

IN THE FAMILY

Mom and Pop and More



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Denise Jeffries-El, the educational director of A Child's Place, with her daughter, DiLynn, at the center. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

By **Diane Cardwell**

Dec. 2, 2011

MEETINGS of the leadership of [A Child's Place](#) — a family-owned day care center, elementary school and afterschool program in northern Queens — do not always follow an agenda.

At one meeting last winter, Linda Coles, who started the business almost 30 years ago with a few charges in her father-in-law's basement, sat at her desk pulling lettuce, tomatoes and grilled chicken out of a bag. Her husband, Gregory, the chief executive, talked with their son, Brandon, about how to handle employees who failed to log in to the new

computerized payroll system.

“We want to let employees be aware that if they miss a punch, it will reduce their hours,” Gregory told Brandon, 27, who had been struggling to step into his father’s role as the finance director.

Then Linda interrupted with another critical question: Had Brandon brought his daughter’s shoes with him to work? Kalia had spent the night at her grandparents’ house and clomped off to class in her rubber boots.

“I don’t like her walking around in those boots all day,” said Linda, who later cited an old wives’ tale that rubber boots could be bad for the eyes. “At 18, 19 months, she can’t dictate to you ——”

“Your granddaughter is 23 months,” Brandon pointed out.

Said Linda, “She’s still too young to dictate to you.”

Just as abruptly, the conversation jolted back to business: scheduling a tour for a potential program partner; whether an employee going through a family trauma should take a few days off; how best to advertise their summer camp (Brandon suggested printing on Frisbees, an idea both parents liked).

Then Brandon’s sister, Denice Jeffries-El, who had already taken over their mother’s role as educational director, called her mother on her way back from a doctor’s appointment, wondering about lunch. Linda shared her plan to make a salad with the grilled chicken. “You don’t have to eat it,” Linda said into the phone, voice rising, “but then you don’t have lunch, and you starve.”

In a huff, she hung up. “It doesn’t sound appetizing, but she can’t tell me what she wants,” she said, putting on a jacket. “I’m going to go to the deli and get your spoiled sister a sandwich.”

Said Brandon, “Can I have a sandwich, too, and not be spoiled?”

And so it goes for the Coles clan, an unusually fractious yet unusually close-knit family for whom the boundaries of home and work are both permeable and in perpetual motion. They work long days and then go out to dinner, vacation together, see one another on weekends at church, swinging from fighting to laughing in an instant. That their business is about child-rearing, and that it is an enterprise facing critical transitions, only underscore the charged emotional bonds and pressures.



Brandon Coles with his daughter, Kalia. Like his sister, Ms. Jeffries-El, his girlfriend and his parents, Mr. Coles works for A Child's Place Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Linda and Gregory own the business — she has a 51 percent stake to his 49 — and take annual salaries of about \$65,000 and \$55,000. Over the next five years, they expect to hand over about a quarter stake each to Denice, who currently earns \$45,000, and Brandon (\$35,000).

And there are other relatives in the three buildings clustered between Northern and Astoria Boulevards where East Elmhurst blends with North Corona: Linda's father and stepmother, Willie and Eileen Crawford, who contributed financing and sweat equity to the enterprise, sit on the board; Brandon's girlfriend of six years, Tamesha Davis, works as an administrator; Gregory and Linda's niece, Alaya Coles, is Denice's deputy; three of Linda's cousins also work there as teachers.

“A lot of my friends say, ‘You still hanging out with your parents?’ ” Brandon said, laughing. “Well, you know, they do things that I enjoy. Through work and vacation and even some nights when we're with each other until 8 o'clock, I don't complain.”

Amid the affection, though, there are challenges: Linda and Gregory are trying to pull back and let the next generation take over, the point at which many family businesses fail; at the same time, they are hoping to expand and create a charter school, even as financial constraints have led some parents to withdraw their children from A Child's Place. Some weeks, money has been so tight that Linda and Gregory have held back on cashing their paychecks so that their children could cash theirs.

At a board meeting last winter, when Brandon and Denice appeared insufficiently focused on resolving an issue, Linda cried out, “We are going to be living in a refrigerator box on the street because you all think everything is so funny.”

