

The Daily Pennsylvanian

Non-profit gives low income families access to higher education

A panel from the organization spoke at a lunchtime talk yesterday

By **Jill Castellano** | 01/28/14 8:41pm



ACHIEVEability Lunch Panel Credit: *Yolanda Chen*, *Yolanda Chen*

Christine DeVore, one of hundreds of participants in ACHIEVEability, stood in front of the audience to speak about her experience with the program for the first time.

“I’m a woman with one child. I came from living with somebody, basically sleeping on a sofa — a really bad situation — and now I stand here as a student from Philadelphia University pursuing my degree in occupational therapy studies,” she said.

ACHIEVEability is a West Philadelphia nonprofit organization that gives low-income families access to higher education, affordable housing and support services like tax help, rehabilitation programs and parent training. The program is currently run by 22 people and 2.5 million dollars.

On Tuesday, The Division of Public Safety sponsored a lunchtime talk at the LGBT Center with a panel of people from ACHIEVEability to speak about the program.

“No person has the right to rain on your dreams,” said Jamila Harris-Morrison, director of self-sufficiency for ACHIEVEability. “We believe that anyone who turns to us in their time of need really deserves the opportunity to do what they feel is best to make their lives better.”

The talk, moderated by Vice President for Public Safety Maureen Rush, was this year’s annual DPS event commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. Rush said that they brought ACHIEVEability to campus this year because it “is supporting people to get good jobs so they can have housing and education ... It’s everything we believe in.”

Penn has been working with ACHIEVEability in various ways since 2000. The program has been involved in Wharton’s Management 101 course and has also worked with Civic House and the School of Social Policy & Practice. ACHIEVEability highly encourages Penn students to become involved in the program’s work, whether it is through painting houses, donating money or tutoring.

Education is one of the main focuses of the program. While 51 percent of job openings in Philadelphia require a Bachelor's degree or higher, only 23.6 percent of adults in the city have college degrees, Harris-Morrison said at Tuesday's presentation.

To ensure their future success, participants in ACHIEVEability must earn an Associate's, Bachelor's or approved Technical School degree in order to graduate, even if they enter the program without a high school diploma. Because the participants also have to work to support their families, a Bachelor's degree might take eight years to complete, Harris-Morrison said.

The 12 graduates in 2013 had an average starting salary of \$16.20 an hour at their new jobs, compared to the average \$9.76 they were paid when the program started, and three of the families became first-time home owners.

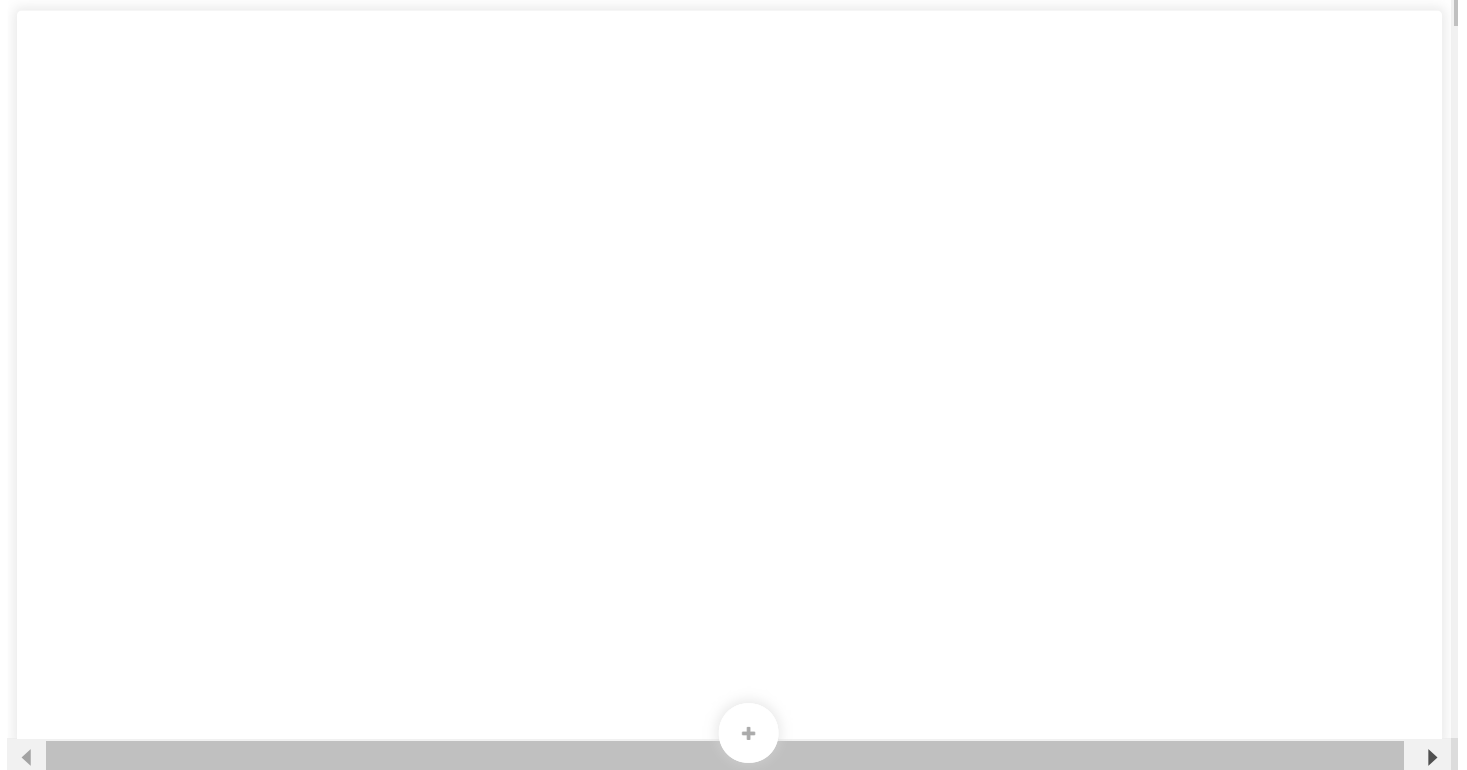
Throughout the presentations, the panel members referenced the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. that resonated with their program.

"The MLK theme that pops out for me is that it's all about love," said Susan Patton, interim CEO of ACHIEVEability. "It really brings us all down to what is possible through the support of others and through hard work."

"Martin Luther King was a pioneer ... He believed in prosperity and upward movement," DeVore said. "I'm affiliated with a dynamic organization that still exhibits those same core values. I can honestly say that they truly are dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty one family at a time."

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