

JFK JR. THE CUNY CONNECTION

Kennedy saw a need for qualified personnel to help individuals with disabilities. His plan lives on at the Institute for Worker Education.

By Cathy Rainone

WHEN JOHN F. KENNEDY JR. decided he wanted to help individuals with disabilities, he chose to focus on the low-paid workers who care for them.

“John wasn’t only interested in people with disabilities,” says William Ebenstein, University Dean for Health and Human Services and Executive Director of the John F. Kennedy Jr. Institute for Worker Education. “He picked an issue that people weren’t talking about then but now they do all the time: that you can’t have a good service for people with disabilities unless you have a good, quality and educated workforce.”

For Kennedy, it started with a challenge from his aunt Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder of the Special Olympics. Shriver told the younger Kennedy generation that she would provide seed money for the best new idea they could come up with to help disabled Americans. Kennedy’s project – to help low wage, front line workers advance in their careers, won the competition and a \$50,000 grant. In 1989, he launched Reaching Up, a nonprofit organization that helps people who work with individuals with disabilities get access to higher education and training.

The University played a major role through the CUNY Consortium for the Study of Disabilities, and since Kennedy’s death in 1999, the John F. Kennedy Jr. Institute for Worker Education.

In researching his project, Kennedy talked with experts and parents and advocates of those who work with individuals with disabilities and found there was a workforce crisis caused by low wages, poor training and benefits, and lack of career advancement. High turnover made it hard for nonprofit service organizations to ensure quality care. Kennedy realized, Ebenstein says, that only experienced, educated and motivated workers could provide excellent care.

Once Kennedy had the grant, he needed to find a higher education institution that would create special programs to help educate the workers. Kennedy’s adviser, Jeffrey Sachs, former senior health and human services adviser to New York Governors Hugh L. Carey and Mario M. Cuomo, introduced him to James P. Murphy, then chairman of the CUNY Board of Trustees. Murphy joined forces with Kennedy to create college-level courses at CUNY for frontline staff who work with children and adults with disabilities. The CUNY Consortium for the Study of Disabilities was established in partnership with Reaching Up, and Ebenstein was hired as director of Workforce Development at the Consortium.

“John realized that we have to start paying attention to staff who work with the people with disabilities, we have to



Kennedy and a logo for the organization he founded.



A Kennedy Fellow scholarship enabled Joseph Miller, now a principal, to study full time.

show respect to them,” says Ebenstein who pioneered the University’s undergraduate and graduate certificates in Disability Studies. “He saw that they were amazing people who needed an opportunity to get ahead. He chose to partner with CUNY because it’s a public system and he found a person at a high level who was very interested.”

After Reaching Up came the Kennedy Fellows Program, which puts participants on a faster track to career advancement. To qualify, workers must attend CUNY. They receive \$1,000 each year and mentoring. About 1,000 students have graduated from the Fellows program, but, as Ebenstein points out, they never really leave.

“Once a Kennedy Fellow, you’re always a Kennedy Fellow,” says Ebenstein.

Joseph Miller was a paraprofessional at P.S. 373 in Staten Island while attending college to get his undergraduate degree. He was married, raising a family and didn’t have enough money to enroll full time, but that changed when he was accepted as a

Kennedy Fellow in 1995. The scholarship allowed him to study full time at the College of Staten Island and get his degree in 18 months instead of four years.

“The program gave me access to the proper support to help me attain those goals, find proper mentors and speed up the process,” says Miller, who became a teacher and is now a principal at P.S. 44 in Staten Island. “You needed approval and signatures to take that many credits. [The fellowship] gave me access to resources within the CUNY system to further my education at a quicker pace.”

Miller says he met Kennedy many times and still keeps in touch with Ebenstein and others at the Institute.

“John knew all the Kennedy Fellows personally,” says Ebenstein. “They had meetings with John and we would invite them to special events ... because we always wanted to hear their voice.”

Ebenstein worked closely with Kennedy for 10 years — until his death in 1999 — and together they expanded the Consortium to include helping nurse assistants become nurses and paraprofessionals become teachers. Ebenstein says he and Kennedy would pay surprise visits to CUNY colleges to meet with students in the Disabilities Studies program.

“He was a great guy, very down to earth,” says Ebenstein. “We would take the subway together to Medgar Evers College and people would come up to him and he was always extremely, extremely polite and respectful to people in a very genuine way.”

After Kennedy was tragically killed in a plane crash, his colleagues wanted to carry on his work. In 2000, with the support of the Kennedy family, they renamed the Consortium the John F. Kennedy Jr. Institute for Worker Education. “I received some very nice notes from Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Caroline Kennedy and Maria Shriver,” says Ebenstein, who in 2006 received a Mayoral Advocacy Award for his efforts to raise the quality of life for people with disabilities.

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“They were all encouraging.”

The Institute, which still partners with Reaching Up, was integrated into the Office of the University Dean for Health and Human Services in 2007. The Kennedy family continues to support the work of the Institute. In 2009, Caroline Kennedy took part in the 20th-anniversary celebration of the Kennedy Fellows program.

The Institute carries on Kennedy’s vision of helping educate front-line workers, says Ebenstein. The shortage of nurses within the health care industry is of special concern today.

“John is to be respected for his vision because he saw that the destiny of people who are receiving the services is connected to the destiny of people who are providing them,” says Ebenstein. “I don’t know if John would’ve ever sought public office, but his work with us was part of developing public policy for what he could stand for. And we wanted to support him in any way we could.”