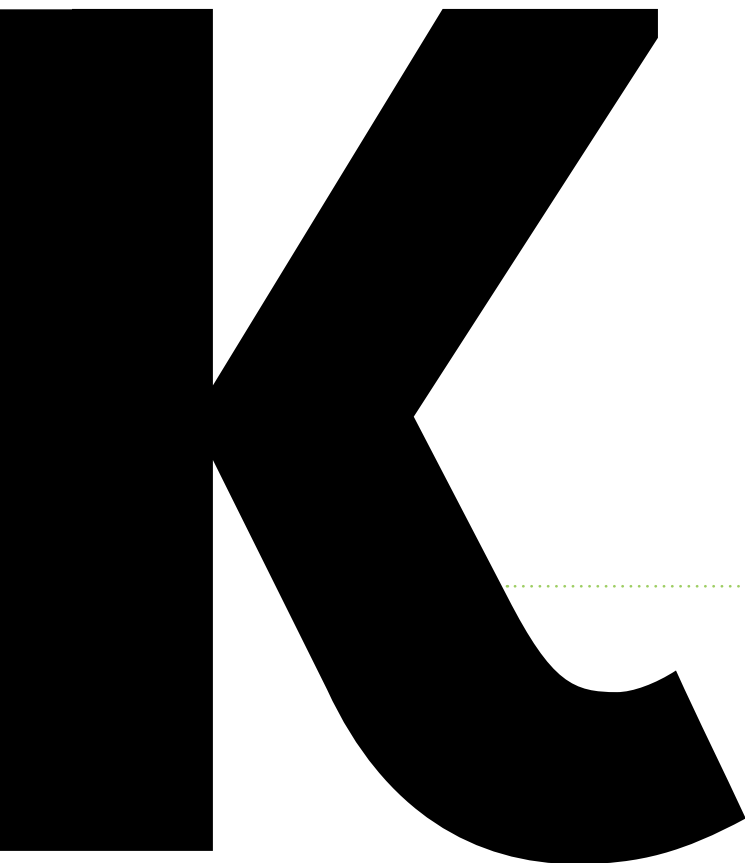




# THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

PITTSBURGH SCHOLAR HOUSE IS BOOSTING THE CHANCES FOR SINGLE PARENTS TO ACHIEVE THEIR ACADEMIC AND CAREER GOALS THROUGH A RANGE OF SERVICES, INCLUDING HOUSING ASSISTANCE AND FAMILY SUPPORTS, THAT ARE OPENING UP NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS. BY JOYCE GANNON



Khaleena Yates was a senior at Clarion University, majoring in mass media, when she became pregnant at age 20. She dropped out of school, returned to live with her parents in her hometown of Pittsburgh, and eventually ended up working for Pittsburgh Public Schools — first in food service and, for the last three years, as a paraprofessional at Obama Early Childhood in the city’s East Liberty neighborhood.

Now 35, the single mother of five children ages 2 to 14 is back in college. She expects to graduate in 2026 or 2027 with a degree in early childhood education and the chance to realize her dream: “to have my own classroom.”

Ms. Yates never abandoned the idea of finishing college after leaving Clarion, which is about 80 miles north of Pittsburgh and now named PennWest Clarion. But with family and full-time work commitments, “I was focused on taking care of my children,” she said.

She also had financial worries, including a long-standing debt at Clarion that prevented her from enrolling elsewhere. Last year, she learned about Pittsburgh Scholar House, an organization launched in 2022 that aims to improve the quality of life of single parents and their children by supporting the parents in earning post-secondary degrees and providing comprehensive services to their families, with the goal of disrupting cycles of poverty.

After Ms. Yates was accepted into the program, Pittsburgh Scholar House paid off her \$1,700 balance at Clarion so that her transcripts could be transferred to Carlow University, a private university in Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood where she started classes last fall and is now a junior.

Ms. Yates is a member of the program’s Parent Community Builder Committee, which plans events for scholar parents and their children. These activities include seasonal parties for children; child care during parents’ group study sessions; and wellness sessions, such as yoga and meditation, that provide an opportunity for members to share their struggles of juggling family, work and school.

