

Single parent program marks 30 years

- Trenae V. McDuffie Jul 16, 2012



Harold Barrow is the senior self-sufficiency coach and resident drug and alcohol counselor and graduate of ACHIEVEability. — ABDUL SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

The reality of being 14-years-old, addicted to drugs, homeless and raising a newborn baby was an experience Harold Barrow will never forget. Now, 21 years have passed, and he credits the coaches from ACHIEVEability for helping him escape that bleak reality.

At 11 years old, he discovered drugs. Living in a domestically unstable household where his father was abusive and his mother was on drugs, Barrow dropped out of school in eighth grade. At 14, he was given custody of his firstborn child. The mother left the hospital in the middle of the night after delivery. Taking the few diapers and formula

that the hospital could offer, Barrow and his daughter were left to live in an abandoned home. As he continued to battle with his addiction and to raise his daughter, Barrow eventually found a shelter, and at the shelter he learned about ACHIEVEability.

“When I came to the [program’s] interview, one of the social workers said to me, ‘Where is the baby’s immunization records?’ I said to her, ‘What’s that?’ It’s hard to describe the look on her face in words, but she had a kind of horrific look like, ‘You can’t be serious?’” Barrow recalled. “But I really didn’t know.”

ACHIEVEability, an organization that develops and manages affordable housing — mostly in West Philadelphia for single parent households — provided Barrow with the first step toward independence.

Participants like Barrow, who come from domestic violence and unsafe living conditions, who are unemployed and sometimes have minimal formal education, seek transitional and permanent housing. Since 1981, ACHIEVEability has developed 210 homes, sold 40 homes to its graduates, and currently manages 150 units.

After housing is secure, the Family Self-Sufficiency Program encourages participants to pursue their education by completing at least five classes per year toward a post-secondary degree, obtain employment by working at least 30 hours per week and develop the life skills necessary for self-sufficiency. In the past two years, 25 parents have graduated the program.

“The piece about ACHIEVEability that drew me is that every family that comes here, or parent who said, ‘I want something different for my child. I want something different for my life and I know I can do better,’” Jamila Harris-Morrison, director of Self-Sufficiency said. “They turn to us. And I love that this program is voluntary. It’s really a partnership between ACHIEVEability and the families to help them become self-sufficient.”

Once accepted into ACHIEVEability, Barrow was linked with programs at Temple University where he received his GED and employment. He said he felt so proud to be

working and have a safe place to live. But once his coaches started to mention college, he wasn't sure about the next phase.

"College wasn't on my radar," Barrow said. "It wasn't in my vocabulary, but they said to me that I couldn't live [at the residency] unless I was willing to go to college."

With that motivation, he graduated from Community College of Philadelphia with a 3.87 grade point average. He received an academic scholarship to study psychology at Drexel University and got a GPA of 3.2. At this point, Barrow was clean, off drugs and maintaining a job.

After graduating from Drexel, Barrow spent the next 15 years working at ACHIEVEability. In addition, he was able to complete a graduate degree in human services and community development. Currently, he is the senior Self-Sufficiency coach and resident drug and alcohol counselor.

"Just that experience is when I came to terms that this program is life changing and impactful," Barrow said. "And being a first generation college graduate, it began to trickle down to my kids."

Barrow did have other children, with whom he was able to reconnect during his transitional period. His son is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and another daughter graduated from Temple. His firstborn graduated college as well and every Tuesday night he has date night with her.

"ACHIEVEability afforded me those opportunities, and I really pride myself being able to do that for families," Barrow said. "And just really investing myself in [their] process and seeing it happen for families over and over again."