

THE FOUNDLING

*The Story of
The New York Foundling*



MARTIN GOTTLIEB

Contemporary photographs by
CLAIRE YAFFA



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AN ENDURING STORY

The work began unheralded on Wednesday, October 5, 1869, in the midst of a noisy, bustling city with too much else on its mind—a huge influx of immigration, stark contrasts between expanding wealth and abject poverty, and the dislocations of the recently concluded Civil War. Two young Sisters of Charity were dispatched from Saint Peter’s Church on Barclay Street on a trip uptown to Greenwich Village. They stopped at Saint Vincent’s Hospital, where they begged a barrel of coal and a barrel of wood. They traveled a few blocks to a four-story red brick brownstone at 17 East Twelfth Street. They turned the key, surveyed the empty confines, and set out to make them “convent clean.” The Sisters, Teresa Vincent McCrystal and Ann Aloysia Tierney, were met at the door by a supporter, Mrs. Daniel Devlin, who made it a point of being the first to greet them, and the scrubbing began. They ate at Saint Vincent’s that night. They slept back at the brownstone on straw mats, which they rolled up in the morning, as they would for a year. The second



Sister Teresa Vincent McCrystal, co-founder of The Foundling.

OPPOSITE: The parlor at East Sixty-eighth Street with The Foundling’s original welcoming crib. Struggling mothers were allowed to leave their infants in the crib, no questions asked.



The Foundling's first home, a humble brownstone on East Twelfth Street in Greenwich Village.

OPPOSITE: *Sister Carmela Joseph with "Porky," around 1945.*

night they brought their own food to the building and ate while sitting on the floor.

Soon neighbors contributed food—"roasted fowls, vegetables, pickles," according to Sister Teresa's diary—and the Sisters were taking their meals at an old wooden table covered with a newspaper "tablecloth." On Tuesday, October 11, they were joined by the visionary Sister Mary Irene Fitzgibbon, a woman with deep, knowing eyes and resolute demeanor. It was her idea to build one of the first hospitals in the United States exclusively devoted to abandoned infants, or "foundlings" as they were known because of their regular discovery on the streets and stoops and in the garbage bins of the slums of New York and other large cities.

Sister Mary Irene set out to save these children, to keep them alive, and to invigorate them. She figured it would be a good ten weeks before the brownstone would be ready to receive its first child. But that evening, above a steady drizzle, the Sisters heard a faint cry outside and opened their door. A bundled baby was waiting on the step.

According to histories of the era, the Sisters speculated on what they would name their first child and settled on a clear choice: "Joseph Vincent," after the baby Jesus' foster father and Saint Vincent de Paul, who was revered by the Sisters of Charity as, among other things, a great protector of foundlings. Amid much excitement, they unwrapped the baby in their new community room and learned that God had other plans. According to several accounts, they found a penciled note. It read, "The child's name is Sarah H."

This was the beginning, a humble one, but filled with faith and optimism, of one of America's great social-service institutions, The New York Foundling Hospital. By the end of October, the Sisters were caring for forty-five infants. By year's end the number was up to eighty-one.





The Foundling established this summer residence along the Hudson River in the lower Bronx for children whose health was considered especially delicate. This photograph dates to the 1880s.

Today, “The Foundling,” as it is known all over New York, has become a \$100-million-a-year institution headquartered in a modern fourteen-story building at 590 Avenue of the Americas, at Seventeenth Street, with forty-four different programs serving more than 13,000 children and families a year from upstate Kingston to Staten Island to Puerto Rico. It now includes another venerable institution with its own impressive 117-year legacy, Saint Agatha Home in Nanuet, New York, which has provided a safe harbor for orphans, children with special needs, runaways, new immigrants, and adults with developmental disabilities. Through 132 often turbulent years, The Foundling has held onto a vision based simply on putting its children, who

remain the city's neediest and most hard-pressed, above all else. No one can say precisely how many Sarahs and Joseph Vincents have been helped in this time, although the number easily reaches that of a significant city—perhaps 250,000, perhaps 350,000. And no one can say that every child has become a success story. In the beginning, in particular, death was literally an everyday occurrence, as illnesses from measles to cholera claimed the frail bodies of babies barely alive when they were placed in the Sisters' care. But thousands upon thousands of lives have been saved by The Foundling. Boys and girls have grown up to have productive and happy futures that could scarcely have been predicted for them, and young mothers have been cared for and supported as they have taken hold of their situations and built livelihoods and loving families.

