

## Former director tapped to lead Edenwald CC

by DANIEL BEEKMAN  
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Leon Oliver Jr., who grew up in Edenwald, teaches art at the public housing project's community center. He and his students recently prepared paper mache Easter eggs.  
Photo by Victor Chu

Edenwald missed Ivan Croft. Slim, gentle and bright, Croft devoted 17 years to the city's largest public housing project – a brick fortress on E. 229th Street. Croft left Edenwald's community center in 2003 and the New York City Housing Authority shed staff. The center emptied. Teen violence spiked.

Fortunately, Croft is back. Edenwald's community center is too. In February, NYCHA yielded a handful of Bronx community centers to the Department of Youth and Community Development and non-profit partners. One of those non-profit partners, Mosholu Montefiore, tabbed Croft to rescue Edenwald. Two months later...

"We have an after-school program," Croft said. "An evening program. Fitness. Spoken word. Dance. Cooking. Chess."

Leon Oliver Jr. grew up in Edenwald. A ceramics specialist, he is Croft's art director.

"The place sounds like a community center again," Oliver said. "A safe haven for children."

On Friday, April 2, laughter drifted from the community center's all-purpose room, where Dashawn Simon, 8, and Diamond Copeman, 10, unwound.

"First snack, then homework, then PlayStation," Simon said.

Croft has applied for a Department of Health multi-service license. He wants to offer sports. Until DOH gives Croft the okay, the center will host low-key games, crafts and study hall. Copeland recently participated in an Edenwald spelling bee.

"It was fun," she said. "I spelled coffee and construction. I know how to spell a lot of long words."

Croft's after-school program is currently serving 80 elementary school aged children, his evening program 50 middle and high schoolers. Councilman Larry Seabrook allocated capital monies to renovate the community center a few years ago, Croft said. Many of the rooms – the dance room, the art room, the music room, the computer room – are brand new and painted a cheery yellow.

Tafhonda Martin's eight-year-old son attends Edenwald's new after-school program.

"What's most important to me is that he is in a safe environment and that his homework is completed," Martin said. "The Mosholu Montefiore staff is professional. You see art on the wall. When I pick him up from school, my son begs to go to the community center."

Under NYCHA management, the community center offered an after-school program and a GED course. Croft's nine Mosholu Montefiore staffers are able to do more.

"This has been a dream come true," said Walter McNeil, Edenwald's resident council president. "[Mosholu Montefiore] hit the ground running. They asked for resident input."

Croft considers McNeil part of his team. He wants to launch a support group for Edenwald residents raising grandchildren.

"Edenwald has been labeled violent," Croft said. "But it's a positive community, in need of a strong community center."

Croft was glad to return.

"I was just at the corner store," he said. "The kids I helped years ago are now adults. I feel like I've come home."