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morning brew

Griego: 41 square miles of roadblocks to kids

By Tina Griego
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The Piton Foundation sits near the top of Republic Plaza, Denver's tallest office building. An open stairway and a platform offering spectacular views connect the Piton offices to Gary-Williams Energy Corp. Gary is Sam Gary. He made his money in oil. Being a man who understands luck and opportunity play into fortune - 33 dry wells in a row and then, bingo — he started The Piton Foundation.

It's a metaphoric name. Climb a mountain, sometimes you need a tool. Over 35 years, the foundation has spent tens of millions supporting programs and initiatives helping low-income families become self-reliant. Quality health care and education are its main concerns.

Piton also organizes and provides neighborhood data. You want to know how many people have college educations in the Valverde neighborhood, the Piton website has it. How does Valverde compare with other Denver neighborhoods? Piton has that, too.

What's understood up here is that the most revealing views of the city rarely show themselves from the 53rd floor.

Sam Gary is 84. A long period of introspection several years ago led him to this thought: All

those years, all that money, and we're still talking about low graduation rates from high school among blacks, Latinos and American Indians. We're still talking about a high rate of college remediation. We're still talking about the achievement gap. We're still talking about disparate health outcomes among economic groups.

"So, really, what have we done?" he tells me. "We were doing things that weren't really sustainable and they didn't seem to make a difference. It's one step forward, two steps back. I felt like we needed to pull things together."

So, Piton did what Piton does. It gathered and sorted data on 2005 to 2009 births to teen mothers or mothers who have less than a high school education. It culled the 2009-10 enrollment lists for Denver and Aurora public schools for students who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. With these three characteristics, Piton isolated by neighborhood the children most likely to enter school behind their peers and to stay behind.

The result: a 41-square mile swath across northeast Denver into Aurora. The Children's Corridor, as Piton is calling it, is home to more than 35,000 vulnerable children, two-thirds of its total youth population. According to Piton,

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every day 10 children are born in the corridor.

The challenge is great, says Piton president and chief executive Terry Minger. "The question is what do you do about it, how do you address it, how do you get your arms around it?"

It's not just a good question. It's the question. It's what we ask as the new schools of northeast Denver open, as we scrutinize the latest results of the state standardized tests, as we celebrate the reopening of North High School with yet another principal at its helm, as West High School enters its final year as a traditional high school.

If Piton's approach sounds similar to that of the Harlem's Children Zone in New York, that's because it is. As in the Children's Zone, the work begins with pregnant mothers, with prenatal care and parenting classes and then moves along the pipeline. But the Children's Corridor differs in crucial ways. The first is scale. The Harlem Children's Zone is 100 blocks, not 41 square miles. The second is the Piton Foundation has no intention of running the show.

Most of the foundation's money and focus will turn to the corridor. The concept is still evolving and I'll be following it, but it includes support of and coordination among the many existing neighborhood groups, nonprofits, child-care centers, schools and other foundations to create a linked community, including a shared database. A couple years in the works now, the underground buzz grew loud enough that every mayoral candidate wanted a look at the map.

"When I saw it, I almost jumped out of my skin," says Mayor Michael Hancock. "What Piton is saying, what I've been saying, is that we need a comprehensive approach. It's not just education; it's health. It's not just health; it's nutrition. It's not just nutrition; it's family dynamics."

Besides Piton, Sam Gary is probably best known for the redevelopment of Stapleton. Many credit


him with the foresight and will to see that Stapleton did not fall to urban sprawl, but become a neighborhood. That same concept, a vision rooted by place, inhabits the Children's Corridor, he tells me. It took 20 years to grow Stapleton from seed to its current form. Gary expects it will take as long to see measurably better academic and health outcomes for children in the corridor.

In other words, he won't be around to see it. But he wanted it launched now, he says, because out there in the corridor is a 15-year-old who is pregnant. She and her child must have the chance to grow up healthy, well-educated and ready to join society in a meaningful way.

"In all the years, I've been doing this . . .," Sam Gary stops and if my eyes don't deceive me, he's teared up. "I'm excited, I guess, the most excited I've been on this journey."

Tina Griego writes Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Reach her at 303-954-2699 or tgriego@denverpost.com.

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Griego: Children's Corridor holds promise

By Tina Griego
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Sunday's column on the Piton Foundation's plans to focus most of its attention on improving the health and education of children in northeast Denver and northwest Auroradubbed the Children's Corridor — contained this sentence:

"Every day, 10 children are born within the Children's Corridor."

The general reaction to this was: What?!

The corridor, I'll remind you, is 41 square miles. Piton fixed its boundaries using births to teen mothers, to mothers ages 20 and older with less than a high school education, and to students receiving free or reduced- price school lunches.

Children from households fitting these descriptions tend to start school behind their peers and to stay behind.

At 10 births a day, the math is easy and the implications startling. About 3,650 births a year in a corridor that by definition is built around its poverty. Now, the Children's Corridor also holds Stapleton and plenty of other middle-income neighborhoods. So, we're talking about pockets of need. Montbello is one.

The number sheds light on something Piton president and chief executive Terry Minger says: "In some ways, the problem is growing faster

than the solutions."

So, let's take a closer look. How does 10 a day compare with the city's numbers as a whole? To whom are these children born?


Here are the answers from the Piton data wizards. First, the 10 children a day is an average over three years. For comparison purposes, I will use a one-year average. The source is the Colorado Department of Public Health and Education. The data come from 2009. This won't be a strict apples-to-apples comparison because, again, the Children's Corridor includes Original Aurora, a small but densely populated corner of northwest Aurora.

In 2009, 9,998 children were born in Denver. Of those, 4,027 were born within the Corridor. Daily average in the city: 27. Daily average in the Corridor: 11.

Roughly three children a day were born to teen moms in the city in 2009. In the Corridor, it was slightly higher.

Equally sobering, 23 percent of those births in the city as a whole were to mothers ages 20 or older with less than a high school education. In the Corridor, it's 31 percent.

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On a slightly brighter note, most mothers in the city and the Corridor receive prenatal care within the first trimester, although not enough do. Roughly four of 10 moms in the Corridor receive late or no prenatal care.

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About four in 10 births in the Corridor are to foreign-born moms. In the city as a whole, it's 33 percent. Far-northeast Denver has become more Latino over the past decade. Original Aurora is home to many refugees.

The long and short of it: All these factors can influence a child's health and home life. They influence the relationship between home and school. They influence how well children are prepared for school.

Way back in February, I broke down West High School's college remediation rates. It came down to this: Only four of the 43 students who graduated in May 2009 and entered a Colorado college or university that fall were college-ready.


That's a view of the education pipeline near its end. This is the view of the pipeline at its beginning.

In the day-to-day work of education reform, in the debate over the weight of standardized testing in rating schools, in measuring teacher quality and student capacity, it has always been the trick to acknowledge the pipeline without surrendering to it.

We haven't figured out the balance yet. The Denver Preschool program was a huge step in the right direction, but one taken as high schools cut social workers, psychologists and nurses, and as the need for quality, affordable child care and health care grows. Balance may be the promise of the Children's Corridor and the partnerships that will emerge to bolster the pipeline from beginning to end. That's certainly its potential.

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