

Center offers hope, support for parents on new path

By Stephanie Shapiro, Sun reporter

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One in a series of occasional features highlighting people in the Baltimore area who exemplify the "Spirit of Sharing," The Sun's annual holiday campaign.

In the sunny playroom of the Park Heights Family Support Center, Ta-Niya Campbell, a wobbly 13-month-year old with pink and white beads in her braids, wants to join a group of toddlers, but isn't quite steady enough.



Isaiah Jones paints with his mother, Donyell, at the new Pimlico Road Arts and Community Center.

Just several weeks ago, though, Ta-Niya wasn't walking at all. Since she and her mother, Tywanda Palmer, arrived at the center in October, they've both made strides toward self-sufficiency.

"She started walking when she came," Palmer, 19, says. Palmer, herself, is working toward her GED and the self-esteem required for raising a happy, healthy child.

"We present knowledge here, and we hope and pray they absorb the

knowledge," says Linda Harvey, director of the Park Heights center. The program is sponsored by Family and Children's

Services of Central Maryland, a private, nonprofit agency based in Baltimore. The nonprofit Friends of the Family also supports the community-based center.

Established across the state in 1986, the Family Support Center initiative accepts any parent or primary caregiver with children up to 4 years old.

Every weekday morning, a van carries Park Heights center participants and their children to the new Pimlico Road Arts and Community Center, where the Park Heights center recently moved. From 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., young parents take classes in math, English, job readiness and financial management. The free program also addresses sex education, child development and appropriate parenting skills. In a weekly mental health class, participants thrash out personal problems while assembling scrapbooks featuring photos of them with their children.

While their moms study, the children play and listen to music and stories under the supervision of child development specialist Michelle Hanna, her assistant and volunteer foster grandparents.

The Park Heights center, which currently has 53 enrolled families, provides two daily meals, distributes WIC vouchers and sends food home to families short of food stamps. Dental, vision and lead screenings are also available through the center.

Harvey came to the Park Heights center in 2000 from Louisville, Ky., where she held a similar position for 20 years.

Although her mother urged Harvey to become a lawyer, the Northwestern High School graduate chose social work. "I'm a more 'hands-on' person," says Harvey, who majored in political science at Indiana University.

From an early age, she realized that many others had been denied the advantages she and her three sisters grew up with. Her mother, Viola Taliaferro, is a retired judge and her father, former Baltimore Colts player George Taliaferro, is a retired sociology professor at Indiana University.

As she considers the inequities that abound in Baltimore, Harvey, the mother of three, becomes irate. "Some of the most brilliant children are walking around in these neighborhoods, but with no support."

But she also realizes that it is ultimately up to her participants, predominantly teenaged women, to turn their lives around and provide for their children.

Harvey glows as she relates success stories, such as that of Tonya Green. Green was 31 when she came to the Park Heights center in 2005 with her son, Mekhi. "I had been going to so many GED programs and quitting," she says.

At the center, she found the support she needed and forged ahead with her life. Green received her GED in January 2006 and is now a sophomore at Coppin State University with plans to become an addictions counselor.

Once a week, Park Heights center participants meet with mental health counselor Cindi Mohamed. In the haven she has created, Mohamed tries to reverse years of neglect.

"One of the hardest things to do is change a person's values and beliefs," Mohamed says. "That's what I'm trying to do. Everybody in their life is miserable. They just assume that's the way to go. It's not."

It's difficult at first for participants to accept the expertise of the center's staff, Hanna says. "Most of them come in with an attitude. It's something to do with the inability to function under stress," she says.

But as Hanna and her staff "model appropriate behaviors" for parents and children, patterns change.

Through Friends of the Family, the Park Heights Family Support Center receives roughly \$250,000 annually from state, federal, corporate and foundation funding. "But it costs a lot more than that to run a center," says Margaret E. Williams, Friends of the Family's executive director. "At the very least, you could get away with another \$150,000."

The Park Heights center's local sponsor, Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland, must raise the balance, if not more. Although the center is a frontline for lifting young parents from toxic environments, adequate funding is never a guarantee.

If it were left entirely to Harvey's resolve, though, the Park Heights Family Support Center would never again have a financial qualm. After all, she and her staff must compensate for the deprivations of a "forgotten population," Harvey says. "We, as an agency, become the family."



Linda Harvey, director of the Park Heights Family Support Center, holds 13-month-old Ta'Nya Campbell.