Much has changed, of course, over time. In its earliest years, The Foundling relied on a combination of faith and political guile to accomplish a direct and dramatic mission—to save destitute and abandoned

Little girls from The Foundling's East Sixty-eighth Street building gathered for this group portrait around 1930.





The operating room at East Sixty-eighth Street, around 1935.

children from death and disease and to help them grow. Against all odds, it built an imposing hospital complex at Sixty-eighth Street and Third Avenue that visually announced itself as a fortress protecting its charges from the harms of an unforgiving world. As The Foundling evolved, it built on its bedrock of spirituality and compassion to professionalize its services. Indeed, its leadership in the development of pediatric medicine helped eliminate many of the illnesses that claimed large numbers of its earliest charges. The concern and faith of the Sisters has been joined by advanced social work and child-care training and the contributions of lay people with a variety of recognized credentials.

In the past quarter century, The Foundling, responding to changes in society and the social situation of its children, profoundly reinterpreted its

approach toward its mission. In many ways, albeit quieter ones, its innovations have been as dramatic as those of its early history. In place of the imposing Sixty-eighth Street refuge has come an active decentralization of services. Programs today most often are based in neighborhoods, where they draw on the support and guidance of their communities, rather than in institutional settings. Its services have grown to include day care, housing management, substance-abuse counseling, initiatives for deaf children, and more—all in response to what the needs of the day call out for and what neighborhoods have determined they can use to nurture families.

For the institution's young people, the focus now is on what Sister Cecilia Schneider, who guided the

The 1939 graduating class of The Foundling's School for Nurses.





The warmth of a hearth at The Foundling, around 1940.

OPPOSITE: A child says goodbye to The Foundling en route to a foster home, around 1945.

Foundling through many of its changes, calls “pursuing permanence for the children.” This means, if at all possible, keeping them in their families and neighborhoods with the support of Foundling social workers and other professionals. Through a wide range of programs in Queens, Staten Island, northern Manhattan, the South Bronx, Rockland and Ulster Counties north of the city, and Puerto Rico, every effort is made to help parents, families, and children strengthen their bonds and avert abusive or negligent situations that could lead to the removal of a child. If such a situation looms, The Foundling’s professionals work to resolve it within the family, through initiatives like the groundbreaking Crisis Nursery in the Seventeenth-Street building, where parents can leave their children in professional care when they feel tensions rising to a point that could lead to physical abuse.

The Foundling of today is certainly a different institution from the one that set up shop in a small Greenwich Village brownstone more than 130 years ago. The clients are not the Irish, German, and Italian immigrants of yore. They are mostly Black, Latino, and, increasingly, members of a host of new immigrant groups. Today, its clients are rarely the babies left in baskets in churches or department stores who used to wind up in newspaper headlines. Rather, they are families in danger of falling apart or older children who have fallen victim to abuse or have histories of acting out or just not fitting in.

There are remarkable similarities between the post-Civil War Foundling, feeling its way in unchartered territory, and the modern, highly professional agency. The children still present needs that are at once heartbreaking and mind-boggling. The agency’s workers still receive modest salaries but continue in their jobs for decades, fueled by commitment and compassion. Even young people who act out in aggressive, sometimes violent ways, and who many





Baby nurses at work in the feeding pavilion at East Sixty-eighth Street. The Foundling was a pioneer in developing hygienic and nutritious milk and each child received a specific formula.

others have given up on are looked upon as changeable and worthy of care and guidance. They are assisted by an ever better-trained staff of professionals and competent, caring support staff, by scores of volunteers who have always been an important component of The Foundling, and, in many capacities, by Sisters of Charity. They are women like Sister Teresa Kelly, whose easy smile lights up Blaine Hall, the ninety-day residential unit at The Foundling's central building, where victims of abuse come for care and evaluation. There is Sister Rita Nowatzki, who, as the agency's first public advocate, has built on an institutional legacy of championing child-care reform. And there is Sister Marilda Joseph Aeillo, who has served The Foundling for more than half a

century and who continues to wear the traditional black habit that has always identified the followers of the first canonized saint born in the United States, Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Playtime on the roof at East Sixty-eighth Street.





THE FOUNDLING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A NEW CHAPTER

September 11, 2001. For everyone who lived or worked in New York City—indeed for the entire nation—life would never be the same.

