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Mt. Airy woman works to end cycle of poverty

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by Sue Ann Rybak

Mt. Airy resident Wanda Mial is working to end the cycle of poverty in Philadelphia – one family at a time.

“Philadelphia is one of the poorest large cities in the country, with the highest rate of deep poverty – people with incomes less than half the poverty threshold – of any of the nation’s 10 most populous cities,” said Mial, executive director of ACHIEVEability, a nonprofit organization that seeks to end the cycle of poverty for low-income, single-parent and homeless families through higher education, affordable housing, supportive services and community and economic development. “The need is great. Our work on behalf of the families and neighborhoods is critical. It is our experience that poverty, in fact, can be solved – one family at a time.



Wanda Mial

“Poverty is so overwhelming, people often don’t know what they can do to help. People care about poor children and their families. People want good things for families, but often they just feel overwhelmed. They say ‘What are we gonna do? Poverty is always going to be there.’ When the truth is we can unpack it. We can unpack poverty family by family, individual by individual. We can unpack the challenges, complexity, politics, money, fear and pain of poverty.

No matter what your political affiliation, most people care about children, families, hunger and poor housing conditions. And even if its not from a humanistic perspective, we need from an economic perspective a workforce that can contribute and deliver quality work products.”

She said the nonprofit recently celebrated its 35th anniversary.

"For more than three decades, ACHIEVEability has been helping families move from homelessness to self-sufficiency," said Mial, who is a member of the Green Tree Community Health Foundation board in Chestnut Hill.

She said to remain in ACHIEVEability's Family Self-Sufficiency program, all participants (mostly single parents) are required to work at least 30 hours a week, complete five classes a year towards a post-secondary education degree or the equivalent, and they must attend regular workshops on issues such as parenting, home maintenance, and financial management.

The organization serves between 120 to 150 families a year, primarily in West Philadelphia.

"Every year about 20 parents in the program graduate from either college or a technical program," she said. "The amazing result of the work is that children's lives are changed by living with a parent who is working their way to self reliance. Over the past five years, between 90 and 95 percent of the children of participants in the program graduated from high school."

ACHIEVEability (originally known as Philadelphians Concerned About Housing) was founded in 1981 by community members who were concerned about the future of low-income, single-parent families living in homeless shelters or substandard conditions.

Since its inception, the nonprofit has developed over 210 housing units from abandoned homes and vacant lots in West Philadelphia. An additional 12 houses were developed for ActionAIDS, a multi-services organization in North Philadelphia serving people living with HIV/AIDS. Recently, the organization renovated 10 homes specifically for home ownership. Five of these homes were recently sold to families in the program.

The "Penn Nursing & Cornell Study on Affordable Housing" concluded that the organization's model is successful at ending the cycle of poverty.

"Our findings suggest that the ACHIEVEability model does work in helping to promote self-sufficiency," said Therese S. Richmond, the study's senior author. "But the results suggest that the micro environments immediately surrounding residents of subsidized housing do matter. Making even modest improvements in the blocks on which affordable housing units are located could have a major impact on the pace at which residents make educational progress."

ACHIEVEability recently merged with Mission First Housing Group to form an alliance that will broaden and strengthen the ability of each organization to serve the people of Philadelphia, including veterans, elderly and the disabled, and single-parent and homeless families throughout the Greater Philadelphia region.

Mial said while the majority of the participants in their program are single mothers, the organization does help several single fathers.

"We have one dad, whose son is 11 years old," she said. "Every night they sit down together after dinner and do their homework together. Every semester they bet each other who is going to get the best grades and the Dad's favorite story is that his son always wins."

"I have been doing this type of work for 25 years," Mial, "I've only worked at ACHIEVEability for about a year, but ACHIEVEability combines both my passion and experience. My passion for changing systems, policies and rules that don't necessarily factor in the needs of real

families and real communities.”

This is the first in a series. Part 2 will be published next week.

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