

Room to Grow has plenty of space for volunteers

By Jaclyn Trop

ROOM TO GROW HAS ROOM FOR volunteers.

Founded in 2004 by South End resident Rebecca Schulman, the Boston branch of the New York-based non-profit dedicated to enriching the lives of babies born into poverty hopes to help at least 25 percent more families in early 2007. Currently serving 150 families from Boston and the city's surrounding neighborhoods, Schulman wants to increase that number to 200.

Room to Grow provides material items and one-on-one counseling sessions for low-income families who have been referred by prenatal programs, including those at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, and Massachusetts General Hospital. Appointments begin three months before a baby is born and continue every three months until the child is three years old.

"Many studies have shown those are the most important developmental years, in terms of both the brain and the body," Schulman said. "We like to be able

to work with families right at the beginning, before the craziness of having a baby sets in."

Room to Grow is the only organization in the U.S. that specializes in serving children under three and was founded in New York City in 1998 by Julie Burns, wife of documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. The charity has remained visible through celebrity support, including that of Uma Thurman, who serves on Room to Grow's board of directors and chaired a fundraiser at the Westin Hotel at Copley Place last November.

Although Schulman anticipates it will be hard to say good-bye when her first batch of clients, which joined in March 2005, leave the program in 2008, "there's a huge transformation that happens over three years that's very exciting to see."

Kira Hoffman, the only social worker at Room to Grow's Back Bay office, teaches mothers to find the right pre-school for their child and ask the right questions at medical appointments. "One of the things we focus on from the beginning is providing tools and a level of confidence for them to find the resources they need," Schulman

said. "All of these things will help them be the best advocate for their baby."

Each two-hour appointment begins with a session with Hoffman to discuss a mother's concerns, as well as ways to connect to other parents and community resources. The second half of the appointment is devoted to choosing supplies that will take her child through the next three months. In order to meet her end-of-year goal of doubling her current client capacity, Schulman plans to add another social worker to the office.

"There's a need for volunteers and a real opportunity to have fun and help some families in the community," she said from Room to Grow's Berkeley Street headquarters, a large, sunny suite that doubles as storage space for baby supplies and an office for social worker appointments.

Twelve-foot tall maple shelves, assembled by a group of local firefighters, most of whom are parents of young children, brim

with toys, clothes, bedding, strollers, rattles and teethingers. Creating Room to Grow's physical space was Schulman's first big challenge. "We started from the ground up and tried to make it warm and inviting," she said.

Families seeking to join Room to Grow must meet four criteria: they must join during the mother's third trimester of pregnancy, commit to three years of appointments, have an expressed desire for help, and not have access to resources on their own. Room to Grow has a retention rate of more than 90 percent, according to Schulman, with some families forced to leave the area due to domestic violence or a lack of housing.

Volunteers are asked to come once or twice a week for two hours and help manage inventory. The Boston office currently has a core of 25 to 30 volunteers, according to Schulman.

Room to Grow accepts donations of "new or nearly new" toys and clothing up to size 4T. The organization cannot take



Rebecca Schulman, executive director of Room to Grow on Berkeley Street.

diapers, car seats or large furniture. Items may be dropped off at Room to Grow's headquarters, 142 Berkeley St., Monday through Friday between 9:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. Curbside pickup is available. Visit www.roomtogrow.com for more information on volunteering or donating. ▀