

MARYLAND

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"I'm not trying to save the world. I'm just trying to save somebody."

Hattie Washington, owner of a group home for boys



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR: SUN STAFF

Hattie Washington gets a hug from one of the residents of her group home during a recent event at which the boys performed Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

Where at-risk boys find home, direction

Hattie's: One of the state's most recognized group homes started less than 10 years ago in a woman's home.

By REGINALD FIELDS
SUN STAFF

When Hattie Washington met Wayne Saunders, the 14-year-old boy carried just a green garbage bag containing nearly every stitch of his belongings — a couple of shirts, a few pairs of jeans — and had no place to sleep that night.

Washington was an assistant superintendent of Baltimore schools and director of an intervention center for unruly students. Wayne, who was a foster child under his grandmother's care, had been kicked out that morning by her, then got into trouble at school and was banished to Washington's program.

"When I first met him, he had his hat on backwards. I told him to turn it around, pull his pants up right and stop slouching in my chair," Washington recalled from that 1995 meeting. "He did three out of three things I



ANDRE F. CHUNG: SUN STAFF

Hattie Washington greets one of her charges arriving home from school at Aunt Hattie's Place in West Baltimore.

asked, and I figured he couldn't be that bad a kid."

That brief encounter would change both their lives. Feeling pity, Washington offered him her home "just for a few nights." A year later, a few nights had turned into long-term living quarters for Wayne and seven other boys like him.

Before long, the divorced mother of two adult daughters made her efforts official

by starting a group home. Today, Aunt Hattie's Place has more than two dozen employees, is home for 18 boys and is considered one of Maryland's best-run group homes.

"There are a lot of good programs out there, and there are a lot of programs I wish weren't out there, and there are a few exemplary programs," said Jim McComb, executive director of the [See Hattie's, 6B]

Boys find a home at Hattie's

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Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth. "You can certainly count Aunt Hattie's Place as one of those exemplary programs."

The state Social Services Administration, which regulates foster homes, said that Aunt Hattie's Place — with a main location in West Baltimore and another site in Randallstown — has been in good standing every year of its existence.

And at the heart of Aunt Hattie's Place remains its founder, a successful 57-year-old woman who seven years ago had her closest friends wondering what she was doing taking in troubled inner-city kids to her middle-class Randallstown home.

At Aunt Hattie's Place are students who were on track to dropping out but are now strong candidates for high school graduation.

Boys who had no structure in their lives but now do homework, eat dinner and brush their teeth on a set schedule.

Youngsters with no discipline who now greet strangers with a firm handshake, unflinching eye contact and a kind word.

Every part of the program at Aunt Hattie's Place, from scheduled chores to mandatory performing arts training, fits its motto: "Creating winners; not just picking winners!"

"I am teaching these boys to be men because this society isn't fair to black males," Washington said. "They are always going to have to be that much better than the next person. So I teach them that first impressions mean so much."

Washington, who now lives in Montgomery County, is a professor of special education at Coppin State College and former vice president at the school. She began her career as a public school teacher and later became an administrator in Baltimore before moving to the collegiate level.

She mixes at exclusive events and counts business owners, politicians and educators among her friends. When invited to an event — an Orioles baseball game or a concert at Meyerhoff Symphony Hall — she might ask for extra tickets for her foster sons and staff.

Washington works from a small office, not more than eight

feet wide, on the Coppin campus. The gentle lady with a wide smile seems small in her reclining chair against all the books and pictures that fill her walls.

She is quick-witted and tries to anticipate questions. But when asked about the motivation behind the group home, Washington folds her arms across her chest and measures her words. She talks about growing up in a crowded home, her humbling start in college and her career teaching special education students, who in her opinion often get overlooked.

One of 15 children

Washington was born in Norfolk, Va., and grew up in the era of segregation, a middle child of 15. Her mother died when Washington was 2, leaving behind a husband and four children.

Washington's father, who owned a small lumber company, married a woman who had six children from a previous marriage, and the family moved to tiny Meherrin, Va., where the couple had five more children.

After finishing high school with honors, Washington set her sights on college. One fall morning in 1964, she walked onto the

campus of Norfolk State University, found an information desk and asked the receptionist for help finding her homeroom.

There was one problem: Washington hadn't applied for admission to the school, and no one at the university had ever heard of her.

"I didn't know that I was supposed to apply," Washington recalled. "Nobody in my family had ever gone to college; I didn't know anything about going from high school to college. I just knew I was going to college."

Washington, who now holds a doctorate in education from the University of Maryland, College Park, earned her first degree in education from Norfolk State in 3½ years.

The humble and embarrassing start at Norfolk State, juxtaposed with a triumphant and proud finish at the school, is what cemented Washington's resolve to help others. If someone could reach down to help her when she was lost, then she could do the same for someone else, Washington said.

With eight boys living in her Randallstown home by 1996, Washington had to hire a house-

keeper and nanny but found that the boys also needed someone to help them with homework, talk over personal problems or throw a ball in the backyard.

Getting off the ground

A fully staffed foster home was the answer, but starting the organization would be difficult. Washington struggled with a litany of paperwork and certifications to get Aunt Hattie's Place opened.

She took money from her retirement fund for cash to rent and furnish two adjacent townhouses in Randallstown that could shelter four boys each. On Feb. 14, 1997, the first boys moved into Aunt Hattie's Place — all except Wayne, who never left Washington's personal home.

Today, Wayne Saunders is a well-mannered, 23-year-old computer whiz, a Coppin State senior due to graduate this spring with a degree in management science.

"I'm really appreciative of what she did for me, because she didn't have to do it," said

Saunders. "I'm really thankful because she got me going on the right track."

"Because of that, I don't call her anything less than Mom. That's my mom," said Saunders, who doesn't like talking much about his biological family in West Baltimore.

In 2002, Aunt Hattie's Place opened a second site, a 4,000-square-foot house in West Baltimore that is now its main location. Besides being home to 12 boys, the city location also functions as the group home offices.

The transition to a fully functioning group home has not always been easy for the boys. A few residents rebelled against the disciplined program staffers implement. Police records indicate officers are called to the Baltimore home several times a month, usually for a boy that has run away or is missing. And a few boys through the years have been considered too difficult to handle and were kicked out of Aunt Hattie's Place.

No major incidents

But police in the city and Baltimore County said there have not been any major incidents at Aunt Hattie's Place, which is licensed to accept boys ages 9 to 18.

If the boys are the group home's cherished residents, then the organization's jewel is the newly renovated Victorian house in West Baltimore that Aunt Hattie's Place opened in 2002. After securing a \$500,000 grant from the state and funds from private sources, the group home purchased the house on Maine Avenue and built an addition on the back while renovating the place from top to bottom.

As a nonprofit, Aunt Hattie's Place is trying to raise funds to help the boys when they grow into men. Once the residents turn 18, they lose state services. They'll have to fend for themselves, whether paying for college or getting a job and paying rent.

Only two boys in the program have reached that age — Saunders and Devin Collins, a Calvert Hall College High School graduate and Coppin State freshman who won last year the prestigious McCormick Unsung Heroes Award for Baltimore-area high school student athletes.

"I'm just very proud of them all," said Washington. "You know, I'm not trying to save the world. I'm just trying to save somebody."



ANDRE F. CHUNG : SUN STAFF

Hattie Washington covers the eyes of a 12-year-old group home resident to prevent him from seeing the answer to a question during a homework session at Aunt Hattie's Place.



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR : SUN STAFF

Hattie Washington sits in the audience with Marc B. Terrill (right), president of The Associated, during a Martin Luther King Jr. Day performance by her boys at The Associated.