

# MARGARET DONNELLY O'CONNOR Education Center

Fall  
2015-  
Winter  
2016

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 residing at 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.



### Brandon

Age: 11, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

**Excels at:** Science, Math, Football and Basketball

**Hopes to Be:** A Surgeon

*"The Homework Club is great because they help me get my homework done and they provide computers for us to use."*



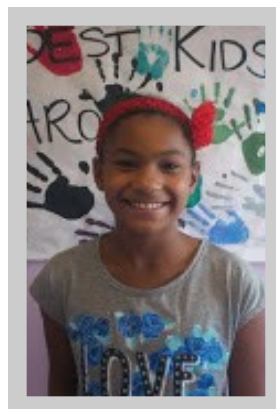
### Leniah

Age: 9, 4<sup>th</sup> Grade

**Excels at:** Math, Science and Dancing

**Hopes to Be:** A Dancer

*"I love coming to homework club because of the activities we do on Fridays and because they help me with my social studies homework."*



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# FSTD: 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



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.

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.

The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at ERLH is staffed by a full-time Education Director (Steven Axberg), a college graduate Jesuit Volunteer who provides a year of service (Corey Hubbard), and various teen mentors from 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.



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.

## Parent Spotlight

"The Ethel Lawrence homework club has been a tremendous help to my family. The homework club gives my daughters all the support they need to do better in school. Mr. Steve and Ms. Corey are amazing and a blessing for the homework club."

-Yvonne Pulliam, ERLH Parent



## Young Actors at ERLH

Hillside Elementary recently enjoyed Theatre Week, a weeklong experience where students in 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade participate in a play. Michael Taubenslag of Taubenslag Productions directed "The Rotten Princess," an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew." Theatre Week is a fun way to help children build self-esteem and help raise funds for the PTO.

A number of students who attend the Education Center participated: 2<sup>nd</sup> graders Keira Brown and Jeremiah Moffit, 3<sup>rd</sup> graders Mi'Lan Drennon and Emmalee Stargell-Talley, and 4<sup>th</sup> graders Nyla Byrd and Aylissah Calaf-Payton all had parts. 4<sup>th</sup> grader Racquel Chamberlain gave an electrifying and hilarious performance as the Wise Man, even sporting a fake beard. The play had a mix of singing and dialogue, and all the students had crucial roles.

Some of our students have expressed an interest in exploring more acting opportunities. Our Jesuit Volunteer Corey Hubbard has a background in improv, and we want to combine her passion with the students' interests by offering improv activities soon at the Education Center. The goal is to run improv games and activities after homework is completed. We hope to see a boost in confidence and self-esteem as our students grow more comfortable performing in front of a group of people. Improv is an excellent creative outlet that will help to build bonds between the children. We will keep you posted about this exciting new program!

## FSHD Welcomes Steven Axberg As New Education Center Director

Our new Education Director, Steven Axberg, joined the team at FSHD in August 2015. Steve's background is in special education (K-8) and

middle-school prep (math concentration). Before coming to FSHD, Steve worked in the recreation department at Woods Services,

a school/live-in facility for children and adults with special needs located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.



When Steve was younger, he served as a volunteer classroom aide for children with autism. "This life-changing experience taught me the patience and passion needed for this field of work and it's also what drove me to pursue a career in education," recalls Steve. When he learned about the opening at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center, Steve says he felt the job was a perfect fit. "I am devoted to making a difference by enhancing and empowering youth, and to erasing barriers created by generational cycles of poverty, racial segregation and economic isolation, and the lack of the a good education."

## Learning Empathy Through Creative Writing

One of our recent writing activities for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders was to write a paragraph about what they would do if they were given \$1,000, but couldn't spend it on themselves or save it. We were impressed by the many creative and altruistic ideas we received. Some students took the charity approach, making donations to help the impoverished or gifts to their church. One student even wanted to start an organization that would bring therapy dogs to seniors living in nursing homes. She was able to relate her mother's job as a nurse at a nursing home to her reasoning for starting the organization. She felt the dogs would make a positive difference by bringing happiness to seniors.

This student's therapy dog idea demonstrates one of the many benefits of creative writing, specifically teaching them empathy. This encourages children to think about what it's like to be somebody else, or to see the world from a different point of view. This is a skill heavily relied upon for writing prompts on standardized tests, such as writing about two opposing viewpoints. Besides teaching empathy, creative writing also can help children strengthen their reading, writing, and learning skills in a way that helps them develop their self-confidence and identity. We will be saving these creative writing exercises, and publish individual books for each student. This will be a great way for the children to showcase their work, but also to show the progress they make throughout the year.



