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## Her homes change boys' lives

By Barbara Ruben

One day in 1994, while an assistant superintendent at Baltimore City Public Schools and director of a program for unruly students, Hattie Washington was sent a boy who had been kicked out of his foster home and suspended from school.

"He was slouched down in his chair. I told him to sit up, and he did. He wore his pants low, and I said 'pull your pants up,' and he did. Then I said 'take your hat off.' When he did all three, I thought, 'this kid can't be all that bad,'" Washington recalled.

When she learned that he was carrying all his belongings in a garbage bag and had no idea where he'd spend that coming night, Washington decided to take him home with her. Little did she know at the time that he would become her first foster son and ultimately change both their lives.

### Paying it forward

Washington thought she'd be taking the boy home for a few nights at most, recalling that a teacher had done the same thing for her as a child growing up in Norfolk, Va.

"My mother died when I was 2," Washington said. Her father then married a woman with six children and they proceeded to have more together. So she grew up in a chaotic household of 15 kids, some of whom were her step- and half-siblings, and she would get lost in the shuffle.

"My teacher used to take me home occasionally, clean me up, wash my clothes, make me feel brand new." Those nights with a caring teacher made all the difference, Washington now says.

So, over the last 15 years, she has more than paid that kindness forward by opening three group homes for troubled teenage foster boys in Baltimore and Montgomery County.

Each home, dubbed Aunt Hattie's Place, provides structure and nurture to six to 12 boys. Washington, 65, lives next door to her newest group home in Sandy Spring, Md. She also teaches graduate students in the education department of Coppin State University in Baltimore.

Back in 1994, though, Washington thought she was just helping one boy for one night. But Social Services never came to collect him, and over the following year



While an assistant superintendent of Baltimore City Public Schools, Hattie Washington became a foster parent to a handful of troubled teenage boys. She eventually decided to establish a group home and now runs three Aunt Hattie's Place homes for boys. Here she is pictured at the newest facility, in Sandy Spring, Md., which is home to eight teens.

Washington found herself taking in several other boys she found slouching on street corners in inner city Baltimore when they should have been attending school.

She eventually housed at her Baltimore home six boys who were slipping through the cracks of the foster care system, taking a 12-hour course to become a licensed foster care provider.

However, with a demanding job, Washington felt she couldn't give the boys the attention they needed. One night she arrived home close to midnight from a contentious school board meeting to find all six of them waiting up for her.

"They said, 'Can we talk to you?' One said, 'Do you think when my daddy gets

out of jail he will come looking for me, he'll want me back?' Another wanted to know, 'Why do you think my mother gave me up to Social Services but kept my brother? Do you think my mother will ever get off drugs and take me back? Do you think she'd love me?'"

But Washington had no easy answers. "I was bone tired, and I knew then these kids needed more than a meal and a place to sleep. They needed some psychological counseling, therapy. That's when I started thinking if I had a group home, I could provide all of that. But as a foster parent, I just didn't have the resources."

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## Foster homes

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In opening her first group home (a much more arduous task than becoming a certified foster parent), Washington amassed enough paperwork to fill a four-inch binder.

"It took me two years to get my PhD, but took me 3½ years to write up the proposal for the group home and get it approved," she recalled.

Washington cashed in her retirement savings to fund the first house. She gets reimbursed by the state of Maryland for each boy cared for, but payment can lag behind for months. During this time, she moved from one demanding job to another, eventu-

ally rising to become the first female vice president of Coppin State University.

### Opening her newest home

But nothing prepared her for the struggle to open her third home, in a house bequeathed to her by a longtime friend in Sandy Spring, Md., north of Silver Spring and east of Olney.

Washington wanted to demolish the sprawling house's five-car garage and ballroom to make way for a wing that could be home for eight boys.

But some community members balked, worried that the home's residents would be out of control, bring crime to the community, and bring down property values. They

didn't pay attention when Washington talked about how the residents are hand-picked and don't have criminal records or serious psychological problems.

Washington found some of her biggest allies to be residents of the Friends House Retirement Community just down the street. Friends House is affiliated with the Quaker church, and Sandy Spring itself was founded by Quakers.

They "came by the busload to the hearing. They said, 'We're a Quaker community, a caring community. This is what we do in this community to take care of people.' They came full force," Washington said.

Fortunately, after Aunt Hattie's Place opened in 2010, some of the home's biggest naysayers became her most loyal volunteers, finding they had nothing to fear once they visited the house, with its pristine, oversized kitchen, recreation area with exercise machines and large screen TV, library and five bedrooms. The backyard includes a basketball court and small swimming pool.

### Helping boys become men

Washington calls living at Aunt Hattie's Place a leadership training program.

The boys all help with chores, from laundry to cleaning bathrooms. They also must learn a musical instrument, learn a foreign language, and play a sport. Over the summer, they each must read 10 books.

Washington makes surprise visits to their school to ensure the boys are in class. They have bed checks every hour during the night to keep them from sneaking out.

They earn points for good behavior, which they can trade in for outings to movies, allowance and other perks.

To encourage a family atmosphere, the boys call all staff by their first names, preceded by "aunt" or "uncle." Each home has several staff members who cook, take the boys on appointments and watch over them.

Washington works hard to keep the boys on the straight and narrow, a kind but firm grandmotherly presence, as reflected by this exchange during a recent visit to the Sandy Spring home, where the boys were friendly and polite.