“I feel motivated,” Ms. Yates said. “I am at a different place in my life . . . and know what I want to do versus when I was 18.”



I FEEL  
**MOTIVATED.**  
I AM AT A  
DIFFERENT  
PLACE IN  
MY LIFE...  
AND KNOW  
WHAT  
I WANT TO  
DO VERSUS  
WHEN  
I WAS 18."

Khaleena Yates, junior, Carlow University





## DEGREES OF HELP

Above, Pittsburgh Scholar House provides space for participants to devote time to family and to academic and career pursuits. Faith Otey, above, reads to her children, Zera Emanuel, 5, left, and Asa Emanuel, 3, at a Scholar House facility on Pittsburgh's North Side.

Below, left, single parents interested in Pittsburgh Scholar House meet at Emerald City Pittsburgh, a downtown co-working, hospitality and social space, to learn more about family, education and other support available through the program.

Below, right, individuals interested in enrolling in the Pittsburgh Scholar House's Wayfinders Program to achieve their goals are encouraged to become a part of the PSH Connect Community, which is an online forum that notifies members when application processes are opened and keeps them connected. The Wayfinders Program provides a range of academic, housing and job search support.





FOR ME, **THESE MOMS** ARE A FORGOTTEN PART OF OUR TALENT PIPELINE. THEY FACE ECONOMIC BARRIERS AND CAN'T PARTICIPATE IN OUR ECONOMY BECAUSE NO ONE FOCUSED ON THEM."

**Diamonte Walker**, chief executive officer, Pittsburgh Scholar House

#### A Model to Follow

The nonprofit Pittsburgh Scholar House is an affiliate of Family Scholar House, an organization in Louisville, Kentucky, that offers housing to single parents in college, as well as services that include child care, tutoring, financial counseling and family therapy.

Family Scholar House has provided housing for about 1,000 student parents and 1,500 children under 18, said Kristie Adams, chief learning officer. Approximately 800 parents in the Louisville program have earned their degrees, and about 80 percent exit the program with stable jobs, according to Family Scholar House.

Among those success stories for the program and the process is Maria Wilson, 39, who credits Family Scholar House with providing her the "road map and instruction manual" she needed to finish college as a struggling single mother who had her first son when she was 14.

Ms. Wilson spent much of her childhood in foster care in Jacksonville, Florida, and

said she "had to Google how to go to college" because she lacked a support network to guide her. At 19, she landed at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, Illinois, gravitated to unhealthy relationships and again became pregnant.

After transferring to the University of Louisville in 2011, Ms. Wilson learned about Family Scholar House from a friend at church and began attending its workshops to get help with financial literacy and stress and time management.

"I had mentors who really set me up for the real world," she said. "They gave me discipline and confidence." When she moved into the program's housing, she felt for the first time that she "had stability and a home."

Ms. Wilson worked full time to support her two sons while earning dual degrees in justice administration and communications, and later earned a law degree at Washington University, St. Louis. Now she's back in Louisville, where she works as affiliate program director for Family Scholar House. She has three more sons with her husband of 11 years, and they own their home.

"Family Scholar House broke the cycle of poverty in my life and my children's lives," said Ms. Wilson.

#### The Pittsburgh Way

Pittsburgh Scholar House currently has 60 participants enrolled in school, with five scheduled to graduate this year — three from Carlow and two from Point Park University, said Diamonte Walker, chief executive officer of the nonprofit. Other partner schools are Community College of Allegheny County, Duquesne University, LaRoche University, Robert Morris University, University of Pittsburgh and Western Governors University.

Pittsburgh Scholar House created the Wayfinders Program to guide single parents in achieving their education goals. The program's four components — Wayfinders Prep, Wayfinders Plus, Wayfinders Plus Housing and Ready2Prosper — offer a range of support. This includes connecting parents to colleges



most likely to help them achieve their goals and providing benefits and assistance designed to help them balance the demands of being both parents and students.

