

# MARGARET DONNELLY O'CONNOR Education Center

Winter-  
Spring  
2018

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.



### Mi'Lan

Age: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade

Excels at: Math, dancing, braiding

Hopes to be: Lawyer or Hair Stylist

"I like the Education Center because it's fun and I get to see my friends. I can get help with my homework and play and feel happy all at the same time."

### Josh

Age: 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Excels at: English, Baseball

Hopes to: Photographer, Chef or MLB star

"The homework club helps me with my schoolwork while also being chill and letting me hang out."



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# 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 New Jersey'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.

The Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center at ERLH is staffed by a full-time Education Director (Michael Morris), an Associate Education Director (Chantel Young) and two college graduate Jesuit Volunteers who provide a year of service (Kathleen Harmon and Andy Beck). 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 and a new higher education prep program designed to help teens understand the application requirements and how to apply for financial aid.



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 death threats to fight exclusionary zoning in NJ's suburbs. She died in 1994, six years before ERLH opened its doors.



## PARENT SPOTLIGHT

"The Education center is a great program.

Dante gets assistance with his homework and social skills and I also benefit from the wonderful and helpful staff, because I'm currently attending college myself and also need help with homework and papers."

—Jenyth Ruberte (mother of Dante Cruz, 3rd Grade)



## New Report Offers Insight Into Hopes and Struggles of Our Families

Where do our families come from? What are their children's biggest challenges? What are their dreams for the future?

A report prepared by Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center Jesuit Volunteer Corey Hubbard answers these and other questions in a recently completed needs-assessment study that provides a first-ever snapshot of the struggles and aspirations of our MDOC families.



Jesuit Volunteer Corey Hubbard with Alaina

Corey, the Education Center's 2015-2016 JV, took on the difficult task of interviewing nearly 30 families in order to glean sociological and academic information about our students as well as their parents. Her report also provides recommendations on how we can improve our program.

Corey's report shows that a large number of our parents either moved directly from or had lived previously in Camden, New Jersey, one of the most dangerous and impoverished cities in the nation. One child's father was murdered right outside of the family's home. Another child was jumped and beaten. Still others have been traumatized by regular exposure to street violence. "In leaving Camden, (our families) leave behind violence and poverty in exchange for better work, a culture of education and achievement, and a level of safety and security that are simply non-existent in Camden," the report says.

Corey quotes one mom, who said she was glad her children are no longer exposed to the "jumping, fights and stabbings at other schools." She confided: "My kids are little suburban kids. I'm so glad!"

The report notes that most of our families are headed by ambitious, hard-working moms, nearly all of whom have continued their education beyond high school. Half of these moms attended some college after high school; a lack of financial aid is cited as the main reason why their dreams for higher education have been interrupted. Other findings:

- A quarter of our moms work two or more jobs to make ends meet.
- Most of our moms are employed in low-paying jobs in the medical field, such as medical assistants (MA) or certified nursing assistants (CNA).
- Nearly a third of our families live below the 2016 federal poverty line (\$24,300 for a family of four).
- Most families earn between \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year.
- Four-fifths have seen an annual increase in earnings of several thousand dollars since moving into Ethel Lawrence Homes. This data is supported by other research which prove that moving low-income families into high-opportunity communities is the best way combat generational cycles of poverty. It also reduces teen pregnancy, increases college attendance as well as marriage rates, and significantly improves adult earning capacity.
- In half of our families, fathers are involved caretakers; they either take the kids on the weekend or are otherwise physically or emotionally involved in their children's lives.

(Story continued on Page 4)



ERLH parent Ana Moncada (with Kiana)



## New Report Offers Insight Into Hopes and Struggles of Our Families

(continued from page 3)

Corey's report also reveals some interesting facts about the strengths and challenges faced by our Education Center students:

- Nearly 40 percent of our students receive supportive services from the Mount Laurel School District, including special education, speech therapy or reading support.
- About a fifth of our students struggle in math and/or reading.
- Eight students (20 percent) have been on the honor roll for at least one year.
- Four students are either in advanced classes and/or in the Gifted Education program.
- Fifteen students (38 percent) "take pride in their work and work hard to make good grades and do their best."
- Eleven students (28 percent) "have creative skills, whether that be writing at an advanced level or creating art."
- Eleven students (28 percent) participate in extracurricular activities, including sports and the performing arts.
- Ten students (26 percent) read for fun.
- Eight students (21 percent) have a "particular love of learning, a deep curiosity and a desire to know more."
- Seven students (18 percent) demonstrate "distinct writing and composing abilities that are at or above grade level."
- Five students (13 percent) are "very helpful, offering assistance to other students struggling with their work or showing compassion to peers in pain."

Our parents expressed much gratitude for the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center program. "It's like having a partner or parent to help," said one mom. Another mom said the program had done wonders for her son. "I've never seen him so confident; that's why this place is so important."

