

Dorian Page of Homewood helps his son Ira with his homework at the library in the neighboring community of East Liberty.





STRENGTHENING FAMILY TIES

FAMILIES ARE THE BACKBONE OF ANY COMMUNITY, AND FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE REDEVELOPMENT PUZZLE IN PITTSBURGH'S HOMEWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD.
BY CHRISTINE H. O'TOOLE PHOTOS BY ANNIE O'NEILL



Born and raised in Homewood, Dorian Page is a patriarch in the Pittsburgh neighborhood, with a deep commitment to helping others. An Army National Guard veteran, he coaches young boxers in the Police Athletic League and has worked with the Veterans Leadership Program to assist fellow vets in finding housing. Now, as a single 54-year-old father of two, he is requesting and receiving help and, in the process, discovering effective, friendly ways to enable his family to thrive.

Shaquala Venson is determined to provide the best for her 3-year-old son, King-Ray. First, the 21-year-old enrolled in the Baby Promise program in Homewood, which offers weekly sessions on how to provide a safe and loving home. In April, she placed him in Pittsburgh Public Schools' premier pre-kindergarten program, a mile from her old high school in the neighborhood. She knew of Crescent Early Childhood Center's outstanding track record in preparing preschoolers for kindergarten, and she is confident that it is the next step in his cradle-to-career success.



Over the past decade, a number of community initiatives to support individuals and families and improve overall quality of life have emerged in Homewood, often with philanthropic support. Along with city, county and school district programs, a variety of nonprofit organizations are investing in the lives of neighborhood residents. These include the Homewood Children's Village, a network of programs that link schools, churches, health and human services providers and their allies to build strong families. Based on the groundbreaking work of the 48-year-old Harlem Children's Zone in New York, the Homewood effort, officially founded in 2010, has grown organically.

Yet, the Homewood neighborhood is facing a challenge: how to provide dozens of approaches from many providers within a broadly effective service ecosystem. Instead of attempting to usher families through programs in conveyor-belt style, the different groups encourage families to connect based on the needs they perceive at a given time. Homewood's vision is to be a big, welcoming house filled with open doors.

For Mr. Page, this has meant participating in a local Fathering Program and then discovering the Homewood Early Learning Hub, where he and his 5-year-old son, Ira, drop in frequently to play and learn. For Ms. Venson, the Baby Promise program at the Homewood Children's Village led to joining the Village's Circles program, with mentors to help her reach her personal and financial goals.

"Back in 2010, it was innovative to think about families and children from a neighborhood level," said Michelle Figlar, vice

president for Learning at the Endowments, where commitment to Homewood totals nearly \$13 million to date. "Now, local is the new national. We ask, what local policies can we change? How do you pilot ideas to take them bigger?"

Making a good start

When Ms. Venson enrolled in the Baby Promise eight-session series in Homewood, she expected to learn about child development, home safety, discipline and stress management, and nutrition and healthy foods. But at each Saturday meeting, while her son played with other toddlers and caregivers at the neighborhood YMCA, she found more: Strategies for coping with childhood asthma. Advice on preventing lead poisoning. Tips on saving with couponing. New friendships and some lighthearted activities, like learning Spanish phrases and soap-making, changed the pace. After the first session ended, she re-enlisted for another eight weeks.

"It's all about wanting to do more for your children—with any resource," said Erica Lewis, program director for the Village's Baby Promise and Circles programs. "Those participants that are most successful come back every week."

She added that Baby Promise is open to all caregivers of children from birth to 5. "We benefit all ages: single moms, fathers, married couples, grandparents and grandchildren."

Baby Promise is a doorway that opens into other supports as well. The Homewood-Brushton Family Support Center, a project of Allegheny County Department of Human Services, welcomes any family with a child under 5, offering or ensuring

Shaquala Venson reads to her son, King-Ray, while relaxing in Mellon Park, which straddles Pittsburgh's Shadyside and Point Breeze neighborhoods and is minutes away from Homewood.



access to prenatal support, health insurance, child development services, summer camps and more.

A smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten has strengthened early achievement in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, said Carol Barone-Martin, executive director of Early Childhood Education for the district. “Other cities are starting to value early childhood learning. We started a long time ago,” she said.