The program also is developing housing that is affordable and working to ensure that housing arrangements provide academic, familial and other supportive services on site. Wayfinders' Ready2Prosper component offers post-graduation services such as assistance with preparing for job interviews and drafting resumes.

In April, Pittsburgh Scholar House participant Saleena Aiken became the first college graduate since the Wayfinders Program was launched in the fall of 2022. Ms. Aiken earned a bachelor of arts in instructional studies from Point Park University.

For now, all Pittsburgh Scholar House participants are women, but there are plans to target single men in future outreach, Dr. Walker said. Higher education is at the core of the program, she explained, "because it has the power to transform" individuals and families living in or at risk for poverty.

A 2019 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit, found that single mothers in Pennsylvania who have a bachelor's degree are 71 percent less likely to live in poverty, and will earn \$608,566 more in their lifetimes, than those with only high school diplomas.

In the Pittsburgh Scholar House program, 90 percent of current participants earn less than 60 percent of the area median household income, which in 2022 was \$60,187 in the city of Pittsburgh and \$72,031 in Allegheny County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Eighty percent of those in Pittsburgh Scholar House are women of color. Their average age is 32, and their children's average age is 9.

"For me, these moms are a forgotten part of our talent pipeline," Dr. Walker said. "They face economic barriers and can't participate in our economy because no one focused on them."

Stable housing is key to helping them earn their degrees, she said.

Pittsburgh Scholar House is scheduled to have its first housing units in the city's East Liberty neighborhood available for occupancy this fall. The goal is to have 100-plus housing units available by 2028 for participants who meet requirements for low-income vouchers through the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh, Dr. Walker said.

A housing pilot in East Liberty includes five two-bedroom units at Naomi's Place, a community where residents can get assistance with financial management, counseling and parenting skills. Pittsburgh Scholar House participants need to be enrolled full time in school and maintain a 2.0 grade point average to be eligible to live there.

## SUCCESS STORIES



[The Scholar House financial assistance] was pivotal in me starting the journey back... I want [my sons] to know you finish what you start... I took them with me to campus when I got my student ID. They're proud."

**Alana Griffin**, psychology major, University of Pittsburgh

I knew I needed a degree to accomplish my goals in life. I tried it without a degree and failed."

**Sacoyia Bey**, early childhood education major, Carlow University

I had mentors who really set me up for the real world. They gave me discipline and confidence. ...I had stability and a home."

**Maria Wilson**, affiliate program director, Family Scholar House, and graduate of the Scholar House program

Also in development are housing sites Downtown, in the North Side's Manchester neighborhood and at Hazelwood Green, Dr. Walker said. Pittsburgh Scholar House is collaborating with developers to obtain low-income housing tax credits for the projects.

All will be in "high-opportunity ZIP codes" where residents will have access to grocery stores with fresh food, public transportation, child care and other "social determinants of health," she explained.

Although some of the communities do not have "full-service" grocery stores now, residents can or will be able to access stores if they live there, she added. For example, the Manchester and Downtown neighborhoods offer public transit to reach grocery stores,

Dr. Walker noted. And Hazelwood Green is a “logical location for future [Pittsburgh Scholar House] residential communities,” she said, because it’s being developed as a future hub for the high-tech economy and universities, and will eventually offer services and amenities for residents.

### Developing the Local Strategy

The idea to bring the Scholar House model to Pittsburgh grew out of conversations starting in 2017 among the city’s major philanthropies, including The Heinz Endowments, that wanted to help single parents earn college degrees and become self-sustaining, said Michelle Figlar, at the time vice president of Learning at the Endowments and now executive director of the Birmingham Foundation.

“We wanted a program laser-focused on helping single parents go to post-secondary schools . . . and wrap services around the kids,” said Dr. Figlar, who sits on Pittsburgh Scholar House’s board.

Sally McCrady, chairwoman and president of the PNC Foundation, told the other funders about Family Scholar House, which PNC — with significant operations in Louisville — has been supporting since 2006. Ms. McCrady helped to organize a couple of field trips to Louisville for officials from Pittsburgh foundations, universities and other organizations.

