because the closest police station is a 20-minute drive away. To remedy this problem, residents are now petitioning the Sheriff's Department for a police substation in one of the towns experiencing the highest crime rates.

CLOSE TIES TO SCHOOLS

Any initiative that addresses the needs of children and families gravitates toward schools, and Free To Grow is no exception. In St. Mary parish, the Safe and Drug-free Schools Coordinator is an active member of the Free To Grow team, seeing her role in both areas as "a perfect fit." Like counterparts in law enforcement and substance abuse treatment, professionals working within the school system cannot help but see the connection between what happens in the broader community and in families affecting an individual child. Even within the confines of a particular elementary school, a child is likely to have siblings in Head Start, in the same school and/or in the local high school. "If we can reach the whole family with messages about drugs, we can be more successful," one points out. Free To Grow has given these partners a way to feel more effective and less frustrated. In an area with such scarce resources, school partners see a big impact. "Free To Grow allowed us to connect the dots and look at the big picture," says one of the school-based partners.

The connections among partners are also evident. A substance abuse counselor who is often the sole resource for local residents remembers a call from the local elementary school administrator about the fifth-grader described earlier—the budding entrepreneur selling rock salt to his classmates. "This sounds like a matter for Free To Grow," the administrator said in calling in the counselor.

A VERY LOCAL APPROACH TO TREATMENT

Despite the significant drug problem in the area, residents had few viable options for drug treatment and substance abuse counseling close to home. To get help, most had to travel long distances; for those lacking insurance coverage, the barriers were even steeper. With the help of a dedicated treatment counselor who also had a law enforcement background, the Free To Grow program has been able to offer many more compassionate and local treatment options to residents who suffer from substance abuse, mental illness, or both disorders.

As an outsider, the counselor had to make an extra effort to build trust with local residents and overcome a legacy of broken promises. An advantage of being an outsider, however, was that she was able to convince residents that their current conditions—rife with so much drug use, grief and despair—were not normal and did not have to be tolerated. She credits Free To Grow with bolstering this therapeutic philosophy and giving both providers and clients new hope for change.

Being known and trusted personally has made a difference not only to treatment regimens but to results. Clients are identified through some formal referrals, but more often through informal ones—a conversation at church, a parenting class or a potluck supper. In the past, access to treatment was rare and difficult; now, it is common and much easier, with few opportunities missed in this small community to help someone in obvious trouble. One violent and destructive client, the counselor discovered, was on incorrect doses



of his medication for paranoid schizophrenia. With the dosage adjusted, he is able to live at home and at peace with his formerly terrified neighbors. The counselor or another Free To Grow staff member transports him to his medical appointments and use the car ride for impromptu counseling sessions. Another client has gone on an unlikely trajectory from armed robbery to college, thanks to an intervention that took place on his home turf instead of the impersonal hallways of a state facility.

CLEAN HANDS AND PARKS

The counselor's compassionate but direct approach to drug problems and Free To Grow's relationship with the district attorney are just a few examples of how the FTG team has looked unflinchingly at the community's drug problems and confronted community acceptance of the drug trade head-on. With so many Free To Grow partners born and raised in the community, and the drug culture so interwoven within extended families, this has taken real courage and persistence.

To tackle the issue of community acceptance of drugs and other risk factors, a Free To Grow staff member who is also a minister came up with a way to symbolically show individual and community complicity in the negative influences that swirled around them. The idea came to him while reflecting on the passage from Psalms 24:1-4:

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas and established it upon the floods. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully."

The idea was to use the powerful notion of clean hands to encourage community residents to wash themselves of these influences—to detach themselves from anyone involved in illegal drugs, even if that person was a parent, brother, friend or acquaintance. In addition to drug use, other risk factors—child abuse/neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence, community deterioration—were each represented by a different color, rendered as a cut-out hand on construction paper.

For weeks, pastors throughout the community mentioned the clean hands idea in their sermons—and its twin messages of hope and responsibility. On a fall day, a kickoff event and parade heralded the message: If these are behaviors you are involved in, you can wash your hands of them and make a clean start. Help is available. But even if you're not involved in these things, if you look the other way, you are still condoning it. Your hands are dirty too.

