A Digression: The Children’s Center

“The past is never dead
its not even the past.”
- William Faulkner

The Center entered into my life experience sometime after the summer of 1958 when our family moved from a second floor apartment at the Valley View Housing Project in St. Edward’s Parish to a 4 bedroom, four square in the Fruit Hill section of North Providence located in St. Augustine’s Parish.

Our house, at 18 Hope Street was approximately a mile up the road from the apartment in Valley View we had moved into when my father accepted the job as Basketball Coach of the Providence College Friars in 1948.

610 Mount Pleasant Ave, the official address of both the Children’s Center and Child Welfare Services, was bounded by Rhode Island College to the west, Fruit Hill to the North and St. Augustine’s Church and Grade School (Grades 1-8) to the east. In fact, a well-traveled foot path carved from the boundary vegetation started across from the Church on Mt. Pleasant Avenue to the Center. One of the St. Augustine’s Parish Priests, Rev. Raymond Dyer, served as the Children’s Center Chaplain.

From 1962 to 1965 I played high school basketball for LaSalle Academy. The best player on our team, Jimmy Wilkins, lived at the Center.

Not skilled enough to play basketball at Providence College where I was a dayhop, I turned my attention to coaching CYO basketball at St. Augustine’s. During the first two years of coaching St. Augustine’s we used the Children’s Center gym located on the second floor of the Center’s School Building.
(Home School) for practice until the parish built out a gym in the school auditorium.

In my final college semester during the winter/spring of 1969, I did an internship at CWS where a caseworker from South Providence, Ray Dunn, and his supervisor, Gerry Ruest, took me under their wings. Both Ray and Gerry were PC grads. Gerry had obtained his MSW from the Boston College School of Social Work. During my internship Ray was accepted into the MSW program at the University of Hawaii, where he would subsequently graduate from and return to CWS. Both Gerry and Ray spent their entire professional careers with SRS/CWS.

During that spring of ’69 I took the Civil Service exam and got hired at CWS even though I had a 2-year military obligation that commenced a couple of months after my hire date.

I was placed in the Children’s Center Institutional unit following graduation. It was explained to me that the ‘transitional nature’ of working with the Center residents fit in perfectly with my two year military leave obligation.

The unit consisted of a supervisor, Bill Connors, and four caseworkers: Tony Bacci, Walter Berger, Jean McAuslan and me.

In winter 1971, before completing military service, I began applying to graduate schools of social work. On the recommendation of a fellow officer I applied to the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Social Work. I was accepted into the program. Next I applied for and received a state scholarship couple with an education leave to attend VCU starting in the fall of 1971.

In exchange for the scholarship I was required to work for the agency one month for each month of educational leave I was granted. During the summer break between academic years I worked in the Intake unit. Following my graduation in the spring of 1973 my Agency employment commitment was, as calculated by the Administration, approximately 19 months.

Enough information?
From a distance (or casual drive through the grounds) the Dr. Patrick I. O’Rourke looked like a college campus, which is probably why RIC annexed it once the place closed. Most of the “campus” consisted of raised, one story brick buildings with above ground concrete foundations. In the RIC campus map (Appendix 3), it resembles a big U; the boys’ cottages lining the left side (Q,O,P,M,N,K) all quaintly named after Native American tribes (i.e., Narragansett) and the three girls’ cottages (L,R,S) on the right side. The corresponding numbers on the map for the boys’ cottages are respectively #1-6.

The Children’s Center Social Services Unit was housed in the Medical Service Cottage (M/S) now labeled as Building 9. We were co-located with the Mental Hygiene Unit, which reported to the State Division of MH/MR and the Center’s medical offices primarily staffed by nurses. The offices occupied approximately 50% of the building. The other part of the building was the ‘cottage’ housing up to 25 children who were either too young (under six), assessed as too vulnerable or frail to be placed in the other cottages; or those children placed for a very short time or on an emergency basis.

CWS was a vertically constructed public agency. Its Table of Organization would show a Chief Child Welfare Supervisor (Mary Rodio), Senior Supervisors (James Barden, Hope Jameson) Casework Supervisors (i.e. Bill Connors, Irene Lally, Scott Mueller) and Social Caseworkers (me).

Services were provided by Caseworkers assigned to specialty units (i.e. Children’s Center Protective, Intake, Homefinders, Shelter) or area units (i.e. Providence, Woonsocket, Newport). Each unit consisted of a supervisor and four or five caseworkers. All caseworkers and supervisory staff held a BA degree and had passed a Civil Service exam. Due to SRS’s generous educational leave program a growing number of CWS staff had obtained their MSW (Master of Social Work) degree.

CWS administrators and caseworkers were primarily housed in A/B cottage (near current building #12) or D cottage (next to #9), both demolished long ago. Several CWS units (i.e., Protective,
Shelter care) were housed in the basements of R & S cottages (#8, 7).

The Children’s Center’s staff consisted of a Superintendent (Frank A. Spinelli), Assistant Superintendent (Raymond Cabana), a thin layer of management (Murray Freidman, Chief Child Care Supervisor); Home School teachers, nurses, recreation workers and the Child Care staff who were called Houseparents and addressed by the kids and some staff as ‘Pop’ or ‘Mom’.

Each cottage had a Head Houseparent who generally worked mornings (6-10 a.m.) and nights (6-10 p.m.). Their shift also covered a “sleeping period” of 10 p.m.-6 a.m. which they were not paid for. Toward the end of my tenure there some of the cottages moved to a three shift schedule under pressure from the union representing the Child Care staff.

Some of the cottages had head houseparents consisting of a husband and wife team (i.e., N cottage – Mr. & Mrs. Buckley).

The Center’s administrative offices and the Superintendent’s residence was located near the current building #11 and the Children’s Center School (and gym) were located in what is now listed as building #13.

I could walk to the Children’s Center as well as LaSalle Academy, Providence College and Rhode Island College from my parents’ house on Hope Street or when I returned from graduate school from my apartment at 4 Layton Street in North Providence.