



LONG ISLAND

P. Levenstein, 88, founded parent-child program

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Phyllis Levenstein, a longtime Wantagh resident who founded the Parent-Child Home Program in 1965 and saw it expand to 145 sites nationwide, was honored at the program's 40th anniversary celebration May 23 in the Garden City Hotel.

Five days later, she died of pneumonia in Rome, where she had gone to visit her daughter, Susan Levenstein, an internist there.

A clinical psychologist, Phyllis Levenstein, 88, was working on an expanded edition of her 1988 book about the parent-child program, "Messages from Home," until the day of her death, her daughter said by phone from Rome. Though she had moved to a retirement community in Oakland, Calif., three years ago, she continued to see patients there until she began her journey to Garden City and Rome.

"She loved her work as a therapist helping people with their problems. She was the confidant of four generations of people," her daughter said.

The Parent-Child Home Program, which Levenstein introduced in Freeport, consists of home visits to families challenged by poverty and low levels of education, helping parents to interact with their 2- and 3-year-olds through talking, reading and playing.

Levenstein's "genius was in figuring out long before current research that preparing children for success in school needs quality parent-child verbal interaction," said Sarah Walzer, executive director of the program's national center in Port Washington. Surveys show that children who complete the program enter school ready to learn and graduate high school at the same rate as middle-income students. The program will reach 5,000 disadvantaged families this year, Walzer said.

Julian Gomez, 31, a Manhattan attorney who recently became the first "graduate" elected to the program's board, said he still has the books and toys brought to him by a home visitor when he was the 3-year-old child of Colombian immigrants. After meeting Levenstein at a fund-raiser last year, Gomez "felt like I had known her all my life. She had a way of connecting with people. She was inspirational."

Daniel Levenstein of San Francisco said his mother was "a soft touch for people who needed services, but she was tough-minded in her scientific research."

She was born Phyllis Aronson in Boston and grew up in Detroit. After graduating from Wayne State University in 1937, she taught in Detroit before coming to New York, where she earned a master's in social work in 1944 and a doctorate from Columbia University in 1969.

As a social worker in Manhattan during World War II, she met her husband, Sidney Levenstein, who was then in the service. They married in 1946 and moved to Wantagh in 1957. He was an Adelphi University professor and Levenstein's partner in the early development of the parent-child program. He died in 1974.

Over the years, she researched and published articles about the school readiness program. She was in private practice in Wantagh for 44 years and affiliated with Stony Brook University and a number of Long Island mental health and child guidance centers.

Levenstein was a fellow of the American Orthopsychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association and a member of the American Educational Research Association and the Nassau County and New York State psychological associations.

The second edition of Levenstein's book "Messages from Home," now in its final stages, will be completed by her daughter, who has been co-authoring and editing with her.

Levenstein was cremated and a memorial service will be held in the San Francisco area in July and in New York later. Contributions in her memory may be made to the Parent-Child Home Program, 800 Port Washington Blvd., Port Washington, N.Y. 11050.

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