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# Wellesley A Better Chance Prepares for a New Home

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ROGER PELLISSIER

**inspired by** then-President John F. Kennedy, an experimental national program called A Better Chance (ABC) began in 1963 to give academically talented students of color equal access to the nation's top high schools, regardless of where they live. Since then, ABC has changed the lives of more than 15,000 alumni across the country. At first, only private schools participated in the program; Dana Hall was among the original 23. But in 1970, two Wellesley College professors, Peter Sipple and Alice B. Robinson, launched a chapter in partnership with Wellesley High School (WHS) and community volunteers.

Wellesley ABC was one of the first 15 in the country at a public high school, and only the second created exclusively for girls. Since then, up to eight students a year (two per grade) have lived in a house owned by Wellesley College.

But the house was never intended to be on permanent loan. After 46 years, Wellesley College recently informed the nonprofit's leaders it will need the building for its own use within three

*The Wellesley ABC Family 2018-2019: (left to right) Ameera (WHS 2021), Cynthia L. Russell (Resident Director), Amabelle (WHS 2020), Shaffaf (WHS 2021), Dedra Moore (Assistant Resident Director), Yasmine (WHS 2020).*



WHITNEY WASSON

*D'Andrea Lancelin (WHS 2008) Paralegal at Gallagher, Evelius & Jones, Baltimore, Maryland.*

years. As a result, Wellesley ABC has embarked on a three-year capital campaign to raise \$1.2 million primarily to purchase a permanent home.

The ABC Scholars, as the students are known, are supported by a resident director, a chef, and tutors — who sometimes are Wellesley College students. Academic advisors help them transition to WHS’s demanding curriculum and navigate the college application process. Each girl is matched with a volunteer host family with whom they unwind over shared weekends and at special events.

According to the group’s co-presidents, Catherine Ward and Ingrid Houghton, all 90 Wellesley ABC alumnae have graduated from college and gone on to careers that include medicine, law, art, entertainment, journalism, social work, the Peace Corps, and the Red Cross. Currently, there are four students in the program, all juniors or sophomores, because the board decided not to admit new students during the three-year interim while planning for a new house is underway.

ABC board member Sunny Allen said that Wellesley ABC is an independently funded organization connected to the national program only

by the chartered name and as a source of applicants. While in seventh grade, applicants are identified by their own teachers and guidance counselors who encourage them to apply to a variety of programs for students with exceptional potential.

“They’re often superstars in school but their schools don’t have the resources to give them the skills to succeed,” said Allen. “Ours is a grueling application process. We even look at whether their families are a good fit. Everyone needs to agree that this 14-year-old can handle the workload while living far from home and fairly independently.”

Through the years, hundreds of community volunteers have been key to their success. As is often true, participation is meaningful to them, too. Ward observed, “Being a host family opened my four children’s eyes as they got to know someone from another background, with different family dynamics.”

Allen described how, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wellesley residents came together to make the organization a reality. “The house [that was offered] had sustained significant fire damage, so many of the town’s civic and religious groups and individuals came together to raise funds, pitch in manually—two churches reportedly competed to see who could put up drywall the fastest—and bring their expertise. Some host families have had multiple ABC scholars because they find getting to know the girls so rewarding.” Early on, their focus was on classes and study skills, but now the girls are also encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities.

“Wellesley High School can be overwhelming for our kids, too,” said Houghton. “And these students not only come from different socioeconomic environments, they also don’t have parents here to reciprocate things like driving friends to sports practice. So the Wellesley Juniors provide transportation.” To ease financial strain, Wellesley ABC pays for the girls to travel home for vacations and school breaks.

Rebecca Vazquez was the first of the ABC scholars to graduate from WHS, in 1974. She grew so close to her host family that years later she named her daughter, Dana, after her host mom. She graduated from Wesleyan University and now is vice president, business affairs, at Home



NICOLE THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY, LTD. (RIGHT)

Box Office. But Vazquez still remembers how hard it was to be away from her parents and four siblings, and how different Wellesley was from her world in the Bronx.

