Julie Burns was working as a therapist in the child and adolescent division of the Karen Horney Clinic in New York when she sensed she could do more to help troubled families. “I wanted to reach families before the problems emerged,” she explains, speaking over the noise of a bustling café in New York’s Soho district.

She could see that the behavioral, emotional and cognitive issues she was treating had their roots far earlier in life. So she wondered, what was out there to help new mothers, especially those facing the myriad of obstacles that accompany poverty? She thought there must be a preventative strategy, a way to strengthen parent-child bonds at the beginning, “rather than addressing these ills when the child was already 5, 6, 7 and up.”

It was in 1996, not long after she had completed her master’s degree in social work at New York University. She was surprised to find few social services available for low-income families with children 0 to 3 years old, a critical age range that researchers say is key to a child’s later development.

A seed was planted. An entrepreneurial side she hadn’t known she possessed began to emerge.

“I saw that I could really fill a niche,” she recalls.

At the same time she saw another, very practical form of aid she could offer to low-income families. She had grown up in Manhattan in an affluent family. She had attended private schools, studied art history in college and even spent five years in the rarified world of Christie’s fine art auction house before making an about-face to pursue social work.

Though her new career was devoted to helping the needy, she still knew people who had plenty.

“I was in my early 30s, and all of my friends were having children,” she says. “You could see this abundance of clothing and books and toys, all of the things children need in those years. And I thought, what would they do with these items when their children had outgrown them? They were in pristine condition.”

The seed began to germinate. “It seemed like a perfect opportunity to provide material items and all of the parenting support as well,” says Burns.

She set to work. In 1998 she opened Room to Grow, an organization providing early support to families of babies born into poverty, in a donated East Harlem storefront space.

Within a year she was serving 100 clients, by herself.

Starting an organization on her own wasn’t something she had planned on. “But it tapped something new in me,” she says. “I found I thrived on developing everything from concept to nuts and bolts.”

The model Burns devised for Room to Grow was a three-year program, engaging with women from their final trimester of pregnancy all the way to their child’s third birthday. Between 1998 and today, her initial idea has remained virtually intact.

Women are referred by their prenatal care practitioners. They must commit to coming into Room to Grow every three months for three years. At each visit, they talk with their social worker and receive needed items such as bottles, clothes, toys and books.

Today, her organization serves about 700 clients at its sites in New York and Boston. All live at or below the poverty level. Most are single mothers, though a small number of fathers participate.
Room to Grow

Rebecca Freedman

Exhale • Summer 2011

Room to Grow

O n this particular day, Burns is battling a cold. She is short on sleep from navigating her 6-month-old baby Willa’s uneven sleep cycle while caring for her other daughter, Olivia, 6, who is off school for spring break. The cafe is unexpectedly noisy so it’s an effort to talk and hear. She is dressed casually — a peasant blouse over slim black pants, and ballet-style flats; her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail; she wears no makeup.

With a hint of alarm, she declines to have her picture taken.

But her passion for her subject prevails. She has gamely launched in even before the waver comes to take her order of hard-boiled eggs, whole grain toast and a big bowl of decaf latte.

The combination of counseling and material goods, Burns continues, is a unique way to foster both child development and parenting skills. The “things” serve as prompts for the long-term guidance.

“I’ve not just providing books,” she explains, “we’re teaching parents how to sit down and read with their children. We’re not only providing bottles, but teaching about healthy nutrition, and talking about what it means to sit down with your child at mealtime and make that a positive experience.”

One of the first supporters of Room to Grow was actress Uma Thurman, Burns’ neighbor, who happened to be pregnant with her first child at the time.

Thurman’s involvement lent a bit of star power, though Burns says she wasn’t seeking out celebrity support. “Uma was genuinely and enthusiastically interested in providing support,” she says. “But we also want to strengthen families in other ways. So over here, you also see beautiful dresses for spring Easter parties. We want families to have the pride and dignity that can come from access to these tangible resources.”

Illuminated by large windows, the cheery space could be a posh children’s boutique, except that these top-quality nearly new items are donated by individuals or collected in donation drives and sorted and arranged by volunteers. (About 2,000 volunteers help out each year, Epstein says.) Some items such as bottles and teething items must be brand-new, Epstein says, and those are often stocked through corporate donations.