The city was affected physically and emotionally in a very profound and personal way by the 9/11 attacks and The Foundling was no exception. Even as staff and leadership experienced their own loss and trauma, their focus had to remain, as it always had been, on The Foundling's neighbors and members of the community—many lacking a support system to fall back upon. The early 2000s were dominated by the aftermath of 9/11, recovering from the economic recession that followed, rebuilding lower Manhattan, and welcoming a new mayor to city hall. Former businessman Michael Bloomberg's approach to city services was highly accountable, data driven, and more businesslike. This was also an important inflection point for The Foundling, ushering in new programs guided by new leadership, new philosophies, and new research on at-risk families and preventive services.

Among the principles that have guided The Foundling since its earliest days are adapting to changing needs in the community and embracing

OPPOSITE: *A young girl at The Foundling's Chelsea office celebrating her adoption.*



scientific advancements and tactics to create the best outcomes possible for the families and communities it serves. The Foundling has always been at the forefront of developing new solutions for serving diverse populations with challenging problems: from the nineteenth century, when some of the pioneers of pediatric medicine were associated with The Foundling, through the leadership of Dr. Fontana, one of the first to recognize, study, and write about child abuse, until the current day, when new evidence-based approaches are revolutionizing how the next generation of social workers practice child welfare. In fact, The Foundling has always sought to be ahead of the curve in recognizing emerging issues—not merely to be open to new strategies and methodologies when it becomes clear that they’re necessary, but to have the vision to see those changes coming and to be at the forefront of developing new solutions, testing them, improving them, and advocating for them.

In 2001, for example, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services awarded The Foundling a contract to start a child abuse prevention home visiting program on Staten Island, focused on preventing the maltreatment of children by enhancing parent-child interactions and positive parenting skills, promoting optimal infant and maternal health, and increasing family self-sufficiency. While this was merely one program, it was a milestone—a forerunner of what would become a robust series of programs backed by data and proven outcomes that have become models for the child services profession globally.

Two years later, a new leadership team joined The Foundling and began moving toward more accountable, data-driven programs, developing a range of new evidence-based practices. The new team helped move The Foundling aggressively in this new and exciting direction, serving more families with programs that yielded an unprecedented level of success in the field. At the same time, in keeping with The Foundling’s history, a new research and training center was in the works that would become a focal point for research, education, professional development, and advocacy.

The center's research, training, and advocacy are central to The Foundling's efforts to anticipate the future needs of its communities and to be on the cutting edge of creating new, more effective programs and advancing knowledge and skill in its profession. It is a fitting legacy for an individual who was a pioneering giant in this field. Dr. Fontana's impact will be felt for generations to come by the children and families who receive the help they need because of his groundbreaking research and tireless public advocacy.

A Better Future Based on Evidence

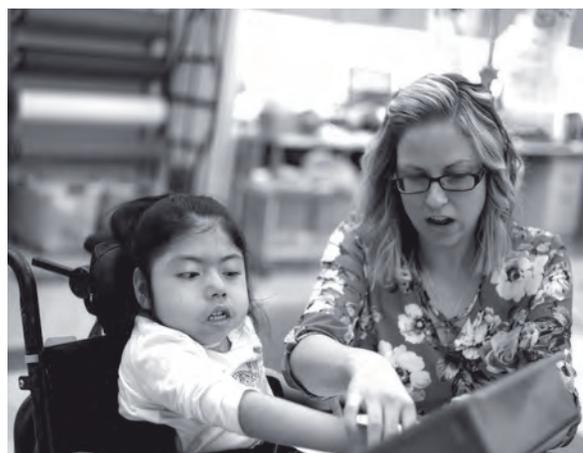
While the trauma of 9/11 still loomed over the city, public officials in the Bloomberg administration began emphasizing result-oriented approaches to problems that had been intractable for years. They sought to produce more successful outcomes across government agencies, including the Administration for Children's Services. In the fields of children's services and juvenile justice, this meant holding organizations like The Foundling accountable for generating successes that were not merely anecdotal, but demonstrable, systemic, measurable, and replicable.

That was exactly the direction The Foundling wanted to move in. For years, government had poured billions of dollars into programs that systematically produced poor results. Multi-generational cycles of abuse and neglect—including educational neglect and a revolving door of recidivism in the criminal justice system—left families struggling and communities deteriorating. Undoubtedly, many children and families were being helped, many lives being saved, but even some of the best social service agencies lacked statistically significant, scientific data on which programs were most effective, which treatment protocols got the best results, and how to train caseworkers, track outcomes, and replicate success.