Homewood’s Crescent Early Childhood Center, enrolling more than 200 2- to 5-year-olds, is the district’s largest early childhood center, with a majority of African American students. “We collect data on our children and we see significant growth,” Ms. Barone-Martin said. “There is no racial achievement gap when they leave the PPS early childhood program. All the children are equally successful.”

At Crescent, Ms. Venson’s son, King-Ray, is receiving the strong start that is his mother’s priority. “I want him to be able to make his own decisions. I want him to learn a second language, so we can travel together,” she said.

As an outgrowth of her participation in Baby Promise, she also is articulating her own goals through Circles, a national mentoring initiative to increase family strength and financial stability. The Village’s Circles program was launched this year and is the fourth chapter in Pittsburgh, with the Endowments as lead funder. The initiative is a response to the great need for new approaches to persistent poverty. The city’s poverty rate is 30 percent, with African American communities like Homewood particularly affected.

When Ms. Venson attends Circles’ 12-week introduction, in weekly Saturday sessions, she sees participants share information

on deeply personal topics, such as stress and trauma, along with practical support on issues like housing and energy conservation. Now that she is looking for a new address in Homewood, she gets frequent tips on vacancies through the group’s Facebook page. As program director, Ms. Lewis also has guided Ms. Venson’s application for a new home through Habitat for Humanity.

Ms. Venson appreciates the help. She has worked steadily since age 13 in the food and service industries. “There’s no respite as a single mother,” she said. “I have to keep the wheels rolling.”

Circles has assisted her in controlling her family budget and planning for savings—a key foundation. In May, she moved to the second phase of the program: pairing up with a trained long-term mentor called an ally.

“Allies are volunteers who ask only one question. Not ‘Do you need money?’ or ‘How can I fix it?’” explained Karin Vanzant, a national leader in the Circles movement. “It’s ‘What do you need from me?’”

While Ms. Lewis admitted that there were “bumps in the road” in establishing the Homewood Circles, she said “a solid 10 families” are in the current cohort and “are flourishing.”

Ms. Venson noted that she also is grateful for help from her father, who lives in Homewood. But some in the community can’t always rely on family for support.

Other programs available in the neighborhood that might meet the needs of these individuals include Sojourner House Moms, which provides 21 units of housing to homeless, single mothers, and aids the women’s early recovery from mental illness and addiction. Veterans can find support—or participate in providing it—through The Mission Continues, a group of former military servicemen now aiding their neighbors according to the needs of the community. In Homewood, the organization’s focus is youth and includes recreational and educational programs along with refurbishing venues that support youth activities.

Taking next steps

Mr. Page first attended weekly Fathering Program classes at the Homewood-Brushton Family Support Center because he wanted to improve his son’s behavior.

“I needed help,” he recalled. His son’s after-school program suggested that Mr. Page try some new strategies. After the center referred them to a behavioral health program, Ira “came a long way,” said his father. “I’m proud of his progress. He likes being around his peers, and he communicates better with them—and with me.”

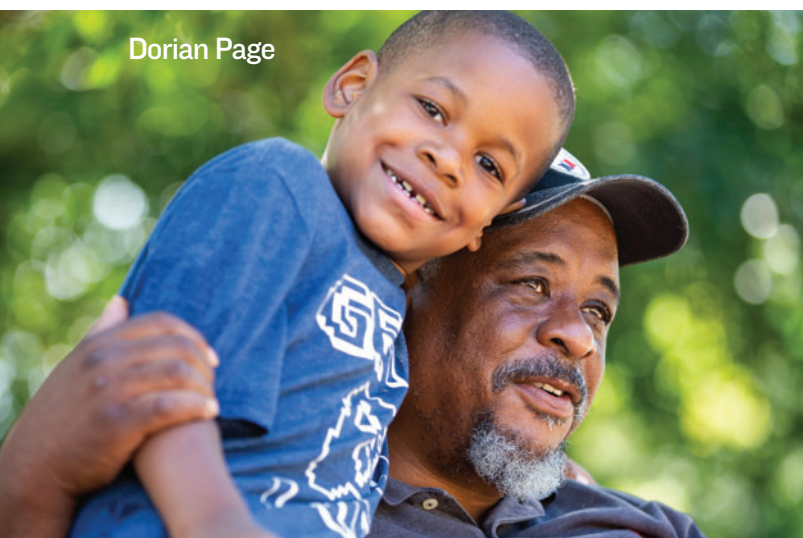
The Homewood center, which is part of a network of Allegheny County Family Support Centers, now provides onsite immunizations and wellness visits with staff from UPMC Pediatrics in a partnership with Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC.

