

TEAM director retires after 12 years of service

By Richard Knoll and Bonnie Blake

The Valley is about to lose one of its greatest resources. TEAM (Training, Education and Manpower) in Derby has announced that Bonnie Bodak, Director of Family Support, retired after helping hundreds of the community action agency's clients for the last twelve years.

Originally hired by TEAM in 1994 to run the Head Start Plus program – a life skills adult training program, Bodak's role continued to expand as the agency and the community recognized her special talents for nurturing, encouraging, and advocating for her clients. First as Career Education and Training Coordinator and then as Program Manager for Employment and Training Programs, Bodak developed numerous employment and training programs to promote self-sufficiency and self-esteem, and developed Nontraditional Opportunities for Women training programs. In recognition for her outstanding contributions, Bodak was promoted to Director of Family Support in 2004, but chose to continue to provide direct services to her clients.

Bodak gave her all, day after day, and was a valuable member of TEAM's organization and our community and we have been blessed to have her among us. We know that her legacy will be a lasting one and that generations to come will benefit from her good works."

TEAM wanted to recognize Bodak's accomplishments with a formal ceremony, but the unassuming Bodak declined the spotlight. "Bonnie is one of those unselfish, egoless professionals who doesn't want – in fact shuns- personal recognition. She attributes any success to the individual clients."

She has nonetheless been honored by a number of area organizations including the Valley Council for Health and Human Services which gave her the "Lewis Savitsky Staff Excellence Award" in 2004; Workplace, Inc. recognized her with the regional "Partner of the Year Award" in 1999; and the *Connecticut Post* named her the "Woman Wise Woman of Substance" in 1996.

Diane Stroman, Vice President of Development for TEAM, said Bodak was hired in 1994 based on a strong recommendation from Claude Perry, Executive Director of the Ansonia Economic Development Commission and Fair Housing/Fair Lending Officer. Bodak had worked for Perry while he was the Economic Development Director for Ansonia, and he had nothing but praise for her as a person and employee. “Superb” is the word he chose. “The beautiful thing about Bonnie was her willingness and determination to see things from someone else’s perspective.” This was particularly important when working with people who had come from dramatically different backgrounds than her own.

Bodak is a team player who never puts herself before others, according to Stroman. “Bonnie is a true believer that anyone can accomplish their goals if they work hard and put their mind to it....she believes our job is to give men and women the skills and tools to get on the road to economic freedom. She helps individuals help themselves by listening to and encouraging them and enabling them to recognize their strengths.

One of Bodak’s many success stories is Tim Grey who came to TEAM about nine years ago when he lost his job and enrolled in the agency’s career training program. Grey was a single dad raising two young children and says that Bodak not only helped him find a job, but also helped him through the Christmas holiday that year. “I have a lot of respect for Bonnie. She is an awesome lady, and has a heart of gold.” Grey, who believes in “taking help when you need it, but giving back when you have it,” has continued his relationship with Bodak and TEAM, volunteering whenever he can. “I benefited so much from my affiliation with her. Bonnie made me feel good about myself” and imparted a “can do attitude....She is just a great lady.”

Chip Anderson, Director of Finance and Planning at NEON (Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now Inc. – the city’s anti-poverty agency), was a grant writer at TEAM from 1997 to 2000 and had the opportunity to observe Bodak working with clients. “Bonnie,” he says, “has a heart for the client. Her work was professionally done, but always with compassion for the client.” He has never forgotten how helpful Bodak was both professionally and personally. “I was a single dad at the time trying to raise a daughter. Bonnie was very supportive....She understands what people need and does her best to make it happen....yet always in the background...she is very quiet about her role.” In fact, adds Anderson, “even if people don’t remember her name down the road, they will remember what she did for them, how she helped them get their lives back together.”

Others in the community who had occasion to work with Bodak appreciated her determination to find a solution to any problem. Patricia Kaplan, Executive Director of New Haven Legal Assistance, found Bodak to be “an extremely strong advocate for her clients” during the numerous times she worked with Bodak to assist people who had come to TEAM for emergency housing assistance. “Bonnie would try to cut through the bureaucracy and find these people a place to live right away and ascertain their legal rights. Cities often don’t understand their responsibilities in these situations ...Bonnie would make sure [her clients] were properly taken care of.

John Trevorelli, Case Manager at Spooner House – the Valley’s homeless shelter, says he has always been impressed with Bodak and found her to be “probably my greatest resource...she has a wealth of knowledge. I could always call her when faced with a problem, and she would know who to call or what to do, and no matter what was asked of her, she never acted as if it were a burden.” Trevorelli added, “Bonnie will be hard to replace...she has a special way of dealing with people and problems. In fact, Bonnie never saw things in terms of problems...she saw challenges that could be tackled and solved...Bonnie is a solution seeker!”

Like everyone else we spoke with, Trevorelli was saddened to learn that Bodak was retiring. “This will be a great loss to TEAM and to our community, but is of course a well deserved retirement for Bonnie.”

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