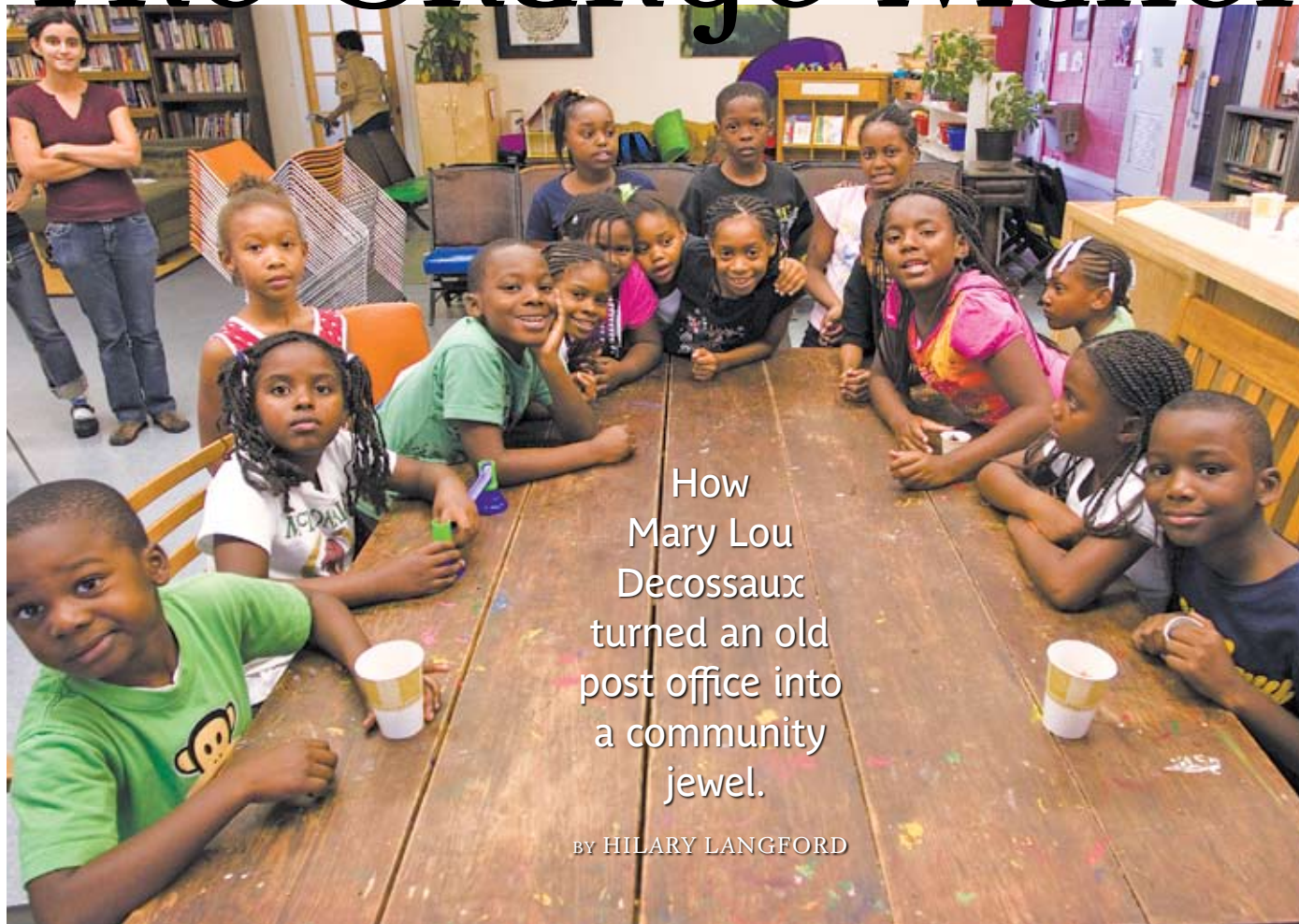


# The Change-Maker



How  
Mary Lou  
Decossaux  
turned an old  
post office into  
a community  
jewel.

BY HILARY LANGFORD

**T**he Neighborhood Resource Center in Fulton Hill has a Paris connection. Yes, as in the capital of France known for its high fashion and art galleries. It's difficult to imagine that the former post office now splashed with primary paint and filled with the din of children would have anything in common with a bustling metropolis, but founder and co-director Mary Lou Decossaux has family in both places.

It began unexpectedly when Decossaux traveled to Europe for a college sports tournament. "After the first game," she says, "I got off the bus and I hitched to France to meet my mother's people. That detour lasted six months and put me on a path to exploring community." Eventually she returned to school in New York but went back to France to earn a master's degree in history at the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. "I studied immigration patterns, why people leave their homes and how they set up communities in 'the new world,'" she says. "I learned how organization or lack thereof can make or break a community." Her work paid off here.

She landed in Richmond six years after leaving France and quickly became dedicated to the world around her. Her civic roles included community development director at the William Byrd Community House, where she coordinated the Richmond Coalition for a Living Wage for four years and became increasingly devoted to the Fulton neighborhood, her home since 1990. And then,

one of those moments happened. "The vision hit me like a freight train the day our community post office closed. Neighbors worried the empty building would be colonized by drug dealers," Decossaux recalls. "I found myself needing to go inside. I called some neighbors, we got a key. ... and the rest is history."

Still, it wasn't always easy. "I tried to forget what I saw, talk myself out of it, get rid of the vision," she says. "I had no time, no money and no business getting involved in another big project. A year later, I quit my paying job and started raising money for what would become the Neighborhood Resource Center. That was seven years ago."

Since then, the center has evolved into a hub of goodness offering yoga, high-school completion classes, a sliding scale Montessori preschool, even a recording studio. While it sounds almost effortless, it was hardly so. Decossaux recalls a particularly rough patch and the advice of a good friend and neighbor, Rose Pollard: "As one of the early NRC board members, Rose witnessed the many trials and tribulations involved in getting the center going. The board had just learned that someone put a bid on our post office and a major donor had pulled out. Everyone was quiet, and then Rose sang out, 'All right now you all that's enough, we'll get past this.' She came up to me square in the face: 'Now look here, don't you quit five minutes before the miracle, you hear me?' Those are the words I live by."

As engaging as she is inspiring, Decossaux

is a no-frills, matter-of-fact woman more likely to greet you with a hug than a handshake. The same compassionate conviction that drove her heroes Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi is evident in her mission. This fall, Decossaux's contributions are being celebrated by the Valentine Richmond History Center's 2009 Richmond History Makers award. "I'm honored to be in the company past and present of good people doing good work," Decossaux says.

Ever humble, she'd rather talk about a group of people she deems the "salt of the earth": her board and staff and the center's biggest fundraising event, Run to the River, this month. "Beyond that, we are looking forward to opening a cafe at the center that will serve an affordable, healthy Sunday brunch and provide job training for future cooks. Once that's under way, we will be able to start thinking about a second-floor addition. If we had the space,

we could double the size of our after-school and preschool programs tomorrow. The need is there. When the resources arrive, start looking up!"

Decossaux adds: "People want to improve their lives; all they need is opportunity, resources and love."

*Run to the River is Oct. 17. For information or to register visit [www.runtotheriver.org](http://www.runtotheriver.org) or [nrccafe.org](http://nrccafe.org).*



Mary Lou Decossaux works behind the scenes. Fulton Hill children (top) gather for an activity at the resource center.