

Life Lessons

Carol Morgan of Lehman's SEEK Program knows from experience how far a little help from friends can go

ANN ALVARADO

Bronx Journal Staff Reporter

At first, she seems out of place, someone that should be walking down Fifth Avenue and not strolling about the Bronx. Dressed elegantly in a navy pullover and pale dress slacks, Carol Morgan, a blonde, blue-eyed Brit who speaks with an accent that is a blend of Elizabeth Hurley and your typical "New Yawka", certainly stands out at the campus of Lehman College, City University of New York (CUNY). Watching her mingle with the mostly Black and Hispanic students at Lehman's SEEK Tutoring Center, where she is coordinator, however, you can't help but notice how she fits in. You might even think she was born here.

Morgan, 43, has had to be as tough as any New Yorker lately. Since becoming coordinator of the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) Tutoring Program at Lehman in 1997, she has seen CUNY go through politically tense times. The system has received harsh criticism from New York Governor George Pataki and New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who maintain that remediation, like that offered by the SEEK program, brings down CUNY's academic standards. The CUNY Board of Trustees has voted to end remedial courses at its senior colleges and now requires that freshmen submit SAT and Regents scores upon entering. Before this change, the only requirement for entrance was a high school diploma.

On top of that, SEEK has endured budget cuts along with the rest of the CUNY system. For the 1999-2000 academic year, \$974 million dollars were appropriated for the system's senior colleges, down from \$979 million the year before. At the same time, SEEK's enrollment has gone up, from 2,332 freshmen entering in the Fall of 1999 to 2,368 freshmen entering this past Fall semester. Specific budget numbers for Lehman's SEEK program were unavailable, but according to Alex Cruz, the campus's program director, less funding means having to serve well over 900 of its low-income, mostly minority students with a budget for 885.

For Morgan, the changes mean having to pick up where remedial courses leave off with SEEK students. Her efforts start with the dozen or more tutors she supervises who help students in various subjects. She also organizes workshops in reading, writing and study skills, and runs the Supplemental Instruction Program, which holds tutor-led, non-credit review sessions for difficult courses.

Morgan knows why she relates to her students so well: She shares more with them than meets the eye. "I literally came from nothing. People take a look at me and think I'm privileged, but I had [humble] beginnings." Born and raised in the East End of London, Morgan's father, a groundskeeper for a London high school, died when she



PHOTO: LENORE SCHULTZ

was 10 years old, leaving behind a wife and four children between the ages of three and 16. Consequently, the family went on Britain's equivalent of welfare. It was a particularly painful experience because, as Morgan says, her family members were "typical stoic English people" and didn't know how to express their grief. Morgan dealt with the tragedy by turning inward and shut down emotionally. "One day, my older sister came to me and said, 'Carol, Mom is worried about you. You don't speak at all, and you haven't cried.' I didn't share my feelings, I just went into seclusion."

At the age of 17, Morgan escaped, choosing to travel the world with friends. She hopped about the globe from Morocco to Germany and even Israel, where she lived for two years on a Kibbutz, a self-sufficient, farming community. The stopover there proved to be quite meaningful. "On the Kibbutz, there was a community that really had a cause, really had a purpose," she says. It provided a sense of belonging which Morgan desperately needed.

During her many voyages, Morgan worked odd jobs around the world to support herself. She picked grapes, and worked as a seamstress and a short order cook. All the while, she was determined to come to America to experience the glamorous land of opportunity she had seen in Hollywood movies and American television shows. Programs like "Leave it to Beaver" which depicted a happy home life, had a special allure for her. "I was always fasci-

nated that there were these kids who would gather at the dinner table and actually talk to each other," Morgan says.

Once she arrived here at age 23, she was already used to the kind of diversity found in New York. "I was world aware. I'd gotten to know so many different cultures," says Morgan. Those experiences have helped her immensely at Lehman. One of Morgan's tutors, a woman of Jamaican descent recalls trying to tell her mother on the phone one day how indebted she felt to Morgan. "My mother asked, 'Is she Black?' and I answered, 'No, but she could be,'" she recalls.

It goes without question that Morgan's affinity for the students has much to do with the hard times she herself has experienced. When she settled in the United States in 1980, she had just \$150, a guitar and a backpack. She'd often stayed with friends to get by and took to selling goods on the streets of New York to survive. That didn't last long. Police soon picked her up for peddling without a license. And that wasn't her only brush with the law. One day, a female friend from Sweden asked Morgan to go with her to pick up her father at the airport. Neither of them knew that the girl's father arranged to have the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) waiting to force his daughter to return home. Morgan had neither a visa nor Green Card and was whisked away by officers. They put her in prison for a week and had her deported. Morgan, however, sneaked

back into New York a week later. "Days after coming back, I was walking down the street, and I saw the cop who took me away. All I could do was stand there and smile," says Morgan, whose eyes widen recalling the terror she felt. "He just looked at me and said, 'I didn't see you.' I was so relieved. I think it must have been divine intervention."

Morgan says the perspective she gained from those experiences motivates her work for SEEK. SEEK was created in the mid-60's in order to help poor blacks and Hispanics get an education they otherwise might not be able to have. Today, the program is open to people of all backgrounds who are classified by CUNY as economically and educationally disadvantaged. It provides academic and economic support including free tutoring, review sessions for difficult courses, academic, career and personal counseling throughout college, and a monetary stipend of \$335 a semester to help pay for tuition, books and activity fees.

Lately, that hasn't spared the program criticism from local leaders. CUNY Trustee Herman Badillo, who supported SEEK at its inception, said in a recent New York Times article, "I have a sense that it has been a big problem and that it has not been implemented as I intended," although he has been reluctant to end the program. Mayor Giuliani has suggested that the CUNY system should not provide remedia-

Continued on next page