

# ACHIEVEability

**Here we speak with Marcus Allen, the CEO at the Philadelphia-based non-profit ACHIEVEability.**

## **Introduce ACHIEVEability! What's the official mission statement?**

ACHIEVEability permanently breaks the generational cycle of poverty for low-income single parents and homeless families through higher education, affordable housing, supportive services, community and economic development, and accountability.

## **How did ACHIEVEability get started?**

We originally started out trying to provide housing to stabilize a lot of the single women with kids in the early '80s that were in Philadelphia. At that time there was low access for those women to shelter. So, some of our founders decided that they wanted to do something about the problem and received donations for four houses from some business people and the Sisters of Mercy. So that's kind of how it got started: people sitting down, talking about an issue, writing some thoughts on a napkin and before you know it, they came up with an organization, which later became ACHIEVEability.

## **How has that changed today?**

Today, we took that a step further to combine not just housing but support services (that includes helping the parents become better parents helping them to build skill, to obtain jobs that can earn wages to support the family) and then we took it a step further and said in order for these families to truly break the generational cycle of poverty, we believe that they need a certain amount of skills and education, so for every family in the program, every adult has to go to college or has to achieve some sort of post-secondary degree or certification that is approved by the organization.

## **So what brought you to ACHIEVEability?**

I've been here for over three years now. I came to ACHA because of a friend who thought this organization was awesome and thought it needed the type of leadership I could bring. I came over and visited with the board members and some of the staff and immediately fell in love with the mission and what was going on here.

(Marcus Allen)

## **What's a normal day of work like for you?**

It changes so often, there's no one particular thing I do on a day-to-day. As a non-profit and a small organization like ours, there are just so many things that need to be done

and not enough people or time to do it. So, I might find myself at one part of the day talking to stakeholders, sponsors and donors, and then later on I could be at one of the house that need repair work—it kind of runs the gamut for me.

### **What are ACHEIVEability's biggest needs overall?**

I think we have a couple of big needs. One is just for us to get information out about us to as many people who would be interested in what we do. Non-profit organizations suffer when there is the potential for people to get involved that you don't tap into. There are a lot of good people with good intentions out there, and I think one of ACIEVEability's biggest challenges is identifying those people, touching them, and getting them involved in our mission to help these families.

Another challenge is lack of resources. We don't always have enough money to build the houses we need to build or to support the families we need to support. On a monthly basis, our waiting list continues to grow of families who are trying to and need to be in our program. Unfortunately, we can't help every family that comes to our door and it's difficult to even do other things we'd like to do with the families we already have in our program. That's why it's important for us to build strong relationships like we have with Urban Outfitters, who actually step in the gap for us on many occasions to help us with our mission.

### **What have you done for the holidays this year?**

We did a really nice holiday party at the beginning of the month. We had over 250 people from our program to attend and we had it at a really nice church in the community where we had a moon bounce, Santa Claus, candle making, music, dance performances, we served food... The families, you should have seen their faces, they were just beaming with joy and the staff loved it. We know the holidays are a difficult time for many families, especially ones going through economic troubles. Our goal was to take some pressure off he families, provide presents for the kids and give parents a chance to see their kid have fun in a non-judgmental environment and just relax!

### **What other events or fundraisers you do over the year?**

Our biggest fundraiser is the one we do at Urban Outfitters! We do that on March 23rd and it's called "Food For Thought." We come together and honor the people or person or entity that has done the most to promote education for those who are most in need. We get the top chefs in Philadelphia to come out and support ACHEIVEability by cooking for for the fundraiser and not only do they cook and donate the food, but their personalities just make the event a great event. Last year we raised about \$350,000 and had over 600 attendees. This year we want to break that record and we're in the process of putting together another phenomenal event. Tickets are available now to the general public!

**What can readers, local or not, do to help ACHIEVEability?**

There is so much that people can do to help by donating or volunteering. People come out in teams to help paint our over 150 houses that families reside in. We have volunteer opportunities for people to tutor the kids and parents who are in school. We need people who can help with basic office duties like answering phones and help with filing. Readers can donate money online, mail it in, or do a match with their employer, or donate their time, houses, and things like coats in the winter months.

**Any heart-warming stories you can share?**

We have a woman named Brenda who has been in our program for nine years. She came to us as a more mature adult, probably in her late 40s. She never thought she would ever go back to school or go to college, but had just a great heart. She ended up going to college while she was in our program and got her four-year degree. But the thing about Brenda's story that is interesting is that she was told when she was younger that she would never be smart enough because they believe she was slow and had a low IQ. Her mom always told her she didn't have what it took to go to school. So not only did she end up getting her degree, but also she got certified in special education and now she works with special ed. kids. An on top of that, she had two daughters when she came here and both of her daughters went on to college with honors. It's a common story we hear at ACHIEVEability that after the parents go to college they break the cycle and their kids end up going too.

Learn more at [ACHIEVEability's website](#)  
Buy tickets for 2013 Food For Thought