



HCCI

## MARY BROWN YOUNG ADULT SUPPORTIVE SERVICES/ INDEPENDENCE STARTS AT HOME



Each year, nearly 1,000 young adults “age out” of New York City’s foster care system on their 21st birthday. These young people are often unprepared to live on their own and are more likely to drop out of high school or become homeless.

Since 2008, HCCI’s Young Adult Supportive Services/ Independence Starts At Home (YASS/ISAH) program, has helped young adults who age out of the foster care system become self-sufficient, and sustain productive lives.

The program is housed in HCCI’s heralded David & Joyce Dinkins Gardens (Dinkins Gardens) on West 153rd Street, the first affordable green building in New York City. Of 85 low-income units, 26 apartments were set aside specifically for youth in the YASS/ISAH program. Youth who have aged-out of foster care are referred by local foster care agencies, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Agency for Children’s Services (ACS).

Six years ago, Mary Brown, now 27, was one of those youth. When she aged out, she moved into an independent living program offered through her foster care agency. “I was living in an apartment under supervision for about a year and a half,” said Mary.

In a supervised independent living situation, according to Mary, every person has their own bedroom within the apartment but they share the common space (living room, kitchen, bathroom). “It’s the agency’s way of preparing you to live on your own. They’ll give you a certain amount of money every week and you had to be responsible, and come home at a certain time.”

In late 2007, Aysha Schomburg, Mary’s former caseworker and mentor, told her about YASS/ISAH. “Transitioning into my own apartment was something that I wanted to do and HCCI’s program was perfect for me.”

In order to be eligible for the program, participants must be between the ages of 21 and 26 and have aged out of foster care within the past two years. They must also show proof of income for three months (or six consecutive paystubs). “Residents have to be interviewed by staff to assess interest in program participation and commitment to self-sufficiency,” said Robin Brown, Life Skills Coordinator and Program Administrator for YASS/ISAH.

Apart from gaining her own living space and real independence, Mary also credits Brown for her unending support and serving as an invaluable resource during that transition into adulthood. “The goals of the program are to achieve social, emotional and mental well-being; to help the youth become economically independent and build sufficient support systems,” said Brown. The program offers several different services to help make life easier for their participants, which range from mentorship and assistance with educational and career opportunities to budget counseling, apartment and childcare referrals.

“Robin treats you the same way that she would treat her own children,” Mary said with emphasis. “She’s been very instrumental in getting us help whenever we need it—paying the rent, the light bill or anything else. Sometimes you don’t know how to talk to other people, especially just coming out of foster care. It’s good to have an adult there with you. Not someone to do everything for you, but to help guide you along the way.”

Brown has known Mary for over two years and since joining HCCI’s YASS/ISAH program, she’s noticed how much Mary has grown in that time.

“Mary is goal-oriented and strong minded,” said Brown. “Her strength lies in her self-advocacy. Mary has been able to move forward in spite of her circumstances.”

Prior to aging out, Mary was active in promoting policy changes for children in foster care. “One of the programs that I helped implement was called Youth Financial Empowerment (YFE). It shows young adults how to save money.”

Mary now works as a concierge at a popular hotel chain in Manhattan and plans on returning to Bronx Community College in the fall of 2014. Through her achievements, notably her work as a youth advocate, Mary has been able to sit down with city officials, forcing them to look at foster care from a different perspective.

“Sometimes adults can see things as one-sided,” said Mary. “They don’t see it from the position of the person who’s living in foster care. They only see it from policy. I could tell them about what’s going in foster and group homes and bring these problems to their attention.”