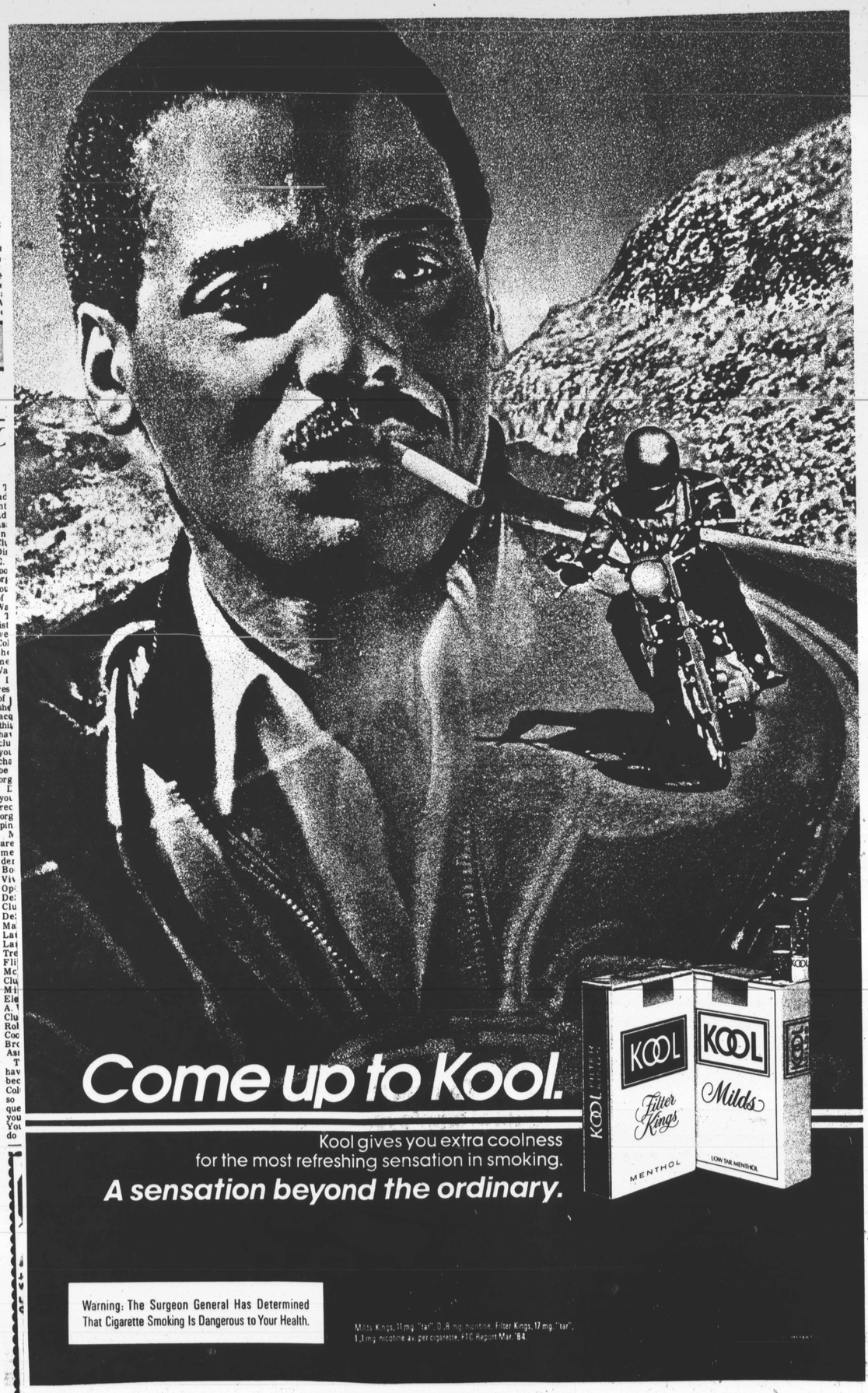


Activist says change community through family strength

By Val Smith-Madden
AFRO Staff Writer

The atmosphere of Baltimore Family life is one of comfort and familiarity. They're like family—an extended family. It's a description that would no doubt, please Ross Ford, Baltimore Family Life's executive director and founder.

The Philadelphia native has long believed that the "optimal system to use to change the community is the family." All of his career efforts have been devoted to working with urban families.

"I think the thing that I'm most interested in is influencing the delivery of mental health services to blacks in the city through training and association with the larger agencies in the city," said Ford recently during an interview.

BFL efforts have been recognized nationally and Ross Ford sees the center as a leader in Baltimore in the delivery of services to families. He says that other agencies would like to function as his does.

The seeds for Baltimore Family Life were planted early in Ford's career. After graduating from the University of Maryland's School of Social Work, Ford stayed on at Maryland's Department of Community Psychiatry. "Our task was to develop a community health program with maximum feasible participation from the community in the delivery of services," said Ford.