The families expressed heartfelt thanks for the opportunity for advancement that comes with living at Ethel Lawrence Homes, which includes seeing their kids attend one of NJ's top school districts.

Like most parents, our moms are seeking the best for their kids. "You don't want them to come up struggling the way you struggled," explained one mom.

Another mom echoed this sentiment: "You work hard so that your children will have more opportunities than you had. The ultimate hope is that your children do better than you ever did."



Corey with Amiya (left) and Anaya (right)

The parents Corey interviewed offered a number of helpful recommendations to improve the Education Center program. We have already implemented a number of these suggestions, including hiring extra staff, expanding individual tutoring and launching a new college readiness program. Parents also wanted more recreational activities and we are pleased that we will soon break ground on our new Outdoor Recreation Area. We are also working on expanding the Education Center into a larger building to be located in the Outdoor Recreation Area at ERLH, which will enable us to accommodate more students and offer new activities including counseling, movie nights and additional parenting workshops.

## Mission Excellence Update

By Chantel Young, Associate Education Director



Our higher education readiness program is led by Associate Education Director Chantel Young

After a raucous holiday party to end the year complete with Gingerbread House decorating contest, pizza, drinks, and sweet treats, we are excited to get back to work. Our first meeting of 2018 focused on personal mission statements.

A personal mission statement is explained by Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, as “a personal credo or motto that states what your life is about.” For young people, it is critical to equip them with the tools they need to clarify who they are, what they represent, and what is most important to them. To help students with this task, we completed an interactive activity called, “The Great Discovery.”

“The Great Discovery” is an activity where individuals are asked open-ended questions about positive influences in life, motivations, and inspirations.

During the course of the activity, our students became visibly emotional when discussing matters that were truly important to them and recognizing what was needed to be their best selves. They will be taking time to digest their thoughts and then drafting their mission statements in our next session. We'll be posting these around the Education Center as a constant visual reminder.

Upcoming events planned for the ME Club include our first ME Club parent meeting and a Teen Summer Job Summit! We are enthusiastically continuing our Mission: Excellence!



## Indoor Grow Tower Teaches Kids About Biology and Healthy Cooking

By Jesuit Volunteer Kathleen Harmon

A few months ago the Margaret Donnelly O'Conner Education Center received the generous donation of a Tower Garden, a vertical, aeroponic growing system that can grow up to 20 vegetables, herbs, fruits and flowers in less than three square feet indoors.

The students have enjoyed planting and maintaining the garden, including checking and balancing the pH levels of the water used in the tower garden basin, as well as harvesting and eating our crops. Grow towers are a fun way to learn about the biology of plants, the science of photosynthesis, and the physics of the water pump used to hydrate the plants. It is also great for learning about the importance of record-keeping and the math behind data analysis, as well as expanding literacy skills and our kids' palates.

The Food Bank of South Jersey, which donated the grow tower, also provided healthy cooking demonstrations where the kids learned about different edible parts of a plant. The students enjoyed making and tasting foods like kale quesadillas, bean burgers, and salsa. But their favorite grow tower activity remains picking the greenery (basil, salad greens and other herbs) and eating the leaves raw.



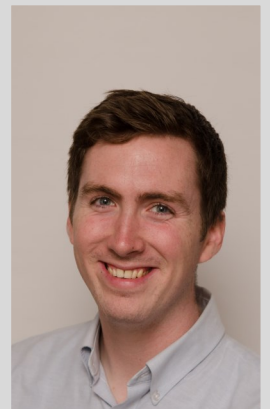
JV Kathleen with Amaya, Mi'Lan and Jayanna (left to right)

# A Message From Our Education Center Director

As the new year has settled down, we've continued to expand our programming here at the Margaret Donnelly O'Connor Education Center. We're proud to announce the return of MDOC clubs! Clubs operate on a rotating eight-week schedule and we currently have four in place: The Chess Club, The Makeup Club, Boys Group, and Craft Club. Children will have a chance to learn new skills, explore their interests, and even have input in choosing what the next round of clubs will be.

Our teen program also continues to expand. Our high school workshops kicked off with the Teen Job Summit, featuring guest speakers, raffle prizes, and tons of information about finding, landing, and keeping a job. We're excited to continue with more frequent workshops in the future. If you have any topics you are interested in, feel free to contact the Education Center.

In accordance with our goal to promote better communication between the Education Center and the ERLH community, we've made a number of changes. Some of these include Monthly Calendars, Adult drop-in hours (11:00 AM - 2:00 PM everyday), Email Blasts, and Monthly Child Updates.