The Foundling had been watching and working with the University of Colorado, Washington University, and other institutions that were researching strategies for developing evidence-based practices for working with children and families who have experienced trauma, abuse, and neglect. Adopting these strategies and practices would be the next step in the evolution and advancement of children's services, transforming it into a science-backed field, with treatment based on research, just as it is in the practice of medicine.

New York City had elected Michael Bloomberg as mayor and his administration embraced this concept and asked The Foundling to develop and conduct the first clinical trial of a program using evidence-based practices. In the years since, the use of evidence-based practices, or EBPs, has proven extremely effective and, in New York City and nationally, the number of children in foster care is now a fraction of its historic highs, the use of congregate care facilities has been reduced dramatically, and more at-risk families remain together, paired with services in their communities and achieving far better outcomes for their children. The Foundling became a leader in testing and implementing this new approach, achieving remarkable results, publishing them for peer review, and training others based on the lessons learned.

Previously, the removal of children from their homes and placing them in foster care—often in different communities served by different schools—was the norm. But with the use of new evidence-based programs, families were kept together and supported with an intensive and comprehensive range of services: drug rehabilitation programs, mental health services, parenting classes, housing support, and employment assistance. Caseworkers began to provide treatment in the families' homes



Teachers work with kids at Elizabeth Seton Children's to hone in on their communication skills.

A student concentrates during a test at Haven Middle School.



and could recognize specific problems and causes of stress faster and could in turn help the family address and correct them.

The success of these programs speaks volumes. They have not only saved millions of dollars for taxpayers, they have achieved far better outcomes for the young people and families involved. Evidence-based programs and the results they yielded have earned The Foundling a global reputation as a leader in evidence-based practices. Following the successful implementation of these practices in New York City, The Foundling launched its own Implementation Support Center, where experts train government entities and child services organizations in the United States and abroad to begin using these proven programs, impacting lives far beyond the reach of the five boroughs.

Redefining Well-Being

For years, the child welfare system has focused on the most urgent needs of the children it served, making sure they're safe and healthy, with enough food to eat and clean clothes to wear, while striving to achieve a permanent home. Since beginning its work in foster care, The Foundling has seen tens of thousands of children pass through its doors and came to the conclusion that those crucial first steps, while they might literally be lifesaving, were not enough.

The knowledge and experience collected over the generations had led The Foundling to the clear conclusion that the best predictor of success for children was their access to educational opportunities. The Foundling had experience running Head Start programs in Puerto Rico, serving thousands of children since the program's launch in 1984, but the focus on education in New York began in 2008 with the founding of

Mott Haven Academy Charter School, known as Haven Academy, in one of the nation's most disadvantaged communities.

Millions of dollars were needed to build and open the school, but The Foundling has never been afraid to take the lead and make the initial financial commitment to new programs it believes in. From its beginning, The Foundling has seen government agencies can often be slow to implement and support innovative programs that meet a new or growing social need. These programs often require private support and proven results before the government recognizes their value and funds their services.

The Foundling set up Haven Academy as an experimental environment to determine what strategies work best for meeting the educational needs of historically marginalized populations. The student population is specific and targeted, as two-thirds of the students are involved with the child welfare system (either as children in foster care or whose families participate in programs to prevent foster care placement) and with the remaining third of the students living in the surrounding community, one of the poorest congressional districts in the country.

Initially, despite all of The Foundling's experience working with children in foster care and those receiving preventive services, progress was elusive. It took time to fully appreciate and understand how trauma affected the learning process and to incorporate that understanding into the school's curriculum. That meant revamped training for teachers, reimagining curriculum and teaching methods, and changing the way educators address student behaviors. It meant creating a new type of trauma-informed environment within the school.



Three students in front of their lockers at Haven Academy.



Students who opt into The Foundling's Road to Success tutoring program meet at locations convenient to their school or foster home.

Today, in both English and math, the percentage of students with passing scores at Haven Academy is triple the percentage compared to the surrounding community school district and exceeds the averages for New York City, New York State, and other charter schools. City officials often visit Haven Academy to observe the progress firsthand and many have come to view it as a model whose practices could be adopted more widely in the public school system. In 2017, the school expanded, opening a middle school to serve older students, and the creation of a high school is on the horizon.

The Foundling followed its successful creation of Haven Academy with the launch of additional educational programs for youth involved in the child welfare system, recognizing that educational achievement, while key to a child's overall, long-term well-being, is not a linear path. In 2014, The Foundling developed Road to Success, a program that provides tutoring and mentoring to students in foster care. Of great importance is the relationship between the student and the tutor: it's about more than passing the next exam—it's about preparing young people to manage academic demands as part of their lives overall. This is something most spend a lifetime teaching their own children but has been completely missing in the lives of these students. Since the launch of this program, high school graduation rates have increased, promotions from grade to grade have improved, and the number of students enrolling in four-year colleges has quadrupled.