He was involved in the planning of the program which eventually became the Walter P. Carter Clinic. Although the clinic was planned with the community in mind, many of the services Ford had hoped to be a part of the clinic were never included.

Ford went on to become the director of the Mental Health Program at Provident Hospital. With the help of Dr. Addison Polk, he was able to develop a strong community board.

In 1976, Ford became involved in an East Baltimore sponsored training program in which he trained counselors to work with black families. This program, the East Baltimore Family Guidance Training program won a national award as an exemplary CETA project.

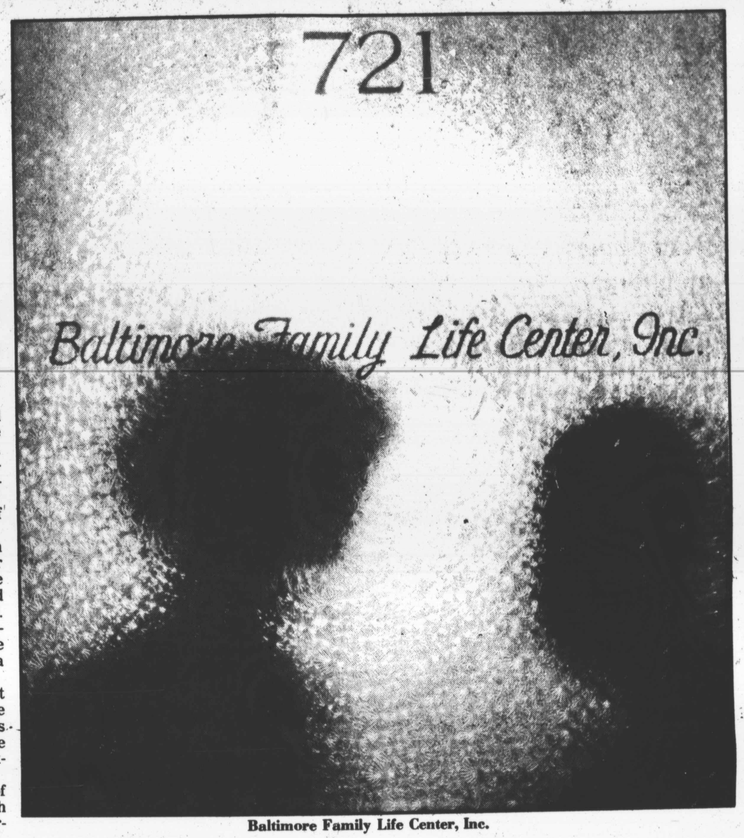
In the first year, Ford trained 15 people, half of whom had college degrees and the others had high school diplomas. The trainees were enrolled concurrently in Sojourner-Douglass College.

In the second year, 12 were trained, and in the third year, all those who were trained were welfare mothers. "This," Ford said, "demonstrated that community people with proper skills can be utilized to do high level counselling."

Desiring to realize his goal in developing a community health service that would be responsive to the community, Ford, along with others, founded Baltimore Family Life.

Members of BFL staff are highly trained individuals who walk a tightrope, they must keep abreast of the changes in their field and they must help their clients to want to come to a professional who "sees you as a family extension."

So far, BFL has been successful. Among its outpatient programs, BFL provides individual counseling services, family counseling services, adolescent counseling, two parenting skills training workshops, a couples group and counseling for individual couples.



Baltimore Family Life Center, Inc.

One of BFL's most important programs is its Extended Family Project. This nationally renowned project, headed by Henry Gregory, works to help people, who would otherwise be institutionalized, learn basic social skills, thus enabling them to become productive members of the community.

"We've found," said Gregory, "that if you grow up in institutions, you live in them for the rest of your life."

Gregory added, "There will never be enough institutions. They create problems that we'll eventually have to deal with."

Youth under 18 are placed with Foster Therapeutic Families who help the child learn basic interpersonal skills. Those over 18 are taught to become independent of agencies such as the Department of Social Services.

Gregory said that the program has been successful "in that it's allowed people the opportunity to develop in the community."

Baltimore Family Life remains a privately-funded organization. Supported by client fees and contractual agreements with the city Department of Juvenile Services and the Department of Social Services, Ford says "We use any route that doesn't control us." Is there a need for an organization such as this one?

Responded a client, "The counselling is a great help to get your mind off of your problems. They don't berate you. They don't make you feel like you're a bad person. These people really care. They help you to see the good inside of yourself and go from there. Without them, I don't know where I'd be."

Photos by Bruce Smallwood

Ross Ford, Executive Director of Baltimore Family Life Center at Read and Cathedral Streets, in the Medical Arts Building.

Henry Gregory, Clinical Therapy Director of the Extended Family Project, counsels a client of the center.