"Everything going good?" Washington asked one boy.

"Mmm, yeah," he responded.

"Excuse me?" said Washington, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, ma'am," he revised his response with a grin.

Washington and her staff also work to instill a sense of self-esteem in the boys, near-

ly all of whom come from backgrounds where they were abused and neglected.

A sign above the full length mirror at the front door contains such affirmations as "I am smart" and "I am kind," which the boys are supposed to recite each time they look at themselves.

"I remember one boy would say 'if I grow up,' not 'when I grow up,' Washington said. "For a kid to come in with that pessimistic, fatalistic, self-destructive notion, it's a societal ill.

"It's hard to feed them every day, clothe them, try to get through that psychological crust to tell them that 'You're going to be somebody.'"

"What helps me [prove that] are kids who are already in college or have finished because they've been where [the boys] are right now," Washington said.

One of those young men is Devin Collins, who came to Aunt Hattie's Place as a 10-year-old. Collins, whose mother was a drug addict, spent time homeless and bouncing from foster home to foster home for several years before he ended up at Aunt Hattie's Place in Baltimore City.

"By 9 or 10, I sold drugs, had been homeless, didn't care about school or anything else, really," Collins said. But moving into Aunt Hattie's Place turned his life around.

"Aunt Hattie just made you know somebody loves you. Someone actually cares about the decisions that you make," Collins said. "From that point on I chose that I wasn't going to be one of those statistics where you're dead or in jail. Aunt Hattie got behind me and everything I wanted to do. I knew I'd have someone to support me."

Collins lived at Aunt Hattie's Place until he was 18, winning scholarships both for Calvert Hall, a Catholic boys prep school in Towson, and Norfolk State University. Now 26, Collins is working at both Aunt Hattie's Place and Johns Hopkins. He has one more year of college left and hopes to finish at Coppin State.

"I'm living proof that you can come out of the foster system and not be a statistic, that you can be a productive citizen. I tell the boys that being at Aunt Hattie's Place is probably the best head start that you're going to have," he said.

### Helping Aunt Hattie

Doing all this good work takes helpers and money. Volunteers, along with monetary donations, are needed at all three of

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# Nuts improve thinking, memory, diabetes

By Julie Bodenmann

Tree nuts are among the earliest known foods. Archaeological evidence suggests that they were a major part of the human diet 780,000 years ago. Several varieties of nuts, along with the stone tools necessary to crack them open, have been found buried deep in bogs in the Middle East.

Rich in energy and loaded with nutrients, nuts, and particularly their cargo of omega-3 fatty acids, are thought to have been essential to the evolution of the large, complex human brain.

Researchers have long linked consumption

of tree nuts, despite their significant fat content, to decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, cancer, even Parkinson's disease.

## Brain boosters

Now comes evidence that they also improve cognition in general and specific ways. Most have high concentrations of vitamin E, the B vitamins (including folate), antioxidants, minerals like magnesium, as well as omega-3 fats, all of which support myriad functions of the nervous system.

Crack open some walnuts and improve



your ability to think critically. Researchers find that eating a high concentration of walnuts (half a cup a day) boosts inferential verbal reasoning, especially the ability to distinguish true from false.

An array of compounds in walnuts, including vitamin E, folate, melatonin and varied antioxidative polyphenols, protect the central nervous system and speed synaptic transmission. The significant supply of alpha-linolenic acid is essential for stability of neuronal membranes, through which all neuronal actions transpire.

Although almonds are not strictly tree

nuts — they are the seed of a fruit related to plums — they may help save your memory. Mice rendered temporarily amnesiac were more apt to remember their way around a maze 24 hours later if they first consumed an almond paste.

The evidence suggests that almonds slow the decline in cognitive abilities linked to Alzheimer's disease. Investigators attribute the memory effects to the presence of the essential amino acid phenylalanine and L-carnitine, believed to



See **HEALTHY NUTS**, page 13

## Foster homes

From page 10

the Aunt Hattie's Place homes.

"We're in need of everything: people who can cook and clean up. I need typists, I need database people. I need to have someone help me do clerical-type stuff, the whole gamut. It's just like running any other business, except it's a home," she said.

Washington would also like the boys to have older adults as surrogate grandparents.

"When [older] people come in to help, the boys cling to them. They're looking for grandparents. They're looking for older people because they don't have that part of their family," she said.

Washington herself is a grandparent. One daughter, who is a doctor, lives in Florida with Washington's two granddaughters. Her other daughter, a lawyer in Maryland, served as executive director of Aunt Hattie's Place for six years.

Washington, who divorced when her daughters were young, stepped down as

vice president of Coppin State when construction began on the Sandy Spring house. She now works full time as a professor at the university, and said she will continue to do so for the foreseeable future to help pay the mortgage on the house.

Washington said she's had interest in her starting Aunt Hattie's Places in Norfolk and even the Virgin Islands. But she has her hands full in Maryland, she said.

Despite her 18-hour days, Washington says she can't imagine a different life, and that she is as grateful to have the boys in her life as they are to be there.

"I say this is my way of giving back. Somebody helped me one day, so I say thank you [to the boys] for taking advantage of the opportunity, thank you for wanting to be somebody so my time and resources aren't wasted," she said.

"You are thanking me, but I'm also thanking you because you are part of the future, part of the people who are going to be taking care of me when I'm a senior citizen."

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