More recently, The Foundling partnered with the City University of New York and New York's Administration for Children's Services to provide comprehensive, year-round support for college-ready students involved with the child welfare system. These young people enter college without the support systems and life experiences many of their peers

have, making their journey extremely challenging. Imagine the adjustment any typical teenager faces when they first begin college and the accompanying support they receive from their family, friends, and community—all people who have been with them, in many cases, their entire lives. Young people involved in the child welfare system lack all of that support and must build that support elsewhere. In the Dorm Project, with the help of Foundling-trained College Success Coaches—an inexpensive and proven effective strategy now being advocated widely in the foster care community—these students are overcoming obstacles and reaching milestones they set for themselves.

Education has the power to break the cycle of poverty. The Foundling is not alone in this effort but is proud to be on the front lines, utilizing proven programs backed by data that are yielding measurable results and showing a clear path forward. Over the coming decade, education will be a major focus for the organization, in recognition of its importance to children's long-term well-being. If others replicate and expand on The Foundling's work, society could make progress on one of the most intractable challenges it has faced in the past fifty years.

Living Their Best Lives

For many years, The Foundling was best known for its services for children, but its work with adults and youth living with developmental disabilities is equally important. Since opening its first group home in Nyack, New York, in 1974, The Foundling has been serving a growing number of men and women, offering an inclusive and personalized approach that enables these people to live their fullest, most independent lives. The Foundling oversees supervised and supported homes for these men and women, provides engaging and educational



Many students from The Foundling's Dorm Project live at City College's The Towers while taking classes at CUNY colleges across the city.



programming in the community, and also prepares individuals to enter the workforce, teaching them skills and connecting them with job opportunities.

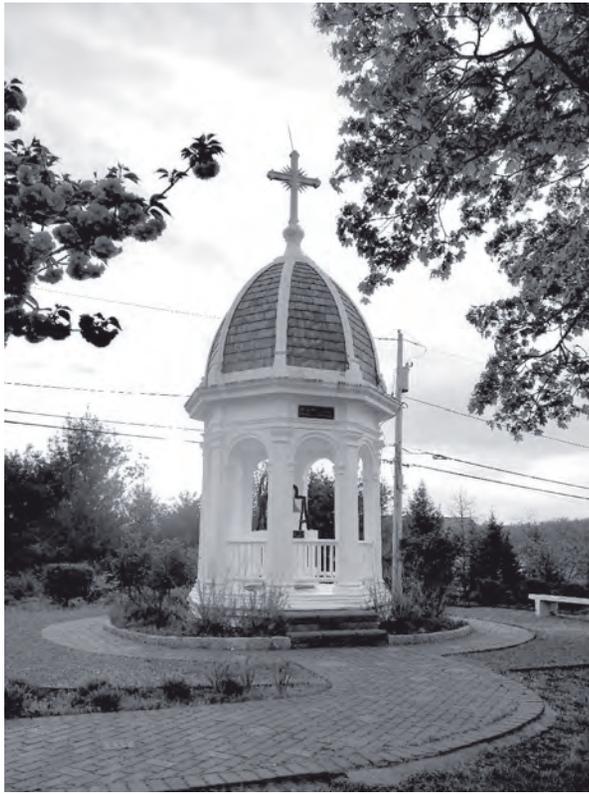
In recent years, New York State mandated organizations would have to change the way they manage the medical and behavioral health care of people with developmental disabilities, dramatically changing the business operations of these programs and encouraging the consolidation of programs under fewer and larger organizations. In light of this shift, The Foundling focused on growing its developmental disabilities department and made a significant leap in services with the addition of The Thrive Network, formerly a separate organization now under The Foundling's umbrella. Adding Thrive to the vast network of programs operated by The Foundling ensures that more families will be able to benefit from these crucial social services. It amplifies The Foundling's commitment to assisting those who need it for many years to come, providing support to these men and women—and their families—helping them live their best lives.

Transitions and New Frontiers

From its earliest days under the Sisters of Charity, The Foundling has not only met the existing basic needs of its communities, it has been a leader in defining the future of its profession. In doing so, it has always been adaptable, financially prudent, and willing to change and adapt to enhance and improve services. When buildings no longer served their needs, they sold them. When programs no longer served their purpose, they changed them. When the needs of the community evolved, The Foundling responded.

