

Queens County Family Court Teen Space Grand Opening
Wednesday, December 3, 2008
Press Conference Transcription

Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye:

Absolutely remarkable, Teen Space. Isn't it just fantastic?

Now I'd like to pause and recognize every single person here but I think that would take us a bit of time. So I'm going to put the most important people first. The people who have been feeding me ever since I set foot on this floor, Andre, Jonathan, Will and Andrew. Where are you?

These are the youth from the Children's Aid's Next Generation's Center for catering. We want to thank you for the catering and the serving. Let me tell you that the food is good! I especially recommend the little mushroom pouches. I don't know how many of you have had those. You won't need dinner. But isn't this a happy and wonderful day. I needn't tell so many of you here – I see Judge Townsend's head over there, our wonderful Administrative Judge from the eighth district and so many of the judges and the court staff and of course the greatest people, the court officers. I needn't tell you that not every day in the family court is happy day, by a long shot, is it. But this is a singular and unequivocally happy occasion.

This all began some time ago and I can't actually say what the moment of beginning was and who cares. There are a million great ideas in the world. There are old ideas, new ideas, good ideas, great ideas but how many do you see actually come to fruition and that is what we are celebrating today. A great idea that owing to the hard work of so many people right here today became a great reality.

So far for me, the theme of that day, the theme of the occasion is Thanksgiving, don't you agree? We're here today to celebrate, to welcome, to give thanks. I've traveled around the corridor here in the last half hour or so, as we waited for Peter Sloane who unfortunately is stuck somewhere along the way, I've heard two things I want to repeat. One was the observation when you walk in the room, the message you are special. Now we think all of you are special too today but you are not the people for whom this room is designed for really. It's designed for the wonderful teenagers we hope come here when their court proceedings are going on. We want them to know from the instant they cross that threshold that all of us here respect them and honor them and we think they are special. And we think that room says it. So that's the first thing I heard here and the second is – I'm sorry to steal the line but let's face it that's what I do for a living – But somebody walked in, I think it was you who said that what is telegraphed is distressed, right? You said that. And I think that's a wonderful line too. Not distress, not distress but distress. That's what this room says.

So, with that as just an opener, I'd like to call on a few people to come stand here alongside me, in front of me. And I think I'll start with our great Administrative Judge of the family court. Joe, aren't you please I'm starting with you? Actually I'm going to call on three special people for having the vision to be open to having this special place set aside for young people who attend their court proceedings. Not only for having the vision but also having the patience to see it through. So I'd like to call first on Judge Joe Lauria, to thank Judge Stephen Bogacz – Steve, are you here anywhere? – Please tell him we thank him too. The former Queens Supervising Judge. After Judge Lauria, I'd like to ask the Supervising Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson to come up and say a few words. So, Joe, it's all yours.

Administrative Judge Joseph Lauria:

Thank you Judge Kaye. Good afternoon. This did require a lot of patience but a lot a lot of passion which is caused it to come today. It is the most recent example of listening to our youth. Several years ago the Center for Court Innovation established the Youth Justice Board. A dozen or so youngsters and adolescence to advise the Administrative Judge and they have been doing that for me over the last several years. In fact, they came up with the name Teen Space. And actually they formulated the rules of conduct you see up on the wall. So as you view the room and as you look at the rules and think about it, this is actually also a creation of the youngsters themselves, which is the perspective we want to have. The courthouse as it appears and looks to the youngsters, not only to the adults who think they're doing their best for the youngsters. And of course the focus on adolescence in the court system and elsewhere came to us from the chief of chiefs, Chief Judge Kaye. We have focused our attention on adolescence for a number of years now, to try and bring them into the folder and this is certainly the most recent example of that. I see Thom Lotito standing in the corner over there, his e-mail address and phone and everything else he has was worn out getting this done, so that's great Thom. Thank you. Certainly other people who I'm sure Judge Kaye is going to acknowledge, so I don't want to steal her thunder. It took a lot of hands, a lot of heart and a lot of brains to do this particular operation so enjoy it.

Chief Judge Judith Kaye:

I'd next like to call on our remarkable Supervising Judge here, Edwina Richardson-Mendelson. Edwina, I would like to reveal the secret of that wonderful trip we took that one day. Edwina and I, Jan Fink, Nicolette Pach, Gloria Sosa-Lintner, we crammed in a car and we went up to Harvard. We were invited to address a class on child advocacy. And Jan and Edwina and Gloria shared some of the things we were doing down there and the students said, "Really, family courts can do that?" Well in this family court we can do anything. Thanks, Edwina.

