This fall some children enrolled in their first early educational experience at Sara Holbrook Community Center in Burlington. Parents are getting oriented to course curriculum and new schedules. Staff, student interns and adult volunteers are acclimating to work settings.

As the new school year begins, many new faces arrive through the door at Sara Holbrook Community Center, Executive Director Leisa Pollander said.

The center located in the Old North End of Burlington was founded in 1937 to serve families struggling to get by. According to U.S. Census 2010 data, Old North End neighborhoods constitute the highest concentration of poverty in Burlington and Vermont.

Pollander said the center has long been a haven of support for the city. It has a long history of serving as an incubator for evolving community needs. For example, The Boys and Girls Club of Burlington was established at the center, as was the Committee on Temporary Shelter. The Center has been a United Way member agency since the United Way was founded.

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Former Sara Holbrook student and University of Vermont graduate, Thu Troung, is a Head Start Early Care Advocate teaching a preschool class as Sara Holbrook Community Center Executive Director Leisa Pollander looks on at the Sara Holbrook Community Center in Burlington.
Two distinct populations are served at the center, some of the families served are generational poor, some are new Americans, whether immigrants or refugees, who have just arrived.

Founder Sara Holbrook was a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Vermont. Her center has initiated many services to assist low-income children and their families over the decades.

Pollander, 56, of Jeffersonville has worked for the non-profit for 14 years. We spoke with her on Sept. 10.

Burlington Free Press: What does an average day look like at Sara Holbrook?

Leisa Pollander: When you walk into one of our sites, you will see kids and adults engaged in learning, and, hopefully, having fun while they are doing it.

Preschoolers learning to be part of a classroom community, playing and preparing for Kindergarten, elementary school children receiving help with homework or creating a craft project, teens hanging out with their friends, playing an organized game or enrolled in an enrichment activity, parents accessing our food pantry to help feed their children—all are part of the tempo here.

LP: This community. We start every fiscal year with a zero-based budget and build from there.

None of our funding sources are guaranteed. We have incredible staff who work long hours for less than stellar salaries. We have board members and volunteers who step up to the plate and give it their all.

We have community partners who are willing to come to the table and help figure out how to blend resources to make things better for the most vulnerable members of our community. Our annual budget is around $600,000, by partnering with like-minded entities, whether they are non-profits, communities of faith, businesses, private donors or foundations, we are able to do more than we could alone.

FP: How did your career begin?

LP: I had to work as I attended college. As a University of Vermont sophomore, I started working part time at a health care clinic and was very fortunate to work with an incredible group of women who taught me a lot about social and economic justice.

After three years, I started a 15 year stint with two different Vermont Head Start programs, where I saw the benefits of early intervention for low income children, as well as how necessary it is for parents to have support and encouragement.

FP: What did you want to be when you grew up?

LP: I grew up in a small farm in Cambridge, Vermont, and I knew that I either wanted to work with animals or people. Beyond that, I didn’t really focus on a specific career until I tried out a host of courses at UVM.

FP: What did you study?

LP: I graduated from UVM with a degree in social work.

FP: Who was your biggest influence when you began your career and why?

LP: I had two professors in the Social Work Department at UVM who left lasting impressions, for very different reasons.

Sara Holbrook innovations:

» Establishing collaborative partnerships to the benefit of the children and families served: Champlain Valley Head Start became an integral partner in our preschool class in 2002; Head Start added medical, dental, nutritional, mental health and social service components that the Center was unable to provide with our budget constraints.

» The Center achieved a 5 STAR rating from the Child Development Division of the Vermont Department for Children and Families. That ranking entitles the Center to enter into partnership with the Burlington School District for the purpose of ensuring high quality, developmentally appropriate early education services to Burlington preschoolers.

» Ten years ago, the New North End Youth Center, located in what was then an armory on Gosa Court, became a Sara Holbrook Center site which serves about 600 tweens and teens.

» About seven years ago, the Center partnered with Burlington Parks and Recreation and the Burlington School District in an effort to expand the number of summer day camp slots for low-income elementary aged children.

» The district provides the space and Burlington Parks and Recreation adds a staff member to the Sara Holbrook Community Center staff. Joint training and fundraising is conducted, resulting in serving 36 children in a half day setting to serving 60 children in a full day setting.