“They’re providing health care right at the center,” said Ms. Figlar of the Endowments. “They’re piloting strategies to bring health care to families. That’s hard to take to scale. Not every center might be able to do that. But it totally aligns the early childhood efforts with health systems. We are starting to see that statewide and nationally—a cross-programmatic approach.”

Dorian Page, below left, and Shaquala Venson, right, each enjoy a sunny summer day in Pittsburgh’s Mellon Park with their sons, Ira and King-Ray, respectively.

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Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf has endorsed that strategy. Last year, he proposed a merger of four agencies into the new Department of Health and Human Services. The reorganization is intended to provide one-stop applications for a variety of public benefits and simplify licensure for providers.

A generation ago, the introduction of the Head Start program launched a series of innovations in early learning. Ongoing research has proved that age-appropriate play and learning helps preschoolers succeed when they entered kindergarten.

Trying Together (formerly named the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children) is a regional nonprofit that provides support for parents and home child care providers in a variety of settings. In Homewood, the group maintains the Early Learning Hub — where Mr. Page also takes his son, Ira, regularly — as a public space offering resources for all.

With core support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation as well as the Endowments, the Hub’s work reflects deeply researched best practices and developmentally appropriate programs. In practice, its atmosphere is more like a toddler’s birthday party, sparkling with color, laughter and bright ideas to engage families.

Among the Hub’s most popular activities is Buzzwords, which involves a partnership of cultural organizations and is aimed at increasing toddlers’ vocabulary, enhancing family engagement and providing creative play opportunities. Research has demonstrated that children’s language skills at age 3 predict their language skills at age 9 or 10, resulting in better school performance in high school, college and beyond.

Buzzwords was created in 2004 by PNC Grow Up Great, a \$350 million initiative of The PNC Financial Services Group intended to prepare children from birth to age 5 for success in school and life. With support from the Endowments, Buzzwords was brought to the neighborhoods of Homewood and Hazelwood in a series of free, hour-long programs that included young artists and staff from local museums.

At an April session, the word of the day was “illusion.” A dozen families, including Mr. Page and Ira, arrived early for a casual dinner. Soon, presenters from Carnegie Science Center and the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust circled the room, wearing silly stuffed-animal hats. They chatted with toddlers, who explored toys and books. Mr. Page

tied a floor-length magician’s cape around his son’s neck. After a spirited rendition of the Buzzwords theme songs, the group listened intently to a reading of “Duck! Rabbit!” a whimsical picture book about optical illusions. The evening finished with each child crafting a two-sided whirlygig.

“It’s fun to hear the families’ comments as they leave,” said Hub director Rachele Duffy. “They’ll see an opera performed or watch a ballet, and say, ‘Let’s do this at home!’”

The Buzzword series has attracted an average audience of 40 to 50 participants, she said. A lending library of books, blocks and other playthings gives parents fresh ideas for family play.

Ms. Duffy also invites guests to consider the Baby Promise program and recommends the Family Support Center and Homewood Children’s Village as sources for referrals to other services, from free computing to career training. For school-age siblings, the Village offers summer and after-school activities, such as chess tournaments, podcasts and poetry.

And based on families’ needs, the Hub might direct them to The Lighthouse project at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, which provides arts and music enrichment and tutoring for high school students, or to faith-based programs like Ruth’s Way, which offers life coaching for young women ages 13 to 21. Word of mouth among programs strengthens the network.

Ms. Duffy said that the Hub extends its reach to families and caregivers throughout Homewood in part by purposely moving around its programs to new locations. For example, while based on Kelly Street in Homewood, the Hub moved the Buzzwords program to the Family Support Center on Rosedale Street in May, and then relocated Buzzwords again in July to The Shop, a large maker space on Dallas Avenue. Ms. Duffy said that spreading the word about Hub programming is worth the effort of changing activity addresses.

“We live out of boxes,” she said cheerfully.

Mr. Page believes Homewood’s new offerings are the right innovations for his neighborhood.

“Back in the day, Homewood had school gyms that were open a couple days a week. But it was more of an athletic program. We need more creative education for African Americans,” he insisted. “I need a destination, a place to do something that will make life better for my son. With [the new Homewood programs] you get pulled in.” **h**