

MARGARET DONNELLY O'CONNOR Education Center

Winter-
Spring
2017

Connecting
People
Who Care with a
Cause that Matters

at Ethel R. Lawrence Homes

NEWSLETTER

Meet Our Children

Ethel R. Lawrence Homes (ERLH), developed by Fair Share Housing Development, Inc., is one of the first affordable housing communities in New Jersey's suburbs to house very low-income families. The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at ERLH offers an after-school Homework Club, a Summer Enrichment Program, one-on-one tutoring and college prep assistance to ensure that the children of Ethel R. Lawrence Homes get the support they need to make the most of the opportunities available in the high-achieving Mount Laurel School District.



Erin

Age: 7, 2nd Grade

Excels at: Reading, library and gym

Hopes to Be: A Teacher

"I like the homework Club. They help me with my spelling words, and we do fun math activities like Candy Store, where we practice using money."

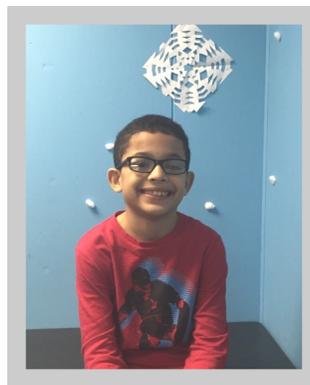
Josh

Age: 9, 3rd Grade

Excels at: Math

Hopes to Be: A Police Officer

"The Homework Club is fun. I get help finishing my schoolwork."



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**FAIR SHARE**
HOUSING DEVELOPMENT
building homes and hope

FSHD: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at Ethel R. Lawrence Homes is operated by Fair Share Housing Development, a non-profit housing and social services provider that seeks to reduce racial and economic segregation in Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester counties by developing affordable housing in high-opportunity communities. Ethel R. Lawrence Homes (ERLH), our award-winning flagship development in Mount Laurel Township, provides 140 townhome-style apartments in a safe environment with access to one of NJ's top school districts.

Affordable housing in an integrated community is the first step to helping families overcome problems stemming from generational cycles of poverty, racial segregation, economic isolation, and the lack of a good education. The key to positive permanent change is to provide ERLH children with supplemental educational support and enrichment programs to enable them to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available in Mount Laurel Township.



Ethel R. Lawrence is often called the "**Rosa Parks of Affordable Housing.**" A teacher, wife, and mother of nine, Lawrence was renowned for braving racist threats to fight exclusionary zoning in NJ's suburbs. She died in 1994, six years before ERLH opened its doors.



The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at ERLH is staffed by a full-time Education Director (Steven Axberg) and this year for the first time, two college graduate Jesuit Volunteers who provide a year of service (Meghan Murphy and Margaret Cowles). We also get assistance from various teen mentors who volunteer with local organizations. Throughout the year, our dedicated Education Center staff works closely with the Mount Laurel School District to provide a disciplined but creative program, which includes an after-school Homework Club, parent participation workshops, a Summer Enrichment camp, and one-on-one year-round tutoring to transform children's lives through educational achievement and enrichment. Homework Club alumni also get support with the college application process thanks to SAT prep classes, campus tours and other programs designed to help teens understand the application requirements and how to apply for financial aid.

PARENT SPOTLIGHT

"The Ethel Lawrence Homework Center has been absolutely amazing. Mr. Steve and the JVs have been so helpful to my family. They've taught my daughter so much over the years. She has advanced in both math and reading and I owe it all to their dedication to make sure each child succeed. I don't know what we'd do without their support. They truly are a blessing."

—Victoria Aponte



Victoria with daughter Jayanna

ERLH Teen Directs New Art Club

By Steve Axberg

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, 11th grade Ethel Lawrence resident Kayla Thurston asked if she could run an Art Club at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center. Without knowing what that would entirely entail, I immediately gave her the go-ahead with an adamant, "Yes"! She went on to describe it as a once-a-month art/craft activity on Fridays (when there is little to no homework). Kayla's goal was not only for our children to channel their inner artist, but also to incorporate therapeutic elements into the activities. Kayla is naturally a very talented artist, however knowledge about a specific topic doesn't always translate into the ability to teach these skills. A combination of knowledge and expertise on the subject, as well as teaching skills/values such as encouraging active learning, patience, adaptation, and communication are crucial to be a successful teacher. After discussing these challenges, Kayla insisted she was up to the task. And that is exactly what has transpired.



