

Gordon Johnson was presented with the Samuel Gerson Nordlinger Child Welfare Leadership Award at the 2006 Alliance for Children and Families National Conference. The award recognizes a person for their contributions to the effectiveness of the Alliance, the field of child welfare, and the national public policy process to advance the cause of quality of services for children and families.

Steadfast Commitment Leads to Success

Nordlinger Child Welfare Leadership Award Winner *Gordon Johnson*

Over a 47-year career that has surely witnessed all the good and bad aspects of child welfare services, Gordon Johnson, M.Ed., LL.D., president and CEO of Neighbor To Family, Inc., Daytona Beach, Florida, has maintained not only his stamina, but his deep commitment to saving and protecting children.

Johnson's commitment spurred him to develop innovative programs that stress the importance of keeping siblings in foster care together, treat foster parents as professionals, advocate tirelessly for special needs adoptions, and enlist the support of local churches in a nationwide adoption program.

Currently leading the agency he founded, Neighbor To Family—which has grown in just eight years to provide services to children in four states—Johnson's career began in the 1950s as a cottage officer at a New Jersey boys home. His career also includes seven years as director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and president/CEO of Jane Addams Hull House Association in Chicago, where he created a new model of foster care that enables siblings to stay together in one foster home.

These achievements were accomplished with significant sources of support and motivation. Johnson's wife Deloris, most notably, has been a constant source of support throughout his lengthy child welfare career. Further, he is moti-

vated by the loss of a child, who died at age 19 due to medical complications.

"When you lose a child you become obsessed with how you can save and protect children," Johnson says. "I'm kind of obsessed with the need for change in child welfare and excited about this model. It keeps me going, keeps my energy level high. The staff around me helps me to stay focused and supports our mission.

"It's unbelievable what we, as adults, have done to kids. Yet to see them change and be able to grow and develop as any little child should—you can't beat the feeling of seeing that happen."

Johnson says his interest in child welfare work was spurred by firsthand observations of family members receiving inadequate care and treatment from reformatories and institutions to which they had been entrusted, and by the cruel and inhumane treatment he encountered at New Jersey's Jamesburg State Home for Boys.

"I saw firsthand some of the inequities of services and in a small way tried to rectify it, was able to address some of the concerns," says Johnson. "Some of the programs that were initiated that I was a part of had lasting effects on children in planning permanent homes and/or stability in their lives and in teaching parents alternative ways of dealing with children who were taken from them so they could get them back."

As director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Johnson



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launched the One Church One Child program with Father George Clements and Greg Coler, the goal of which was to find through one church a family to adopt one child, and repeat that process to address the staggering need for placements for 1,000 African American children available for adoption in Illinois. The Ford Foundation and John F. Kennedy School at Harvard University selected One Church One Child in 1986 as one of the 10 Best Government Partnership Programs in the country.

One Church One Child is now active in many more states and has resulted in more than 100,000 adoptions since its inception.

While at Jane Addams Hull House Association, Johnson created a new approach to foster care that enabled sibling groups to be placed together, and remain together, in foster homes. He called this approach the Neighbor To Neighbor foster care model.

According to Johnson, inspiration for the program stemmed from visits to a children's reception center at a Chicago shelter. "As director of DCFS, I saw children, 30 or 40 of them, arriving in the back seats of police cars, dragging behind them their belongings in black garbage bags," says Johnson. "We were working to find foster homes and we couldn't find them. They were being split up and I saw firsthand the effect it had on them and me. They were in a state of bewilderment because they didn't know where they were and why they were there. They didn't know where their parents were or why their parents weren't there. They were placed in different homes where many times they didn't have a chance to be together for months or years."

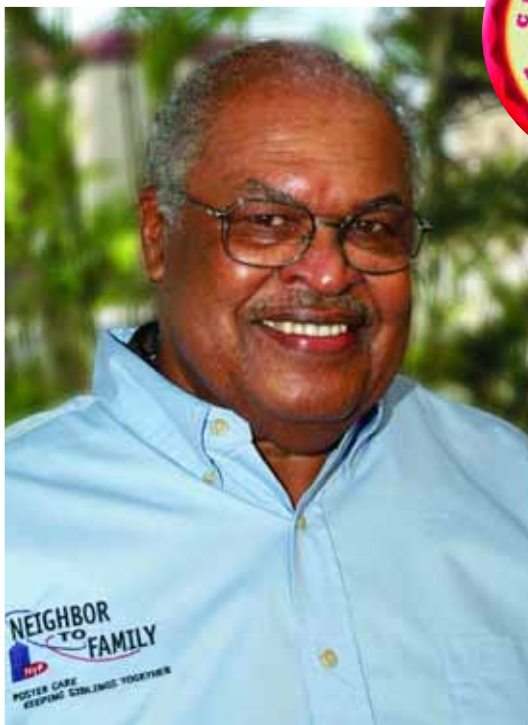
Johnson envisioned the Neighbor to Neighbor program as a "failsafe approach to keep siblings together" and has demonstrated that it could be done "even in the chaotic system of child welfare."

In 1998 he was invited to bring the Neighbor To Neighbor approach to Daytona Beach and soon thereafter founded Neighbor To Family, Inc.

With a mission of doing whatever it

takes to keep siblings together through strong partnerships with families and communities, the organization professionalized the role of the foster parent by making each foster parent a paid employee of Neighbor To Family.

"A foster parent is one of the most important people in the life of a child and they should be treated and



supported as professionals," says Johnson. "They should be given the benefits that I get—health insurance, 401K. They should sit at the same table and learn about the kids that are coming into care so that we can help them adjust and develop in a safe environment."

Neighbor To Family foster parents are required to receive 30 hours of training annually, covering topics including anger management, drug use, CPR, and shaken baby syndrome. The agency's retention rate for foster parents is 85 percent, compared to an estimated 10 percent national average.

The seven-month average length of stay for children in foster care at Neighbor To Family is well below the national average of 32 months. The average number of times a child is moved during foster care and percentage of children leaving and re-entering

foster care are dramatically lower than the national averages.

Neighbor To Family has expanded its reach beyond Daytona Beach to Miami and Orlando, in Florida, as well as to four counties in Georgia, Baltimore, Maryland, and Norfolk, Virginia. Over eight years, the agency's budget has grown from \$750,000 to \$35 million.

"I'm honored to be selected out of all the candidates they had nationally for this recognition," says Johnson. "It's also an honor that they feel that I have something to offer and recognize that."

For information on Neighbor To Family, go to www.neighbortofamily.org. ■

*Previous Samuel Gerson Nordlinger
Child Welfare Leadership
Award Winners:*

2005

Jim Campbell

*Leake and Watts Services,
Yonkers, NY*

2003

Robert B. Jones,

*Children's Aid and Family
Services, Inc.,
Paramus, NJ*

2002

Ron Reed

*Family Service, Inc.,
Minneapolis, MN*

2001

Michael Danjczek

*Children's Home of Easton,
Easton, PA*