Looking back, West Haven resident Jacqueline Cruz can see how the West Haven Community House’s continuum of programs for children, starting with Head Start, has had such a positive effect on her life, as well as many, many other children through the years.

Jackie, as she is known to staff here, was “born and raised in a Hispanic family” and therefore had little early-life exposure to the English language. “At the age of four, I was enrolled in the Head Start program here at the Community House … and it was at preschool where I learned to speak English as my second language.”

Head Start “is where I learned my basic colors, numbers, and alphabet and how to better improve my interaction with others,” she noted. In addition, Jackie was also getting home visits from Community House staff, from whom “I learned how to write my name and advance in my learning skills.”

Fast-forward a few years later when “as a second grader in the Molloy School my mother enrolled me the Community House’s KIN (Kids in the Neighborhood) after-school enrichment program, where I attended for the next three years,” Jackie said. “Although the program was only twice a week, it was something I looked forward to every day.

“I enjoyed the help from the staff when it came to homework and other daily issues, the ability to interact with others who I was introduced to, the hands-on activities that we learned from, along with the sports and other fun activities. The KIN program taught me and others how to better understand ourselves and others. It was also there that I learned how the simple things that we consider ‘fun’ can also be a big help in life.”

Community House programs also were a big relief to Jackie’s mom. “From a parent’s perspective, my mother enjoyed the program, too, as not only did it help parents with their work schedules but it also reassured them that their children were in a safe and enjoyable environment.”

Her connection with the agency did not end at KIN. “Throughout my high school years in West Haven, I had the opportunity to come back to the Community House as a summer employee and to work both with the preschoolers and also for the KIN/CHAMPS after-school program.”

“Going back to where it all started for me was emotional but also an eye-opener. It made me realize how important it is to start and to never give up. Teachers here do their best to encourage kids to continue and believe that they can do anything they set their minds to.”

Since 2010, Jackie has been staffing the receptionist desk on Elm Street, serving, as she realizes, “as one of the public faces of the agency.”

Ironically, too, what goes around comes around – Jackie’s fluent bi-lingual skills in both English and Spanish make her an invaluable liaison to the public for the Community House.

Today, in addition to her work on the front desk, and in the agency’s School-Age Child Care program in the afternoon, Jackie serves as one of the agency’s primary Spanish translators, putting documents and calendars into Spanish from English.

Looking back, she noted, “I have learned the importance of education and how much it can impact not only my life but others. Not only did schooling help me succeed in many areas of my life, but along with attending preschool and other agency programs here, it all helped guide me in the right direction” and to the success that Jackie is having today as an adult employee at the Community House.