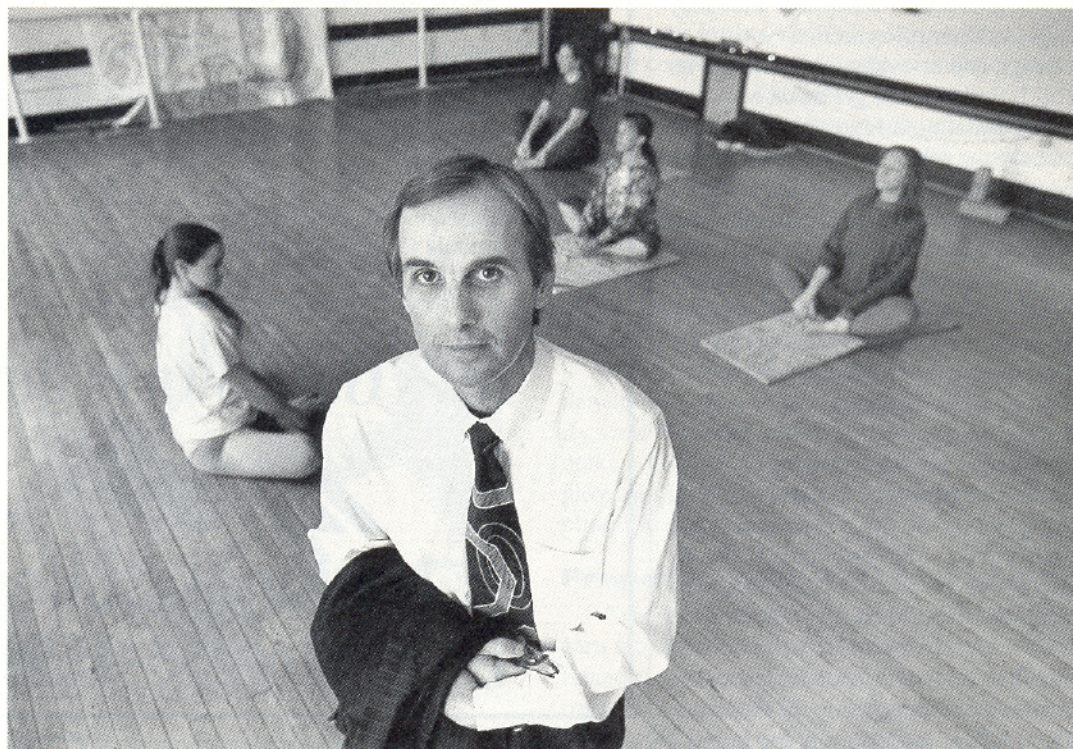


# Center of Attention

**"If Westport  
Allen Center  
hadn't  
helped us,  
the Plaza  
Academy  
wouldn't  
exist."**

**Gary Seabaugh**



*The Rev. Roger Coleman, with members of a Movement Collective class.*

SCOT MORRISSEY

**Whether "poor,  
controversial or odd,"  
K.C.'s diverse  
community groups  
call Westport Allen  
Center home.**

**G**ary Seabaugh was running out of time. The Plaza Academy, the alternative school he directed for 12 years, lost its lease at a local church last year. Seabaugh had little money for rent, and prospective landlords seemed to consider the academy's troubled teens among the least desirable tenants.

Then Seabaugh turned to the Rev. Roger Coleman, a minister who manages Westport Allen Center, a Midtown facility providing low-cost space to not-for-profit organizations offering lifestyle services to area residents. Coleman took

the Plaza Academy's case to his board of directors: The alternative school deserved to survive. Its education program was widely acclaimed; 95 percent of all Plaza Academy students finish high school and nearly 70 percent go to college.

The Westport Allen board decided to rent Seabaugh the space he needed at a price the academy could afford. "If Westport Allen Center hadn't helped us, the Plaza Academy wouldn't exist," Seabaugh says.

## **The Atypical Community Center**

Today, the academy is one of 30 organizations housed in Westport Allen Center, located at 42nd and Waddell, a block north of Westport Landing. This three-story brick structure was a deteriorating vacant school building — Allen Middle School — until Coleman and other civic leaders reclaimed it for community use.

Since opening in 1980, Westport Allen Center has been known for its unique approach to community service. Although the center offers the usual range of fitness and recreational activities available in typical community centers, its board consistently supports programs that are either unavailable or hard to find elsewhere in the city.