A Modest Start

Like so many small businesses, A Child's Place was born out of personal need. Linda and Gregory, who grew up in the neighborhood and began dating in high school, moved in with his father a few years after he graduated in 1979 from Clemson University in South Carolina, where he was on a basketball scholarship and she studied education.

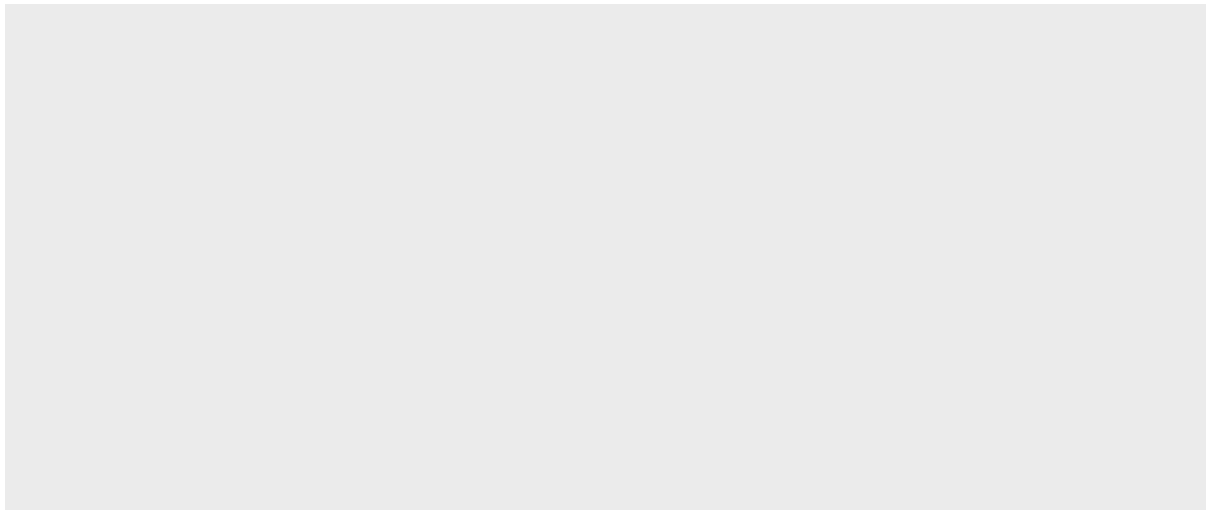
Linda began taking Denice, then a toddler, along to a day care center where she had gotten a job, but that proved untenable. Creating A Child's Place would allow the couple to support themselves while spending time with each other and their babies, and maybe to leave something for their children.

Gregory, now 55, who had studied business and worked as an industrial engineer, recalled, "I felt that working for myself, I would be more dedicated to get things done."

For Linda, 54, it was a way to address the working-mother dilemma. "They would be on cots over here, and we would be right over there," she said, indicating two sides of a small office, "planning things and doing the checks."

The business quickly outgrew the elder Mr. Coles's basement, moving in 1985 to a storefront on Northern Boulevard, and then expanding to another space on Astoria Boulevard.

In 1998 — after both Gregory's father and Linda's parents mortgaged their houses and the couple secured financing from nonprofit lenders — they bought a large lot on 108th Street for about \$300,000 and spent \$2.5 million building the squat, three-story structure made of stucco and brick that now houses the preschool.



A board meeting at A Child's Place with, clockwise from left, Willie Crawford, Linda Coles, Denice Jeffries-El, Gregory Coles, Eileen Crawford and Brandon Coles. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Today the company serves about 300 children — including Brandon's 2-year-old daughter, Kalia; Denice's 7-year-old son, Jaylen; and her 18-month-old daughter, DiLynn. There are 136 infants and toddlers, whose parents pay up to \$765 a month for day care, and about 110 children enrolled in kindergarten through third grade, at a cost of at least \$470 per month. A Child's Place also offers an afterschool program that serves about 90 children, about 40 of whom go to other schools.

Brandon, who graduated from Delaware State University in 2007 with a degree in business management, had worked for his parents during high school, helping with the bus service the school used to run, but at first he resisted returning as an adult. He worked at a Wal-Mart store in Delaware for a few months, but he rejoined A Child's Place as a financial supervisor. He now lives with Ms. Davis and their daughter a few blocks from the school, across the street from his parents.

