



# A truly unique 'Home'

JON CAMPISI / STAR PHOTO

**Northern Home for Children opened in 1853** and landed at its current location in 1923. The institution has adapted its approach over the years in order to keep up with the needs of children and families. Northern Home now offers an array of services to children and young parents.

By Jon Campisi  
Star Staff Writer

The Northern Home for Children began pre-Civil War as a place of refuge for orphaned children.

Since that time, the mission of the Roxborough institution has expanded. And while the 156-year-old Northern Home no longer has a strict residential component, per se, it continues to serve the needs of less fortunate youngsters across the city.

"The nice thing about this agency is it changes as needs change," Donna Bolno says on a video about Northern Home.

The *Star* recently sat down with Bolno, Northern Home's director of development, to discuss the agency's place in the city and how it evolved from a traditional orphanage to an organization offering a wide array of services for both children and young parents.

The Northern Home for Children opened Aug. 3, 1853. At the time, it was called "Northern Home for Friendless Children . . . an association for the laudable and benevolent purpose of educating and providing for friendless and destitute children."

Just under a year later, Northern Home moved to 23rd and Brown streets. It remained there until 1923, when it relocated to its current six-acre site at 5301 Ridge Ave.

Today, Northern Home is a place where teenage mothers can live and get the education and support that are often necessary to raise a young child. The agency also offers family services, behavioral health and com-

munity-based services, and works with between 26 and 30 city schools. It also has begun a child-adoption component.

Northern Home even got a mention on an episode of Oprah Winfrey's television show, after rock star-turned-sports-team-owner-turned philanthropist Jon Bon Jovi donated school uniforms, school supplies and computers. In conjunction with MTV's *Real World Philadelphia*, Bon Jovi helped to secure and build a new on-campus playground for the children.

In Bolno's mind, the combination of dedicated staff members, helpful volunteers, corporate partnerships and name recognition, celebrity or otherwise, comes together to form a worthwhile community service that has solidified its place in Philadelphia history.

"We are very proud of the high-caliber work we do with children," Bolno said.

These days, Northern Home has many components. One of the buildings houses Generations I, a program geared toward teenage mothers ages 16 to 18. The young moms, who are referred by the city's Department of Human Services, and were removed from their homes for one reason or another, are allowed to stay at Generations with one child.

While in the program, the mothers are taught parenting skills. But they also must remain in school, which is why the agency is beginning a day-care program, so the kids will have a place to stay while mom is in the classroom.

"The young mothers are taught a variety of life skills to ensure a successful life for them and their children," Bolno said.

In May, Northern Home will unveil the new Generations II, which will be similar to Generations I in theory but will be geared toward mothers ages 18 to 21. As opposed to the dorm room-style setup in Generations I, the new program will contain suites, and each young mother can have up to two children in the room they share with a roommate.

Unlike Generations I, where the moms are referred through DHS, these young women will be too old for the children and youth system, and may otherwise be living in shelters or on the street, said Mary Fran Riffel, a development associate at Northern Home.

The referrals for this program come from the city's Achieving Independence Center, and the people are defined homeless by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

As one traverses the campus, another building becomes visible, one that is critical for those youngsters who may need the type of guidance they are not receiving elsewhere. Here, Northern Home offers both an after-school partial hospital program and an outpatient behavioral health program. The former is described in literature as "an interventive, non-residential behavior-based program for socially or emotionally troubled youth."

The program offers individual counseling, group therapies, academic enrichment and participation in sports and other recreational activities. The latter works toward treating and resolving family issues, and includes individual, family and group therapies.

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Riffel said the after-school partial hospital program currently serves 65 boys and 20 girls ages 9 to 13. The program offers dinner, tutoring and academic enrichment, therapeutic activities and recreation.

Riffel said the partial hospital programs, while the need increases, do have a limit as far as the number of children who can be involved because of space constraints.

The interesting thing about Northern Home, Riffel said, is that it started as a place where children who became orphaned during the Civil War could go to seek solace, regardless of whether they lived in the North or the South. This inclusive outlook continues today as the agency welcomes all children regardless of background.

Because many of the children served by Northern Home are needy and impoverished, the donations of food for Thanksgiving, gifts during the holidays, and other items, are appreciated by staff and families.

"Basically, I do it for the smile," Kevin Tierney, a general manager with Wawa,

said on the Northern Home video while explaining why he supports the agency, monetarily or otherwise.

Bolno said Northern Home has had an ongoing partnership with Wawa food markets for more than 20 years. The agency has numerous individual, corporate and school and university partnerships, many of which provide incalculable help, caring and support.

"When a company comes for a 'day of caring,' they are able to do in a half-day what would take us months," Bolno said. "Volunteers are critical to us."

Riffel herself started as a volunteer and continued in that capacity for four years until she joined Northern Home as an employee. Today, the agency employs about 300 people and benefits from the work of more than 200 volunteers.

One of the main aspects of Bolno's job is to network with individuals who have an interest in helping children. In these difficult economic times, alternative sources of funding have to be explored. The agency is sustained mostly by city and state funding, but also applies for funding from foundations, both public and private. Revenue is also generated through fund-raisers and "friend-raisers" held throughout the year, such as the upcoming *A Night at the Races . . . Kentucky*

*Derby Preview Party*, which will take place at the Manayunk Brewery on May 1. The \$25 fee, which includes beer, pizza, snack foods and desserts, will assist mothers and babies in the Generations programs.

Still, money can be hard to come by, so donations of all denominations are greatly appreciated so Northern Home can provide the children with the services they need, Bolno said.

"There's always a shortfall, and we always want to do enriching things," she said. "In these times, (funding) is really difficult."

Bolno has been at Northern Home for 10 years. Previously, she worked as both a teacher and a social worker. At Northern Home, she has had various job titles, but it's her current gig that has her mingling with the greater community on a constant basis.

"I love meeting people who really care about children and the community," she said.

The work that Northern Home does is at times very difficult, Bolno said, but it's extremely rewarding.

"It's a very nice atmosphere in which to work because it's very positive," she said.

Northern Home has a number of psychologists on its staff, as well as two full-

time psychiatrists, social workers and therapists, among other professionals. The well-staffed agency also has a new chief executive officer, Tracey Lavallias, a man who Bolno said is a perfect fit for the organization and sets the tone that is needed.

"He's great," she said. "We are so lucky to have him."

Lavallias was the head of behavioral health at Northern Home for seven years before taking an outside job opportunity. His return, Bolno said, marked a step in the right direction for the agency.

From the mother-child services to the after-school support to the behavioral health programs, Northern Home is a place where many needy children and families can get the care and attention they deserve, at least in the eyes of those who work here.

"It's a very inclusive continuum of services," Bolno said. "It's constantly evolving as needs are identified." ●●

*To learn more about the Northern Home for Children, call Donna Bolno at 215-482-1423, ext. 1216, or send e-mail to [dbolno@northern-home.org](mailto:dbolno@northern-home.org). The Web site is [www.northern-home.org](http://www.northern-home.org)*

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