Consider the Movement Collective, a con-

**By Mary Beth  
Gordon**

sortium of highly trained professionals who conduct movement classes that focus on a lot more than mere physical exercise. Most Collective instructors emphasize gentle, repetitive movements that help relieve chronic ailments such as arthritis, lower-back pain and hypertension. But alleviation of pain is only one benefit of the classes: Students and teachers alike say the simple, fluid movements help stimulate creativity and release repressed emotions.

The Movement Collective teaches a variety of classes, most involving new age-sounding names such as the Feldenkrais Method; t'ai chi ch'uan; hatha, kundalini and tantra yoga; plus Sufi and other dances of universal peace. About 200 people a week — most traditional nine-to-fivers with families and dogs — attend Collective classes.

Coleman and his board aren't ruffled by people who suggest the Movement Collective or other seemingly unconventional groups might be too far left of center for a community facility. "Our space is definitely available to eclectic groups," explains Coleman. "A lot of people in the mid-city area have an incredible amount of creative energy and talent. If they need space for an artistic endeavor, the exploration of a spiritual idea or new-age concept, or the organization of a community project, we intend to provide it."

### Reaching Out, Filling a Need

Coleman says Westport Allen Center's main purpose is to seek and sponsor programming that meets the diverse needs of the Midtown population, which includes virtually every age, economic and ethnic group. To that end, the center board — composed primarily of business leaders committed to the revitalization of the area — developed a formula for the center's use: one-third of the space is to be devoted to cultural activities and groups; one-third to those addressing social/human needs; the rest to community organizations for meetings and special events.

This operational philosophy must be working because, every week, more than 1,800 people visit Westport Allen Center, which is open days, evenings and weekends. Some come for acting lessons, yoga classes, aerobic workouts and a variety of ever-changing Communiversities courses. Others participate in home-repair and weatherization workshops, health seminars, employee-training sessions and numerous short-term courses and special events.

Many arrive in need of help, whether from a support group, or direct assistance and information from one of the many community service organizations housed in the center. Hospice Care of Mid-America, for example, annually provides in-home care and counseling for some 200 terminally ill individuals as well as the emotional support necessary to sustain the 600-plus friends and relatives of the dying.

And Westport Allen Center offers plenty of activities for children and older adults. Senior citizens regularly gather for potlucks, card parties or Sunday Bible readings. During the ballet season, some 140 youngsters take lessons at the State Ballet School, part of the State Ballet of Missouri, which is headquartered in the center. Dancers from the State Ballet's professional company use the center's auditorium for daily workouts and rehearsals.

"We're proud of our incredible mix of organizations and activities," says Coleman. "Some are highly respected, such as the State Ballet of Missouri and the Kansas City Association for Mental Health. Others are virtually unknown. But if a group is addressing an important need in this community, we will find space for it even if it's poor, controversial or just plain odd."

In the controversial category, Narcotics Anonymous and groups that deal with AIDS issues are on the front line. For example, when a Narcotics Anonymous representative asked Westport Allen officials about using meeting space for recovering drug addicts, he expected the standard response: no way. He was surprised when the staff took his proposal seriously. "They were curious — they wanted information and assurances about the safety of my group — but they were open-minded and willing to work with us," says the official, who asked that his name not be published.

Since first meeting in the center in 1982, Narcotics Anonymous has grown from a tiny group holding two meetings a week to an important central-city organization serving an estimated 500 recovering addicts at 14 weekly meetings at Westport Allen.

Coleman admits the center may have forfeited the financial support of some existing and potential funders who don't, for example, approve of any group having the term "AIDS" connected to its name or goals. He and his board never bow to these sometimes powerful pressures. "We're here to assist people and organizations that are making a difference in the community," he says.

Representatives from groups operating from Westport Allen Center echo Coleman's sentiments. They respect the mission of the center and appreciate the special ambiance created by the diversity of groups. "The energy in this beautiful old building is extremely positive," says Arielle Denise Thomas, Movement Collective co-founder. "That's because Westport Allen Center is filled with community groups doing wonderful things." ■

*Mary Beth Gordon is a writer, editor and public relations consultant. Her articles have appeared in Ingram's, Bride's, Christian Science Monitor and other local and national publications.*

**"We're here  
to assist  
people and  
organizations  
that are  
making a  
difference  
in the  
community."**

**Rev. Roger  
Coleman**