"It's not a choice — it's all you know," he said of his decision to come back. Growing up, "if I wasn't playing basketball or going to school, I was at A Child's Place," he explained, adding, "And my parents are so community-oriented, everyone else knows you as A Child's Place, so you're kind of like a walking brand."

Denice, 31, who also began working at the school as a teenager, moved to Maryland for college but transferred in 2000 to St. John's University in Queens. There, she studied business and education and met her husband, Jabbar Jeffries-El, now a food and beverage manager at the Marriott Marquis hotel in Times Square. They bought a house on a quiet street in Englewood, N.J., where, Denice said, she doesn't have to talk about A Child's Place.

Mr. Jeffries-El said he, too, hoped to start a business of his own someday. He has plans for a partnership with his brother but would shy away from employing relatives, he said.

"It's tough to have to discipline this person and then go spend Thanksgiving Day with them," he said. "Ultimately, business and family don't always mix."

In Control

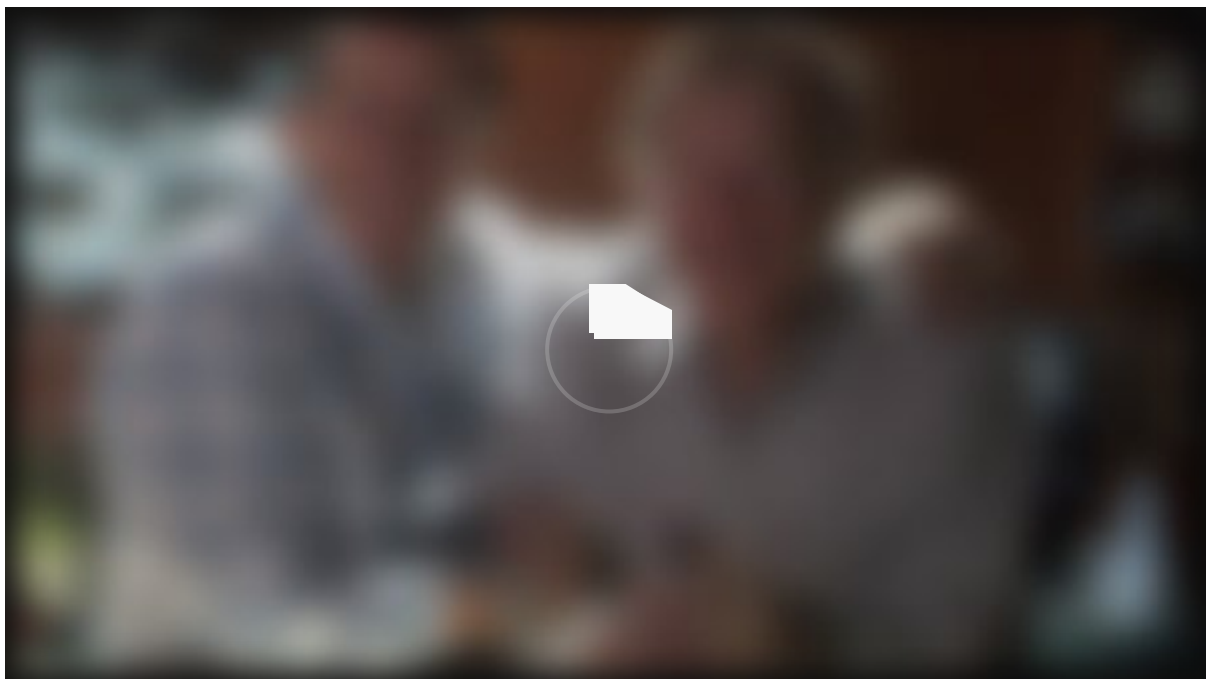
“My brother’s personality is really something else,” Denice said as she steered her Hyundai Sonata across the George Washington Bridge one morning last spring. “He can annoy me extremely quickly, but he’s extremely bright.”

Brandon always had great ideas, she said, but was not as good on the follow-through. Knowing they would eventually be partners, she had been urging him to show more dedication to the business.

“I’ve been trying to help him understand the responsibilities,” Denice said. “I try to explain to him, ‘To whom much is given, much is expected.’ ”

It was about 8 a.m., and Denice had already done much. With her husband having left for work shortly before 7, she was upstairs adorning DiLynn’s ponytails with tiny clips, so Jaylen welcomed a reporter inside their spacious home, which overlooks the park where he plays baseball. Clutching her cellphone and purse and planning to pick up a bagel at some point, Denice piled them into the car for the 30-minute drive to Queens.

