NYC Program Offers Jobs, Business Training to Public Housing Youth

In June 2011, 9-year-old Damir Thomas from Brooklyn, New York’s Lafayette Gardens public housing, helped rescue a 73-year-old neighbor who had fallen and was unable to pull herself out of her bathtub. The doctors who treated her for hypothermia said a few more hours could have meant serious medical problems. That same day, Thomas won a national contest to be the local “Police Chief for a Day.” Prior to this, Thomas, like many young people at his housing development, rarely viewed himself as part of a community—let alone a hero.

Resident Association of Lafayette Gardens President, Tyree Stanback, credits Thomas’s change with participation in the Youthmarket. Thomas is one of five Lafayette Gardens’ youth selected by the Resident Association for Youthmarket; two more are alternates. The Youthmarket farm stand program trains and employs youth, while offering affordable, local fruits and vegetables to communities that often lack access to fresh, healthy produce. Beginning as a weekly farm stand in one neighborhood, Youthmarket now includes 11 markets throughout New York City. Including the market at Lafayette Gardens, two of the markets are located at public housing communities.

Youthmarket is managed by GrowNYC, which provides environmental programs, in partnership with community-based organizations. The young people employed at the market are introduced to the program by organizations such as the Resident Association. They set up necessary equipment, unpack produce, create and replenish displays, lay out price boards, assist customers, take closing inventories, make suggestions for ordering produce for the following week, and conduct an analysis of net profit and loss. This training program prepares young people to develop and operate a small business while educating them about their health, nutrition, the environment, and regional agriculture.

Youthmarket emphasizes the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy lifestyle and encourages them to bring this message to their families and others in the community. Last year, more than 35 young people participated in Youthmarket, and this year over 50 are involved.

Stanback says Youthmarket does more than provide youth with life skills: “People who live in public housing often have a life that is narrowed to the scope of public housing, but programs like Youthmarket involve them in the greater community and society as a whole. Young people who sell drugs learn business skills such as marketing and distribution—but we are teaching them these same skills to be used in a positive way. This opportunity and experience is a real eye-opener.”

For more information the youth-run markets, please see: http://www.grownyc.org/youthmarket/locations
Mary Ann Wilson moved from New York City to North Carolina with four of her 11 children, the “clothes on her back,” and a dream of owning her own home. In June 2011, 7 years after her move, Wilson’s dream came true with the help of Habitat for Humanity and the Gastonia Housing Authority’s (GHA’s) Family Self Sufficiency program (FSS).

As a public housing resident of GHA, Wilson joined the FSS program with the end goal of homeownership. When FSS participants increase their income, the difference between their old rent and their new rent amount is deposited in an interest-bearing account. At the same time, the participants work on educational, financial, or employment goals they selected for their FSS contract. Wilson’s FSS goals included cleaning up her credit, moving from employment as a substitute teacher to an elementary school teacher’s aide, and continuing her education. Wilson had an associate’s degree and finished credits to complete a bachelor’s degree in education. A co-worker convinced Wilson to give the Habitat for Humanity homeownership program a try, saying, “What do you have to lose?”

Habitat for Humanity partners with individuals and organizations to build decent, affordable housing. The organization’s low-income applicants invest in their homes by working on them. Habitat and others call this idea “sweat equity.” Wilson worked with Habitat for about 1½ years while still in FSS.

Before being eligible for a home, Habitat requires applicants to spend 75 hours working on other Habitat homes or in a Habitat ReStore. The application process also involved interviewing before a 15-person board.

Then, as a single person, Wilson was required to put in 325 hours working on her home. She and a daughter put in the time together on activities that Wilson said were not difficult. She selected some features of her home, such as ceiling fans paid for with an “allowance” from Habitat, but did pay about $200 in costs during construction. More meaningfully, while working in the house before the walls went up, she “wrote scripture on each of the four corners inside the new house.”

Wilson’s mortgage, paid to Habitat, is financed with an affordable loan. Habitat uses the money to fund additional homes. They also receive donations of cash and materials. Wilson also covered $1,150 in closing costs, in part from her FSS escrow account.

Of her future plans, Wilson said, “I get bored when I don’t do anything. I plan to get certified to teach English as a Second Language now.” Whatever she chooses to pursue, Wilson can do it in the comfort of her own home.

To learn more about Habitat for Humanity: http://www.habitat.org/