» The First Congregational Church of Burlington partners with the center to provide youth volunteers in a service learning capacity.

» The center is affiliated with UVM’s College of Education and Social Services, providing the center with dedicated and skilled employees.

Margaret Whittlesey taught public policy, which made me look at how our political process impacts people across the economic spectrum. After I had been here for a few years, I was delving into the history of the center and discovered that Ms. Whittlesey had at one point served as the agency’s president of the board, which was very interesting.

Debra Cohen Klein taught me about the introspective side of social work; making the time to think things through, analyze why I felt as I did about a particular topic and then how to articulate my thoughts as an advocate for those I worked with.

FP: What fuels your passion?
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Making connections to people, whether it is to a child, a family, to a co-worker or community partner or to a donor.

We are all human, and we all have strengths and growth areas. We can all learn from one another if only we are open to that. As a society, we cannot afford to leave a person behind — otherwise we all pay the cost for that. And, most importantly, if we all work together, despite our differences, or maybe because of them, we can get things done.

FP: Could you describe your duties and responsibilities at Sara Holbrook?

LP: When the shop is small, the list of duties is long in a tiny non-profit. I am the chief grant writer, program developer and public face of the agency. Human resources, bookkeeper, and board support are all part of my everyday duties.

FP: Could you tell me about the best day on the job so far?

LP: When I started here in 1999, there was a young man who participated in our evening drop-in teen program, Ahmed Fico was one of the first Bosnian students at Burlington High School. When he graduated, he was hired to staff our elementary after school and summer camp programs. He attended UVM and graduated with a degree in computer science and was hired by a local company that does work across the entire U.S. When he agreed to serve on the center’s board, it dawned on me that one of the center’s “kids” was now one of my bosses.

FP: Your worst day?

LP: I think it was in February of 2002. We all came into work on a Monday morning after a really cold weekend, only to discover that the furnace had died at some point and the water pipes had all frozen and burst. The downstairs was a skating rink, we had to close down, rehab the building and get back up and running — I think we re-opened within a week.

FP: What do you do to de-press after a long day on the job? How do you deal with the pressing needs of this non-profit?

LP: I have a strong corps of support people I can count on for help process issues when I am feeling stuck. Vicky Smith from the King Street Center, Kirby Dunn from Home Share Vermont, Maggie Leugers from Burlington Parks and Recreation and Rita Mallett from COTS are all instant go-to people for me.

Internally, I have an incredible board of directors; Kathy Schirling, our board president, is one of the warmest, most caring and supportive people I know.

The center is blessed with some really committed, hard-working and articulate staff who work tirelessly to support kids and families. Martha Makaym and the staff at the United Way of Chittenden County are all great listeners and community doers. I don’t ever feel alone when I am grappling with an agency issue.

FP: In what ways have you been innovative in your approach in leading Sara Holbrook?

LP: Over the past 14 years, we have established many collaborative partnerships to the benefit of the children and families we serve. None of these partnerships are innovative because my work alone; Burlington has many creative leaders who are willing to come to the table and figure out how to pool resources in a way that benefits the community and stretches resources to meet some very pressing needs.

FP: Have there been limits to innovation?

LP: Funding is always an issue in the nonprofit world. I think Vermont has one of the highest per capita rates of non-profit organizations, and we all compete for very limited dollars.

We have to be mindful of that and continue to develop partnerships with nonprofits, city and governmental entities, communities of faith, corporate and private donors. Fundraising takes an enormous amount of time, as does the establishment of trusting relationships. But those relationships are integral to developing true partnership.

FP: What’s next for you?

LP: When it is time to pass the torch, I think I will take a year off and just chill. I have had a job since I was 13. Most of those years, I have held down two jobs. Then I would like to consider a stint in the Peace Corps.

FP: If you could do anything you wanted to innovate at Sara Holbrook, with no barriers, what would you do? The sky is the limit.

LP: In order to take the center’s programs to the next level, we need a larger facility. This building was built in 1965, and was expanded in the 1990’s, but we are maxed out for space. The need for more programming is evident and we can’t meet that need without addressing the space issue.

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Sara Holbrook Community Center Executive Director Leisa Pollander and Champlain Valley Head Start Director Paul Behrman peek in on a Vermont Adult Learning English Class. LYNN
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