

In Queens, a princess

by Jason Pafundi, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, October 27, 2011 12:00 pm

As part of a five-day official visit to the city, Mary, the crown princess of Denmark, spent an hour at the Jacob Riis Settlement House in Long Island City.

She met Riis board members, elected officials including Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D- Manhattan and Queens), Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer (D- Sunnyside) and Assemblyman Francisco Moya (D-Corona) and Queensbridge residents. She was even presented a bouquet by 6-year-old Deshaya Franklin.

After a presentation about the settlement house and its programs by Executive Director William Newlin, the princess heard speeches from students who spent a week in Denmark as part of Riis' exchange program. She then watched a presentation on body image and the media before congratulating a group of new American citizens.

The settlement house was founded in 1888 and is named after Riis, the muckraking journalist and social reform photographer from Denmark. Princess Benedikte, sister of the current queen of Denmark, Margrethe II, is the patron of the settlement house.

"This settlement house has a long history of Danish support and involvement since it was founded by Jacob Riis, so it was very important for her royal highness to be here today," Maloney said.

The princess, 39 and married to Prince Frederik, heir to the Danish throne, was born in the Australian island state of Tasmania and met her husband in a pub in 2000 when the prince was visiting for Summer Olympics.

Newlin, the Riis executive director for 21 years, said the settlement house serves hundreds of people each day and around 10,000 people a year. Services include an after-school program, senior services and immigration help for those new to the United States.

"We are continuing the legacy of Jacob Riis and what he started by working with those who need assistance," Newlin said.

According to Newlin, the largest program is the after-school service which works

with over 400 students per day. The comprehensive program is what Newlin calls a “continuation of service” where the program works with kids from kindergarten through 12th grade.

“We want to continue with them from each level to make sure they are reaching and fulfilling certain requirements before they go to the next step,” he said. “The goal is graduation and so that they can be ready for college and the world.”

The after-school services include technology programs, arts and crafts, literacy and other educational and social programs.

Newlin said the senior program is also comprehensive. It provides two meals per day that are cooked on-site, technology programs and trips to first-run Broadway shows like “Memphis” and “The Lion King.”

“The goal with the senior program is to let them live independently in their community in a healthy lifestyle,” he said. “There are even exercise classes, including tai chi.”

The immigration service has over 30 English classes for speakers of other languages, case managers who work to get immigrants any help they might need and an attorney who works with them on the process of becoming citizens.

The settlement house gets the majority of its funding from government, but Newlin said there is also private money that will keep increasing as long as the programs show results.

“People will fund us because we have produced,” he said. “They’ll get a return on their investment in terms of the outcome of the immigrants, the youth and the seniors.”

Flemming Heilmann, Riis’s chairman emeritus and himself a Dane, said the royal visit was a big boost for the program.

“It’s a big thrill to all the participants of all ages,” he said. “It gives a tremendous boost, and with the media from Denmark and New York City media, people will know more about what we do because we are proud of it.”

Based on the bright smile from the princess as she got into her car to head back to Manhattan, she is proud too.