Data shows that keeping families together, if possible, is the best option. Today, organizations like The Foundling have more effective tools

OPPOSITE: *Carl C., who lives in a Foundling apartment, enjoys his independence and a beautiful day in his neighborhood.*



The cupola from Saint Agatha's is now located in Nanuet, New York.

for approaching its work and have seen a great deal of success. The number of children in foster care has dropped to a fraction of its historic highs and institutions that provide congregate care have mostly been phased out of existence. The Foundling saw this very positive trend coming and recognized the need to adjust. With the need for congregate care facilities waning, Saint Agatha's, a beloved home for many children for many years, was no longer viable. Its role in so many lives was extraordinary. It was a model in its time and close to the hearts of everyone involved in the organization. But meeting the needs of the community today, and in the future, was the priority.

Saint Agatha's closed its doors in 2005 and its landmark building was sold to the local school district in Nanuet, New York. It is now the site of a local park and walking trail that community residents young and old enjoy. It was an important decision, but ultimately, in the world as it is today, the sale was clearly in the best interests of the children and families who depend on The Foundling's services.

Another mainstay of The Foundling's programs and operations was the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, which is now a separate entity after having been affiliated with The Foundling for many years. Everyone involved recognized that operating independently would enable the hospital to focus more intently on health care for children with complex medical needs and to allow them to expand their services and capacity. It had elected an independent board some time ago and, in 2012, with substantial support from The Foundling, relocated to a new facility in Yonkers, New York. Seton, which had been able to care for no more than sixty children at any given time in the past, now can serve as many as 169 infants, children, teens, and young adults. And as of 2019, they renamed themselves to Elizabeth Seton Children's.

OPPOSITE: *Music therapy at Elizabeth Seton Children's.*



THE GIFT OF CAMP

“For me, camp has always been like my safe haven, like my home, and now that I do have a home outside of camp, it’s just my home away from home. . .”

Camp Felix, launched by The Foundling, is one of the only overnight camps for children in the child welfare system. The camp is not only a recreational opportunity but an important component of the children’s education—teaching them resilience, how to build positive relationships, and giving them confidence to help them lead successful lives. For many, this week-long adventure changes their outlook on life, their future, and their sense of pride. They leave carrying a new sense of hope and the belief that despite their difficult circumstances at home or with their families, they can “do anything.”

To date, Camp Felix has given more than one thousand children the gift of camp and the educational, life-affirming experience that comes with it.

Boys playing soccer at camp.





TOP: A girl showing strength and determination on the rock climbing wall at camp.

ABOVE: Campers enjoy a well-balanced meal in the mess hall.

LEFT: All campers enjoy cooling off in the pool, as well as instructional swim while at camp.

At the same time, The Foundling has opened a number of new facilities. Haven Academy and Camp Felix, described earlier, and others. One recent location is Stephen's House in Staten Island. Named in honor of Stephen Siller, a firefighter who lost his own parents at the age of ten and died heroically in the 9/11 attack, this building is home to the maternity and mother child residential program and provides community services ranging from medical and mental health care to preventive programs among other vital services. The Foundling also opened a new mental health clinic in East Harlem (officially named The Foundling's Home of Integrated Behavioral Health) in 2019, which serves the neighborhood with carefully researched services and approaches to care that support and strengthen family relationships. Mental health services, particularly for youth, are a tremendous need and The Foundling is working to expand its use of evidence-based mental and behavioral health practices to make them available to greater numbers of people. As many Foundling leaders have recognized in the past, when times and community needs change, the bricks and mortar can be turned into funding for expanded services.

The Foundling's Developmental Disabilities Division offers day programs for men and women, finding ways to strengthen their fine-motor skills through games.





Today, The Foundling still owns the upper floors of the building housing its headquarters since the 1980s, which houses a number of programs, including its Crisis Nursery, The Fontana Center, Family Services for Deaf Children and Adults, administration, and many staff involved in the organization's evidence-based community of programs.

From its humble beginnings in that Greenwich Village brownstone, The Foundling today is one of the largest organizations of its kind in the country, known around the world for its groundbreaking research, leadership role in advancing the science of child welfare, and compassionate support for thousands of families. Grounded in 150 years of commitment by a succession of heroic figures in this field, The Foundling maintains its transformative work and expansive vision for the future.

His Eminence, Timothy Cardinal Dolan (left) and Monsignor Kevin Sullivan visit The Foundling's Crisis Nursery in 2017.