Supervising Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson:

I am far too excited to do this without notes so you will have to forgive me today. I am the proud Supervising Judge of the phenomenal Queens County Family Court. Under the dynamic leadership of our chief of chiefs, Judge Kaye and our citywide Administrative Judge of the family court, the Honorable Joseph Lauria, we bring you Queens County Family Court Teen Space. I am so excited about Teen Space and the reason I am excited about Teen Space is that the idea did not come from well meaning child professionals like ourselves, as wonderful as we are, the idea did not come from us. The idea came from the teens. They asked for a resource room where they can distress and get ready for throe court appearances. They can read, they can talk to a professional social worker about the issues in their lives and resources available to them. They can study, they can do homework there, they can use a computer and if they choose and they need to they don't have to do a single thing but sit and wait and relax before they have to go into the courtroom and I am thrilled about that. We have Teen Space now and now we have another job to do. We have to fill that room for the purpose of having youth participate, meaningfully participate, in their court appearances. That is a goal, it has to be a united goal and we can do this. Welcome!

Chief Judge Judith Kaye:

Thank you, thank you so much, Edwina. I'd like to add our thanks too as long as we're still in the court system part to Judge Pfau. I was hoping our Chief Administrative Judge would be here today because she made so many telephone calls, didn't she, at those critical moments so that we were able to pardon off this really superb space and have it constructed. To George Cafasso, where are you George, the Chief Clerk of the family court. Thank you for being such an enthusiastic partner and such a great help to us in so many ways. To the entire staff of the Queens County Family Court for their welcome and

their assistance especially, Joe Illardi and Brian Sherlock. You provided so much help and IT assistance and I am very, very grateful to you. And to Thom cowering over there in the corner, afraid that if he shows his face I'll ask him to do another thing – but I think we're ok for today. Virginia Gippetti, where are you, Virginia? For your assistance with the data, we are so grateful for all of your help too. Thank you. There are just so many people to thank. I hope you all understand that we feel enormously grateful. I feel enormously grateful to each and every one of you and wish I could include your names. At this point, I would like to call on Pete Moses, the Chief Executive Officer of Children's Aid and wonder if you might say a few words, Pete. We're so enormously indebted to Children's Aid – also for providing the day-to-day supervision but providing generally their thoughts and their advice on this fantastic Teen Space. I might say the very first, I would say in the entire country but I could be a little bolder, in the entire universe. Also want to say a special thank you to Bill Weisberg, Jane Golden, Cathy Clements – thank you so much for your great assistance. Also, where are you, Jessica? I'll take this moment, Jessica Schacter, she's the Children's Aid representative who will be providing the actual day-to-day supervision for us in Teen Space. She gets to play with all the games and eat off the food.

Chief Executive Office of Children's Aid Society, Pete Moses:

What a vision, what a dream come true. I'll add my thanks to everyone else's. Treating teens with respect, the novel idea of actually listening to what they have to say. Respecting them enough to believe what they say might actually have some real meaning and substance. And finding people who could help not only listen but then do something about what they had to say. That's what this is all about. That's what all of the teen programs at Children's Aid Society are infused with. Never doubt for a minute that this is a very different paradigm of thinking about young people than what we've been used to. Not only in the courthouse, but in our schools and many other places, especially in the early and mid nineties. We have really not understood that our teenagers have a lot to contribute to our community even the ones that others consider broken – those coming into this system, those coming out of jail. Our Next Generation Center has kids coming out of foster care, kids coming out of jail. They're the kids that are serving you today. Kids that are on the streets not connected with school – They have improved our work at Children's Aid immeasurably. And all the staff of ours that Judge Kaye mentioned – this whole group right here are the people who know how to do that, who know how to first listen and translate what they hear back from the kids into meaningful actions on the teenagers part that add to the value of our community and make of all things a court house that actually has the family part of it really coming to life and is in fact friendly to teenagers which after all is why the juvenile court was created in the first place a zillion years ago. To help young people get back on track after making a mistake or two which is after all endemic and natural in being an adolescent. So we are thrilled to be back with many of our old friends and help to implement this incredible vision. We know it can turn lives around at the right time and keep them turned around. We're proud to have been asked to help and we're happy to be here. Thank you.

Chief Judge Judith Kaye:

Thank you so much Pete and thank you again to the Children's Aid. We're so grateful for your help past, present and future. Now a little touch of sadness, if there is any today. Peter, Howard G. Sloane, Chair of the Heckscher Foundation for Children is not here among us today. In fact, I was even bold enough to think all the people we invited would be here, Virginia Sloane and Julia Bator, the senior program officer would be here too. But I am happy to say that we have Nick with us today who is recording every moment and everything that every one of you says. We will be sure that a copy of this is sent to Peter Sloane. And Peter, I express profound thanks to you and to the Heckscher Foundation for making this extraordinary, extraordinary Teen Space possible. We give you this huge round of applause, every single one of you. Thank you. With that, Now, I'd like to call on the real hero's of the day – you're a hero too,

Pete and you are too, Peter and you're all hero's – but the real hero's in my mind are the Youth Justice Board members and if our purpose in this whole project is to hear from the voice of young people, what better time than to hear from them right now. Rocina.