Former client Jocelyn Peña, 29, recalls her first impression of the Boston site: “It was amazing,” she says. “When I walked in, and everything was there — the clothes and toys and books,” she recalls, “I was amazed. I thought, I can just come here! Wow. That was awesome.”

Peña “graduated” from the program last fall when her son, Alex, turned three. She was staying in a shelter when she came to Room to Grow, low on hope and full of fear about having a baby without the father’s help. Now, in large part because of Room to Grow’s help, her life has stabilized. “I have an apartment, I have a job and I understand my son,” she says. “I’m helping him through what he’s learning, at the same time having patience and at the same time paying my bills.”

By the end of the three-year program, families have received 130 books, about 10 per visit. Peña says she has arranged her son’s room with the free space, the pro bono legal assistance that sped up the process of organizing as a nonprofit, and financial support from the portrait company The Picture People that enabled her to plan and open Room to Grow’s Boston site in 2005.

Like the Flatiron site, the Boston space, at 142 Berkeley St., was designed to convey comfort and dignity to the low-income parents Room to Grow serves.

Inside, floor-to-ceiling maple shelves and drawers hold stacks of meticulously folded infant clothing and blankets in pastel colors. Sasakia Epstein, the Boston site’s executive director, gives a tour. “Here we have some of the necessities: clothing, swaddling blankets, safety supplies,” she says. “But we also want to strengthen families in other ways. So over here, you also see beautiful dresses for spring Easter parties. We want families to have the pride and dignity that can come from access to these tangible resources.”

At a recent Mother’s Day fundraiser in Boston, another Room to Grow client, Taneisha Henry, 24, stepped to the podium.

“Room to Grow has made a huge difference in my life. I have become a very calm parent. I’m no longer confused. I have lots of confidence.”

With that confidence, Henry was able to enroll in cosmetology school. She is slated to finish this year and hopes to start pursuing a career in hair styling.

“Room to Grow has made a huge difference in my life,” Henry tells the audience of staff, donors and volunteers. “I have become a very calm parent. I’m no longer confused. I have lots of confidence.”

Burns works from home now rather than coming into the office every day. She splits her time between their Soho apartment and their home in Walpole, N.H., where Ken has lived for the past 30 years and where Olivia now attends school.

As CEO, she oversees the high-level operation and planning for Room to Grow while her executive directors and social workers handle the day-to-day site activities. She is now working with a consultant to explore how she might expand the organization to more cities.

Ken Burns, already father to two grown daughters when Olivia was born, gave his wife some wisdom on how motherhood would alter her perspective.

“He said it would be the difference between knowledge and understanding,” she explains. “And it’s true. As a social worker I had a lot of knowledge coming in. But once I had my own child I really understood on a much more visceral level what it takes to be a good parent. It helped deepen my appreciation for the extraordinary strength our clients have.

“As a mom who has had, just by good fortune, opportunities and resources, it’s still one of the hardest jobs out there. But to do it with limited resources and the challenges these families face, it’s extraordinary. I am in awe.”

Burns is grateful to have grown up with parents who were in her corner. She hopes, through Room to Grow, to pass on that gift to other families. She splits her time between their Soho apartment and their home in Walpole, N.H., where Ken has lived for the past 30 years and where Olivia now attends school.

As CEO, she oversees the high-level operation and planning for Room to Grow while her executive directors and social workers handle the day-to-day site activities. She is now working with a consultant to explore how she might expand the organization to more cities.

Ken Burns, already father to two grown daughters when Olivia was born, gave his wife some wisdom on how motherhood would alter her perspective.

“He said it would be the difference between knowledge and understanding,” she explains. “And it’s true. As a social worker I had a lot of knowledge coming in. But once I had my own child I really understood on a much more visceral level what it takes to be a good parent. It helped deepen my appreciation for the extraordinary strength our clients have.

“As a mom who has had, just by good fortune, opportunities and resources, it’s still one of the hardest jobs out there. But to do it with limited resources and the challenges these families face, it’s extraordinary. I am in awe.”

Burns is grateful to have grown up with parents who were in her corner. She hopes, through Room to Grow, to pass on that gift to future generations.

When she was making school and career decisions, she says, “I had a fundamental sense that wherever I was, whatever I wanted to embark on, there would be a level of support. And I think that mirrors what we’re trying to help teach the families that come into Room to Grow. As much of a struggle as it may feel to raise your children in the confines of poverty, to enable the children to grow up with a sense of confidence and a strong identity is so vital to a constructive future.”