Education Director  
Michael Morris

## JV Reflection: By Andy Beck



Jesuit Volunteer Andy with Aaron

When I decided to accept the position at MDOC, I had no way of knowing what I was getting myself into. Perhaps I felt more confident than I should have; I had experience working in classroom settings and with children, and expected my skills to translate over seamlessly. However, I was very quickly rid of that notion the first day our kids stepped off the bus. I had worked with children before, but never in this context, and certainly never with this specific group. Even now, halfway through the school year, I feel surprised by something that happens here every single day. As much as I am here to teach these children and expand their horizons, they have pushed me in the same way. Calling myself a teacher feels disingenuous; I'm just another member of the Homework Club community.

Working at MDOC has made it extremely clear to me that education is, at its core, about relationships and community. My actual job description seems to fluctuate by the day: I've taught piano lessons, led meditations, played kickball, quizzed multiplication facts, worn a mustache and impersonated Steve Harvey, and worked through conversations about everything from cheating in UNO to the dissonance surrounding growing up humbly in such a wealthy part of New Jersey. I've read *The Cat in the Hat* with a first-grader and worked on SAT-level reading comprehension later that same day. The only constant in the Homework Club, it seems, is the community that brings this place to life. I look forward to strengthening the community feel of the Homework Club as I enter the second half of my JV year.

## TEACHER TESTIMONIAL

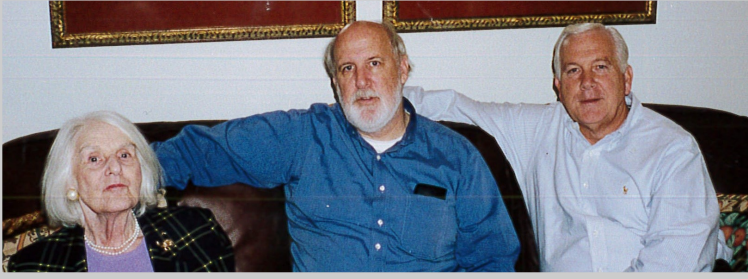
"Personal connections are the loving foundation on which educational support is built. It's so important to a boy or girl to have some individual attention. This is a great program and as a veteran public school teacher, I am so glad to be a part of it."

—Mary Starn  
MDOC Volunteer



# A True Life Hero: Margaret Donnelly O'Connor

By Peter J. O'Connor



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

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 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 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.



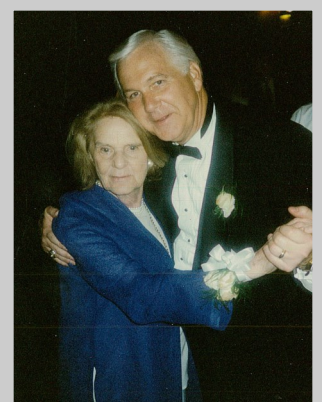
Margaret with granddaughters Erin (far left) and Meredith (to Margaret's left), Judith and James O'Connor, and Peter (far right).



Margaret with her 1967 elementary class in Maplewood, New Jersey



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



Margaret with James

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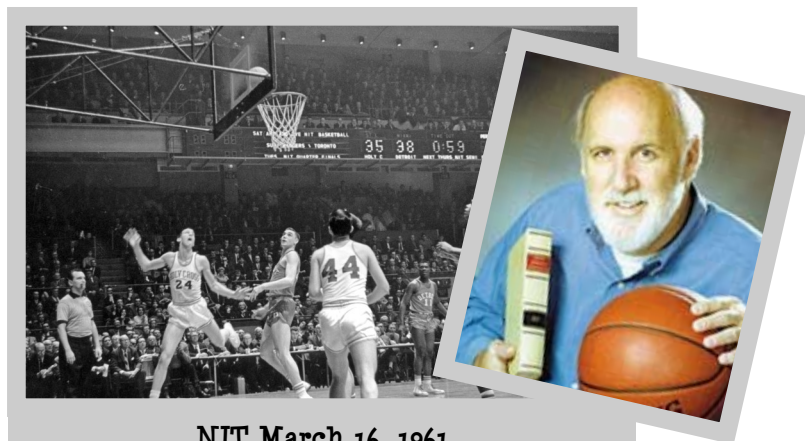
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*Thank You!*

*-Peter J. O'Connor, HC '63*

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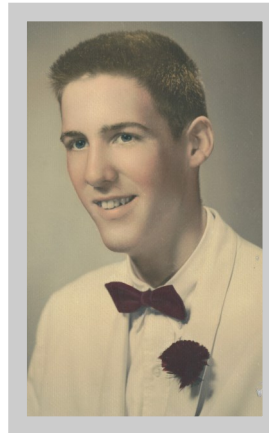
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*Peter J. O'Connor, SHP '59*

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Mother's Matter is a program run by the **Lauren Rose Albert Foundation**, which is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization that was created to honor the legacy of Lauren Rose Albert, a woman who touched the lives of many women. Besides providing Mother's Day baskets to mothers in lower-income families, the organization also provides emergency financial assistance to women and families, education grants, and new and "gently used" career clothing for interviews.

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