Several hours later, still with no bagel, she headed for a doctor’s appointment on Long Island, a now-routine visit for treating breast cancer; she received the diagnosis last year. “They think I started getting it because of the hormones when I was pregnant with my son,” she said matter-of-factly. Not planning to have more children, she opted for a double mastectomy. “I was like, ‘Listen, I don’t need them; I don’t use them for anything,’ ” she said.



Three family businesses in New York City have managed to survive for three generations and counting.

She also underwent a yearlong round of chemotherapy and a series of reconstructive surgeries. She is open about the experience but said she was surprised at how deeply it reverberated through A Child's Place after she wrote a letter about her illness to the 85-member staff, prompting many tears. Linda said it brought the group closer, as women shared stories of themselves or loved ones having the disease.

For all of those bonds, though, Denice said she dreamed of moving to Florida, away from the cold, and running A Child's Place from afar.

"My brother's got cameras everywhere," she noted, referring to the robust surveillance system, called Peace of Mind, which allows parents to see remotely what is going on throughout the center. "It's like a jail, but the way he has it set up I can log on with my phone and see what's going on."

No one really believes she could go through with a move, though: she would miss the family too much, and she would have difficulty letting go.

As it is, Denice never feels that she is doing enough to grow and nurture the business. At a meeting last winter, she told the board — her family — that she needed to spend more time at the school.

"I have to get my halls together," she said. "I have to make sure my teachers are in line."

Ms. Crawford, Linda's stepmother, began, "Well you have people in place — "

"It's not about having people in place; it's about me being in place," Denice shot back. "Nobody can do what I do but me."

Fault Lines

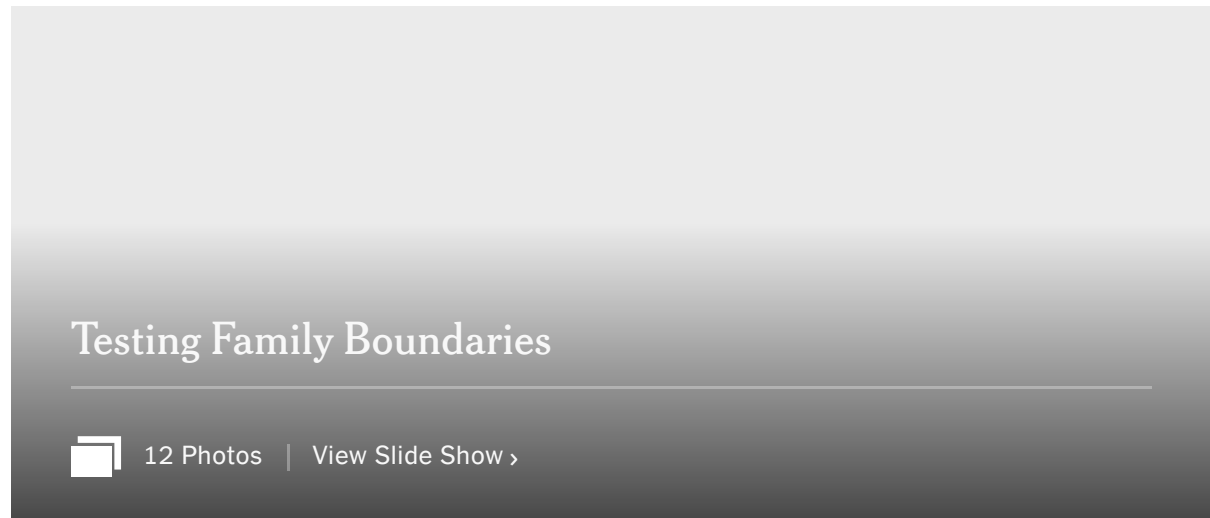
On the Monday before Easter, Brandon was behind the wheel of his Ford Flex, running errands before meeting his parents, with plans to bring up an issue that had been on his mind.

Tension had been developing between Ms. Davis, his girlfriend, and Alaya, his cousin, in part because of complications of the family relationships.