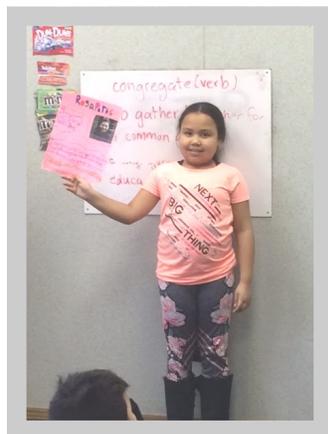
Kayla Thurston directing our new Friday afternoon art club

The Art Club days have been a huge success, something the kids look forward to each month. It is certainly important for our education center to serve as an academic resource, but social and emotional development are also crucial. At the inaugural Friday Art Club, Kayla led our children to create Vision Boards, where they could think about their goals and dreams, and create a tangible record of them. This is a perfect example of art enabling us to express what cannot always be said in words. In the subsequent sessions, our children made group and/or individual crafts relating to Fall, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The group crafts also helped provide decorations for our Fall Festival and Breakfast With Santa events.

When asked about how she thought our children's experience thus far has been, and what the success of her Art Club has been, Kayla responded: "I believe everyone is artistic. I just wanted to be the one to bring it out."

Black History Month

February is Black History Month, a month all students should celebrate and learn about regardless of race or ethnicity. Our elementary students have worked on research projects that will not only educate them on more on Black History Month, but also build foundations for skills they will need in middle and high school, such as gathering research, putting it together, and presenting it in front of a group. We paired our middle school students with younger elementary students to help guide them, while our older elementary students worked independently. Presenting in front of friends is typically easier than a large classroom or to strangers, so this eased introduction mitigated the anxiety our students might feel during a presentation.



The individuals we studied were innovators such as Madam C.J. Walker and Dr. Charles Drew, artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, and civil rights activists such as W.E.B Du Bois and Sojourner Truth. By exposing our students to a wide variety of individuals, we hoped to inspire our students to overcome adversity as well as

build pride in the accomplishments of historical figures our kids might be able to relate to easier than those they read about in their textbooks at school. After the research presentations, our students demonstrated how well they retained what they had learned in an engaging scavenger hunt that built on their knowledge of Black History Month. In school, Black History Month might be a mundane lesson with a subsequent quiz, but we were able to learn and build skills in a fun way that felt nothing like school.



A Message From Our Education Center Director

An exciting new development has just begun involving our education center and the Mount Laurel School District. Our program has always been a supplemental educational resource that is available for the Ethel Lawrence Homes residents after school. However, if there are additional ways to empower our students and give them an even greater chance of being academically successful, we are certainly open-minded to new programs. Loretta Del Collo, the Literacy Curriculum Supervisor for Mount Laurel Schools, recently invited the education center staff to come to the schools during the day to work with select students to improve their math skills. We will engage in co-teaching, pull-out tutoring, and side-by-side lesson reinforcement.

I initially expected Loretta to get us involved with the English, Reading, and Language Arts classes for two reasons. One, that is her forte, and two, many of our children have deficits in reading and could use the supplemental help. But Loretta wants us to focus first on our students' strengths, which are in math and science. By focusing on strengths, our students' confidence and self-esteem will grow, and with a little extra support, a student barely passing his or her science class might be able to get an A! This focus, as well as our STEM enrichment activities, could help inspire our students to consider a career in the constantly evolving fields of math and science.



Education Director
Steven Axberg

A Reflection by JV Margaret Cowles



Our New JV Margaret Cowles

With a degree in neuroscience and psychology and almost 5 years of experience as an EMT, I thought I'd seen it all. But my job as a youth coordinator at the Education Center has introduced me to many new jobs, tasks and challenges that I feel very excited to tackle each day.

Working with such passionate, energetic kids has reinforced my desire to become a pediatric nurse and without ERLH, I would still be searching for

this clarity of purpose. Fostering relationships with the kids, and teaching to the individual and not the mass, is the kind of innovative educating that makes Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center such an incredible place.

Despite seeing almost 40 kids each day, we are able to provide one-on-one tutoring assistance for any K-12 child in our center. Having never considered teaching before, I am delighted that this position has opened my eyes to all the possibilities out there. I've taught everything: math, reading, sports, piano, filling out the FAFSA, career opportunities and even basic first aid! The Education Center fosters not only academic growth but personal, social and emotional growth as well through mentoring, group activities and emotional awareness and intelligence. Whether we're cooking, studying or doing STEM experiments with the kids, I learn something new every day and I look forward to discovering more about myself as I enter into the second half of my year as a Jesuit Volunteer.

Teacher Testimonial

"The Homework Club does excellent work. My students tell me having someone give them extra practice time and help with their homework makes their school day that much better. I love that my kids see the connection between Homework Club and school."