Youth Justice Board member, Rocina:

Hello, my name is Rocina and I represent the Youth Justice Board, a project of the Center for Courts and Community and the Center for Court Innovation. Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. The opening of the Teen Space involved collaboration between many organizations including the New York State Unified Court System, New York City Family Court, and the New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. Members of the Youth Justice Board were pleased to serve as advisors in the creation of this space. The opening of Teen Space today marks a great step forward for young people involved in the New York City Family Court permanency planning process.

The Youth Justice Board is an after-school program in which 15-20 New York City teenagers study a juvenile justice or public safety topic, investigate relevant policies and issues, and formulate and publish policy recommendations. Board members then work towards the implementation of key recommendations.

As a Board member, my peers and I worked on increasing youth participation in the permanency planning process. First, the Board interviewed many court professionals including judges, Children's Services attorneys, lawyers for youth, social workers and child welfare experts. Members also observed court proceedings and conducted focus groups with youth in care to understand youth experiences in court and with their caseworkers and lawyers.

The Board learned that some youth do not attend their hearings because of past experiences in Family Court. Some youth said that they feared unwanted encounters with family members, others reported that they were uncomfortable in the waiting areas, and several said they felt intimidated because they did not know how the court works.

The Board addressed these and other concerns in a report, published in June 2007, that set forth recommendations for how to increase young people's participation in court proceedings that profoundly affect their lives. One recommendation of the report was to create a space in the courtroom dedicated to young people, an idea that was gaining traction throughout New York State. Today's opening makes that recommendation a reality. The Teen Space responds to youths' concerns by providing a safe, comfortable space exclusively for young people, where they can access resources and learn about New York City Family Court and the permanency planning process.

The Board recommended creating a teens-only waiting area because members felt that it would attract more youth to court. Since issuing its recommendations in June 2007, the Board has advised Judge Lauria and Kathleen DeCataldo on the creation of the Teen Space. Specifically the Board made recommendations about the design of the Teen Space, proposed rules for the space, and suggested resources that the space could offer. Early next year, the Center will publish an informational and organizational tool designed by the Youth Justice Board to assist youth in care. We are excited that this resource will be available to Teen Space visitors.

Today, I am proud to see one of the Board's recommendations come to fruition. This Teen Space can help to improve the experience of going to court for youth in care, not only because they will be greeted

by this welcoming space, but also because they will have access to resources and can use their waiting time to become more informed about the court process.

Again, thank you everyone for making today possible.

Chief Judge Judith Kaye:

Thank you so much for those beautifully chosen words and you just know that we join heartedly in every single one of those sentiments that you have expressed. Thank you so much for all of your hard work and helping to make this happen. We thank every single member of the Youth Justice Board. How many of you are here today? Will you please tell everyone how deeply appreciative we are because you are the people who made that room what it is. A welcoming place and a place of respect and I hope that you will see the benefits of all your hard work has produced in a not very long time. That room will be filled, I am sure. And I noticed you used the word exclusively, so that's an obligation. We're going to have to figure out how to keep – I know the president of the Queens Bar is here today, Steve, where are you? – You will post members of your Bar Association at the door just to be sure that room is not used by lawyers. Do I have your promise Steve? Because this room is for the kids, not for you. There are lots of rooms for attorneys, they're called offices.

And while I'm on the subject of the Youth Justice Board, I'd like to thank Linda Baird, Matt Canfield and Justine Van-Straaten of the Center for Court Innovation who have worked so well with the Youth Justice Board.

A final thank you to the Queens Teen Space Advisory Workgroup. My goodness, I'd like to thank and thank and thank and go on thanking. And of course I'd like to thank Scholastic Books for their generous donation of books.

But I've saved for absolutely, absolutely last the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children and I wonder, Michele Campbell, Toni Lang and Kathleen DeCataldo would you please step forward for a very special round of applause. I have to say that the greatest thing about my past twenty years or so chairing the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children and not time has been more fulfilling, more exciting, more wonderful than when Kathleen has been the Executive Director, with Toni as the Deputy and Michele as the sidekick for all of us. So I thank you all. It's their hard work and their perseverance.

Thank you all so much. Enjoy the day. Enjoy the food and the company. Enjoy the Teen Space. Thank you all so much.