Alaya and Denice grew up together and can communicate with nothing more than a look. At moments they are simply Alaya and Denice, cousins and friends, Brandon said, but they also need to be Miss Alaya and Miss Denice, the office professionals in charge.

As Brandon's girlfriend and the mother of his child, Ms. Davis had

constant access to the institution's higher-ups, and the staff was beginning to look to her for leadership, sometimes in areas that were not her territory but Alaya's.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

“She’s brought a lot of new ideas, a lot of things that being in the family, being there every day, you may overlook because you’re there all the time,” Brandon said that morning. “She’s very driven, so when she’s at A Child’s Place, she’s very much Miss Tamesha, and that’s good because she knows where to draw the line.”

It’s a line that everyone in the family seems to struggle with at times. At a surprise birthday party for Linda at her house last month, the conversation moved from Linda and Gregory’s recent Caribbean cruise to whether Brandon could get out of work at the end of the week to go bowling with his grandfather, and then changed again to Brandon’s desire for a motorcycle. Linda asked Ms. Davis how she felt about it.

“You’re in the hot seat now, girl,” Denice said, laughing. “Answer the question.”

Looking at Linda, Ms. Davis began, “Well, I told him, you’re in a different place right now —”

Jovially, Denice cut her off: “She asked what you thought, not what you said.”

After a moment, Ms. Davis started again, telegraphing, more than stating, her worry: “I told him, it’s not so much you driving but how other people behave when they’re driving.”

Brandon, not getting the full-throated support that he was after, began,

“Ah, Miss Tamesha.”

She shot back, “I am not Miss Tamesha right now.”

Passing the Torch

On Election Day, A Child’s Place was closed to students, while the staff had career development workshops. Gregory met with the food service workers in the basement of the preschool building. Linda was home, finishing up the fried chicken, baked ham, macaroni and cheese, pot roast, cakes and pies she had made to feed the staff.

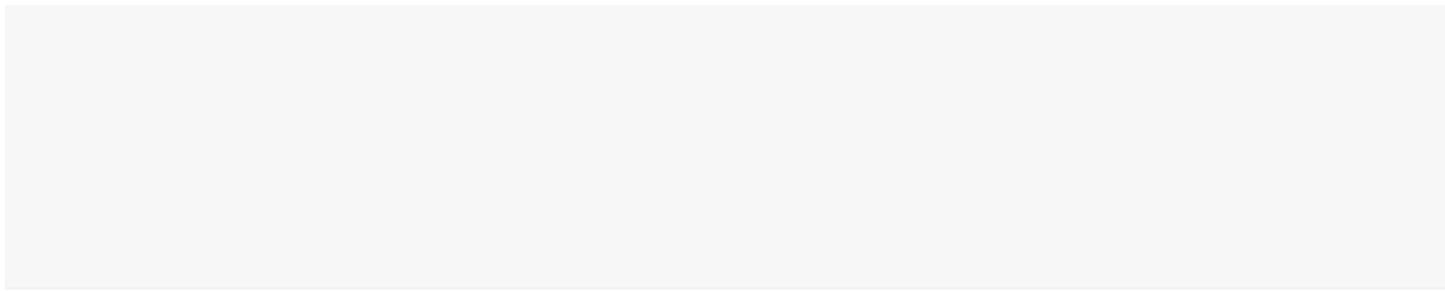
Upstairs at the center, teachers were watching videos of themselves interacting with their charges, and then filling out questionnaires that would form the basis of group critiques later.

Brandon was in the front office, where he had recently added more of his diplomas, honors and certificates to join those of his parents and sister on the walls. Moving from computer to computer, where teams of teachers were watching the video feeds, he was trying to sort out technical glitches.

Denice was, as usual, running between the two main buildings, meeting with supervisors, rallying teachers, checking in with Brandon about how things were going.

It was a few days after the surprise party for Linda, and she and Gregory were feeling more comfortable about the coming transition. Brandon had just handled the twice-monthly \$90,000 payroll on his own for the first time. He and Denice were beginning to act like true partners. Their parents were thinking they might soon be able to take time away for themselves more regularly. Maybe the next trip would be to Florida — if they could keep the kids from tagging along.

“A lot of times, our kids, they like to travel with us,” Gregory said one evening, laughing. “They just like to be around us.”



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