—Shannon Sonnie
Fourth Grade Teacher
Hillside Elementary

A True Life Hero: Margaret Donnelly O'Connor

By Peter J. O'Connor

FSHD's Education Center is dedicated to Margaret Donnelly O'Connor (1914-2005), a true hero who overcame adversity and hardship, never accepted defeat, and was a model of one who promoted education and lived her life for others. Margaret, an

orphan, married, gave birth to two sons, and was deserted by her husband when her boys were two and three years old. As a single parent, Margaret O'Connor sacrificed her entire adult life to provide her two sons, James and Peter, with the opportunity to live in South Orange, New Jersey, attend the best schools (Seton Hall Prep, College of the Holy Cross, Villanova University, and Georgetown Law Center) and develop the values needed to succeed in life. James, now married for 49 years, father of two daughters, and a grandfather of four, retired in December 2004 as Group Vice-President Marketing, Sales, and Service for Ford



Margaret with sons Peter (left) and James (right)

Motor Company after a 40-year career. Peter, a public interest lawyer, is the Founder and Executive Director of FSHD and Fair Share Housing Center (www.fairsharehousing.org).



Margaret with James

Margaret, a graduate of The College of New Rochelle (class of 1937), was an elementary school teacher for more than 30 years in Newark and Orange, New Jersey. She earned a Master's Degree in Education at night at Seton Hall University, worked every summer to make ends meet, and always told her sons: "I will never let you down," and, "No matter what the obstacles are, you can do it." After her sons became adults, Margaret devoted herself to the sick and infirm: reading to the blind on the radio, volunteering at nursing homes and church-related activities in the City of Camden, and joining the Third Order of Saint Francis of Assisi in Haddonfield, NJ.



Margaret with her 1970 elementary class in Newark, NJ

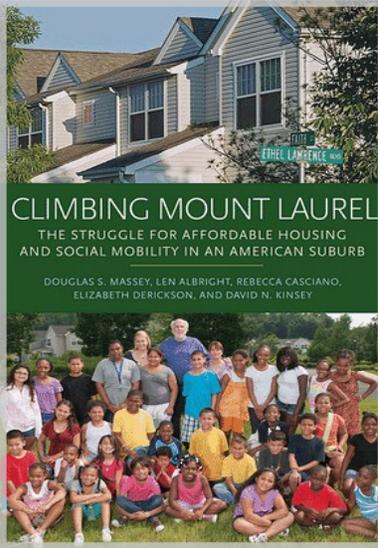


Margaret Donnelly O'Connor
(College of New Rochelle
Yearbook Picture, 1937)



Margaret with granddaughters
Meredith (left) and Erin (lap)

ERLH Offers A “Pathway Out of Poverty”



Ethel R. Lawrence Homes provides “a pathway out of poverty” for low-income residents, according to a book published by Princeton University which identified significant benefits associated with moving into FSHD’s flagship development. Among the findings: ERLH residents experienced a reduction in welfare dependency and significant improvements in mental health, personal safety, employment rates, and income levels. Families with children also benefitted from quality academics thanks to a superior school district and an increased focus on classwork and reading by young people living in the development.

Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb is the result of two years of research by Princeton University. Professor Douglas S. Massey, who led the Princeton team, decided to focus on Ethel R. Lawrence Homes because the development was built as part of the settlement agreement in the landmark Mount Laurel case, which is often called the most important civil rights ruling since Brown v. Board of Education.

Massey and his research team surveyed residents of Ethel R. Lawrence Homes to assess their personal, household, neighborhood and school circumstances before and after relocation, then compared them to a similar group of low-income people who applied for an apartment at ERLH but did not get in. The research found that living at ERLH conferred many benefits to residents and saved taxpayer dollars in the process because:

- ◆ Welfare use decreased by 67 percent;
- ◆ Earnings went up by 25 percent;
- ◆ Mental health improved by 25 percent (stress reduced due to safer neighborhood)
- ◆ Rates of employment rose 22 percent;
- ◆ Total average income was significantly higher for ERLH residents (\$26,271) than non-residents (\$21,022).



The high school graduation rate at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center is 97 percent! This compares very favorably with the 49.27% 2012 high school graduation rate in Camden.



“In their new neighborhood, project residents evinced better mental health and achieved greater rates of employment, more abundant earnings, and greater economic independence than they would otherwise have achieved,” the Princeton researchers said in the preface to *Climbing Mount Laurel*. “It also gave residents more time and energy to devote to the education of their children, and enabled their children to attend higher quality and safer schools while earning grades that were as good or better than what they would have earned in their old schools. For these reasons, we see the construction and management of the project not only as a vindication of Ethel Lawrence’s dream, but as a model for promoting greater integration and a pathway out of poverty for disadvantaged minority families throughout the United States,” the researchers said.

The Princeton research also found NO evidence of increased crime, higher taxes or a decrease in property values for residents of Mount Laurel Township.

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