# Message From The Education Center Director

The staff and children attending at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Center both share excitement for the new school year. The changes in the program from last year took some time to adjust to, however the program is running quite smoothly now. We have developed an effective routine for the children attending our program to complete homework, study, and receive additional tutoring when needed. With the help of volunteer tutors from the local community, students are able to work one-on-one with tutors, with the goal of not only meeting the expectations, but exceeding them. We were able to recruit six new volunteers in addition to the returning volunteers from last year. The staff, volunteers, and children all come together to form a wonderful community for learning.

For the elementary students attending our program, we often have extra time for students once homework has been completed. We have decided to use this extra time to develop better skills in math, reading, writing, and critical thinking. All of these skills are crucial for mastering the new standardized test in New Jersey, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. The PARCC was designed to coincide with the Common Core State Standards to ensure the presence of these standards in the classroom. These standards focus more on applying knowledge of concepts and critical thinking as opposed to memorizing facts and formulas. It is our hope that by regularly practicing and honing skills, such as critical thinking, the children attending our program will not only be better prepared for standardized testing, but they will also develop a solid foundation for higher education.



Education Director  
Steven Axberg

## Meet Our New JV: Corey Hubbard



JV Corey Hubbard

Our newest Jesuit Volunteer is Corey Hubbard, a native of Seattle and graduate of the University of Portland. Corey has a degree in Social Work and Spanish. She spent the last year serving with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Houston, Texas, providing legal services to immigrants and refugees. Corey loves being creative, whether that's on stage with theater, doing improv or making art. She's excited to bring games and goofiness from her college improv troupe, the Bluffoons, to the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center! She couldn't be happier to be here with these amazing kids on a new coast. It's already been an adventure.

Each year the Jesuit Volunteer Corps provides a full-time youth coordinator to work at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at ERLH. Jesuit Volunteers commit to one year of post-college service where the need is greatest and to live in apostolic community with other JVs. Our youth coordinators have come from colleges and universities across the United States including Holy Cross, Boston College, Gonzaga University, Fairfield, Notre Dame, Stanford, Dartmouth, Dayton, Fordham, George Mason, Georgetown, Hamilton, Michigan, Rockhurst University, Scranton, St. Joseph's, St. Louis University, University of Portland, Marquette University, and St. Olaf College.

## Teacher Testimonial

"The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Center is a great asset to the Mt. Laurel School District. They do a wonderful job supporting both the students in their community as well as the teachers."

—Melissa Gualtieri  
5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Math  
Hartford School

# A True Life Hero: Margaret Donnelly O'Connor

FSD'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 47 years, father of



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

two daughters, and a grandfather of four, retired in December 2004 as Group Vice-President Marketing, Sales, and Service for Ford 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](http://www.fairsharehousing.org)).

Margaret, a graduate of The College of New Rochelle (class of 1937), was an elementary school teacher



Margaret with her 1972 elementary class  
at South 17th Street School, Newark, NJ

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.



Peter J. O'Connor with "his" kids  
at Ethel R. Lawrence Homes



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



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



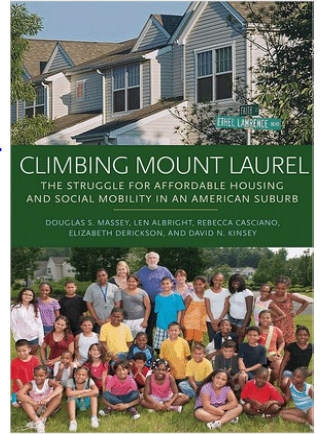
Margaret celebrates her  
85th birthday with her sons



# ERLH Offers A "Pathway Out of Poverty"

Ethel R. Lawrence Homes offers low-income families "a pathway out of poverty," 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. Additionally, ERLH's residents and the surrounding community were most impacted by the New Jersey Supreme Court rulings (1975 and 1983) known collectively as the Mount Laurel Doctrine.



Massey and his colleagues Len Albright, Rebecca Casciano, Elizabeth Derickson and David Kinsey 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).

"In their new neighborhood, project residents evinced better mental health and achieved greater rates of employment, more abundant earnings, and greater economic independence that 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 researchers also looked at U.S. Census and administrative data to undertake a time-series analysis of trends in crime, property values, traffic congestion, taxes, school performance before and after 2000, comparing trends in Mount Laurel to

those in surrounding communities. The Princeton research found no evidence of increased crime, higher taxes or a decrease in property values.



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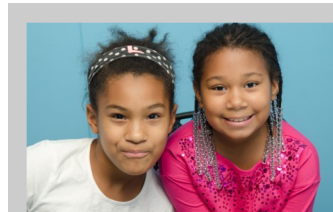
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**Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center**

Ethel R. Lawrence Homes

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Mount Laurel, NJ 08054