They came away “equally impressed with the model as I was,” she said. “The multi-generational approach was unique and didn’t already exist in Pittsburgh.”

“I think what really sold us is the impact it has on children,” said Endowments Learning Program Officer Kathleen Keating. “Kids are getting high-quality learning experiences and seeing their parent going to college. Parents aren’t spending all their energy thinking of child care and housing.”

Supports for the children of single-parent scholars include financial assistance for food, diapers, health care services and school supplies. The program also helps scholars find child care if needed.

The Endowments has made four grants totaling \$925,000 to Pittsburgh Scholar House, beginning in 2021, Ms. Keating said.

PNC has provided \$300,000, and the Henry L. Hillman Foundation made two grants totaling \$550,000, according to their staff.

“We knew right away that it could thrive in Pittsburgh,” said Lisa Johns, vice president of finance at the Henry L. Hillman Foundation. “It eliminates the binary choice between family and education.”

Other funders include The Buhl Foundation, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Eden Hall Foundation, First National Bank, McAuley Ministries, Opportunity Fund, Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation, Segal Family Foundation, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and UPMC.

To get the program up and running in Pittsburgh, funders asked the Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education, a consortium of local colleges and universities, to serve as its fiscal sponsor until Pittsburgh Scholar House obtained independent nonprofit status last year.

“It’s sort of the jewel in the crown, in my opinion, of what’s possible,” said Karina Chavez, executive director of the consortium and a board member of Pittsburgh Scholar House.

Though Pittsburgh is “nonprofit-services rich” with programs that offer child care, food security, affordable housing and other basic needs, she said, “We don’t have the connective tissue to wrap around single-parent students in the way Pittsburgh Scholar House will do.”

For Alana Griffin of McKeesport, a divorced mother of two sons who dropped out of Pitt at age 19 during her sophomore year after her mother died, money was a chronic obstacle to going back. She completed some online credits at Penn State University after her first child was born, but high credit card debts prevented her from obtaining more financial aid.

Pittsburgh Scholar House paid a \$2,380 debt she owed to Pitt and provided \$1,000 in tuition aid when she re-enrolled at the university.

“[The Scholar House financial assistance] was pivotal in me starting the journey back,” said Ms. Griffin, who’s majoring in psychology and works as a marketing consultant. Now in her early 40s, she told her

sons she returned to college “because I want them to know you finish what you start . . . I took them with me to campus when I got my student ID. They’re proud.”

Sacoyia Bey, 42, of Squirrel Hill, a mother of two sons who works as a caregiver for the elderly, completed cosmetology courses after high school and later earned more than 100 credits from the Community College of Allegheny County, Laurel Business Institute in Uniontown, and University of Phoenix online courses.

But a divorce, custody battle, and series of family challenges kept her from finishing a degree, she said.

After she was accepted to Pittsburgh Scholar House, the program paid off her outstanding debt of nearly \$1,000 at CCAC, gave her \$1,000 for tuition at Carlow, and has helped connect her with food pantries and in-home services for her younger son, who is autistic.

Carlow accepted 90 of her college credits, and Ms. Bey expects to graduate in 2026 with a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. She’s working on a business plan to open a child care center that could accommodate children with special needs.

“I knew I needed a degree to accomplish my goals in life,” Ms. Bey said. “I tried it without a degree and failed.”

Ms. Bey and one of her sons were featured in a promotion for Pittsburgh Scholar House last August during the Pittsburgh Foundation’s #OneDay Critical Needs Alert. Donations generated for Pittsburgh Scholar House from that event totaled \$8,000, said Kelly Uranker, vice president for the foundation’s Center for Philanthropy.

Dr. Walker is confident Pittsburgh Scholar House will achieve its mission “to break the cycle of poverty” as more participants earn degrees and achieve financial stability.

“My goal in 10 years is that we don’t have the daughters of the people in the program now in our program [then] because they won’t need us,” she said. **h**