“After school, I worked part time at EA Davis,” said Vazquez. “The store back then seemed so old-fashioned, like something from Mayberry RFD,” she said, laughing. Moreover, some of her classmates had misconceptions. “One thought all kids from urban areas walk around with knives.”

Jamilia Simon, WHS Class of 2013 and another Wesleyan graduate, is now a program coordinator at the Fresh Air Fund in New York.

“It’s interesting to look back and see that I was only 14 and the environment was very different from my home in Brooklyn, which is much more diverse,” said Simon. “Not only was I unable to see familiar faces, there wasn’t anyone who looked like me. It wasn’t easy to make friends and it was hard to feel comfortable.”

“During my first few months, people expressed their curiosity in different ways,” she recalled. “Some were genuinely interested. Some questions were just ill-informed, and I had to explain things when all I wanted to do was eat lunch. Things like why I wear my hair a certain way or dress as I do — things I’d never even thought about before.”

*left: Rebecca Vazquez (WHS 1974) Vice President of Business Affairs, Home Box Office, New York, NY; right: Jamilia Simon (WHS 2013) with host family Shelley and Jay McHale and kids. Jamilia is a program coordinator at The Fresh Air Fund, New York, NY.*

Her natural reserve probably made things harder, she acknowledged. “But it was also difficult because Wellesley is a bit of a bubble. Some kids had never even been to Boston much. A big part of adjusting is deciding whether you have to assimilate, which I didn’t want to do, or just be yourself. But I had good support. My house mom (resident director) was strong. I could talk to her, or to my host family, and my advisor about a lot of things. My ABC sisters [in the house] were my rock. The school did its best to be inclusive.” Ultimately the experience prepared her well to handle college.

Precious Lawrence, Class of 2005, was raised in Washington Heights, Queens, New York, by her grandmother, whose schooling ended before high school.

“My grandmother always wished she’d had a formal education,” said Lawrence, an attorney in New York. “She knew without that, you can’t, or won’t, succeed. Coming from inner city schools, my sisters and

education “the best education any parent could want for their child”

I didn't have the best opportunities for education. But my grandmother knew about A Better Chance. She said, "You don't have a choice. You're going."

Although she earned As and Bs throughout elementary and middle school, at Wellesley High, she struggled. But not for lack of trying, she said. "My study skills weren't up to par. It was hard academically. I didn't always do well. My first year I was on academic probation. But because of Wellesley ABC, I had so much support. Joy Moore and her spectacular family were my hosts. Joy accepted me as I came. She let me be a teenager and was a voice of reason when I wanted to talk about how things were going. There were no expectations other than to let me breathe and just be."

They helped the 14-year-old through a tough freshman year when she also lost her grandfather, who died of cancer. And Lawrence bonded so closely with her academic advisors, Cyetta and Dennis McCormick,



*Precious Lawrence (WHS 2005) Associate Attorney at Landau and Associates, Fort Lauderdale, Florida*

that to this day she considers them her parents, and thinks of Wellesley as home. A former assistant attorney general for children's legal services, she now is a personal injury attorney for medical facilities and physicians who treat patients injured in car accidents.

"Wellesley ABC gave me the support systems, the study skills, and the overall confidence to do the hard work required by Wellesley High School and meet the social challenges of being different—an inner city, minority teenager in a largely white community, away from my grandmother and my home. Without all of that, I never would have gotten into Fordham University, much less St. Thomas University School of Law. At college, I missed my grandmother but my confidence was through the roof. I knew how to reach out for academic resources because I'd had them at Wellesley High School. I had the best education any parent could want for their child."

"ABC does exactly what the program says," said Lawrence. "It gives young people of color a better chance by giving them the tools to help themselves." 

TO LEARN MORE, visit  
[www.wellesleyabc.org](http://www.wellesleyabc.org).