The color green was reserved for Free To Grow, representing growth, prosperity and partnership. As people symbolically washed their hands of the other colors, a huge tree was created with leaves of green hands: a new shade of Free-to-Grow green.

Green is also the color of two other community changes that flowed from the Free To Grow partnerships and possibilities. The first is a park in an area experiencing some of the worst drug-related violence, giving local children a safe place to play. The second, across the highway, is the color of trees and grass surrounding the ground just broken for a new recreation center. "The last thing we needed was another gym," says one of the organizers. Instead, the recreation center will be a safe community gathering place for multiple generations, including two classrooms that will be in use around the clock.

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Free To Grow's model is one of **partnerships**, both **old and new**, bringing **Head Start** together with **schools, law enforcement**, the substance abuse **treatment** community, local **businesses**, and **others sharing** the same goals of **strengthening families and communities**.

Free To Grow was not directly responsible for the new recreation center, but gets the credit all the same. Why? Because when the entire project was in jeopardy (after delays had run construction costs through the proverbial roof), it was community residents who stood up for themselves on the steps of the parish courthouse and demanded a bond issue to cover the extra costs. They held local officials accountable to keep at least one of the promises they had made to the community, and it is that sense of empowerment that residents attribute to Free To Grow.

Louisiana, “and be as clear as possible about expectations and roles.” In their case, law enforcement was a particularly important new partner, but so were partners in the Safe and Drug-free Schools Committee and a local substance abuse counselor.

Keep the faith. In St. Mary parish, religious faith has helped residents and the Free To Grow team overcome tremendous adversity and maintain a sense of hope for the future. Free To Grow team members worship together and local pastors are both formal and informal resources for the partnership.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Asked what advice they would give others considering a similar approach, the Free To Grow team members offer these lessons they have learned over their five years of experience.

Stay the course. At many junctures—including the initial application itself—the St. Mary CAA agency staff and then different Free To Grow partners experienced moments of real doubt and disappointment. They were undeterred by setbacks and kept their focus unwaveringly on the families and communities they wanted to restore to health and well-being. In many cases, these families and communities were also their own.

You can't do it alone. The Free To Grow model is one of partnerships, both old and new, bringing Head Start together with schools, law enforcement, the substance abuse treatment community, local businesses, and others sharing the same goals of strengthening families and communities. The task is massive and ambitious; it will not be resolved overnight, or by one agency acting alone. “Bring every possible partner to the table,” advise the Free To Grow team members in

A VEHICLE FOR HOPE

Summing up the effects of Free To Grow in the parish's towns, a team member described it this way: “Free To Grow is a vehicle for hope.” Like the cars that St. Mary CAA gives to those who have no other mode of transportation, Free To Grow is a vehicle that may have looked a little dubious at first. But the Louisiana Free To Grow partners took a chance on this unfamiliar vehicle, recognizing that it might in fact get them where they wanted to go. It may have moved slowly at times, and required some tinkering along the way, but as they got to know it, they became more and more attached to it. In the long run, it proved to be extremely reliable, with a promise to keep running for a long, long time.



FREE TO GROW PROGRAM PARTNERS

Central Vermont Community Action Council, Inc.,
Barre, VT

Community Action Project, Tulsa OK

Head Start of Greater Dallas, Dallas, TX

Human Resources Agency of New Britain,
New Britain, CT

Laguna Department of Education, Laguna, NM

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Committee, Inc., Hughesville, MD

Southwest Human Development, Phoenix, AZ

St. Mary-Vermilion Community Action Agency, Inc.,
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Free To Grow was established in 1992 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Working in collaboration with the national Head Start program, and with technical support provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, the program's model development phase provided \$5.4 million over five years to five Head Start programs in diverse communities throughout the country.

Building on risk and resiliency research, as well as on the work of noted developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner on the ecological development of the child, Free To Grow's first grantees were asked to establish community partnerships in order to create substance abuse prevention approaches that would strengthen young children's overall environment, specifically their families and communities.

In 2000, based upon the promising results of this pilot phase, RWJF, joined with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and local community funders to launch a national research and program demonstration phase of the initiative, committing \$20 million to test the Free To Grow approach in fifteen communities nationwide. A rigorous evaluation is being conducted by Wake Forest University School of Medicine, in order to identify the program's impact over the four-year demonstration.



FREE TO GROW

Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-free Communities

MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
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