

# Durham program gets new families off on the right foot

*Durham program helps new families stand on solid ground*

The Durham News, April 27, 2011, BY ELIZABETH SHESTAK, Correspondent

Sha-mil Foushee's pregnancy was a surprise.

It also came with a series of complications. Her baby girl, Ny'Kiaria, was quite small in utero and at risk for being stillborn. And at 21, Foushee had unreliable housing, no steady work, no health insurance, and no plan.

Through the Durham County Health Department, she enrolled in the Baby Love Program as a Duke University Hospital patient, where she received maternal support services. Then the Baby Love folks told her about Healthy Families - a home visiting program for parents with children age 3 and under.

When she was six months pregnant, Foushee met Cheryl Davis-Dukes, one of the nine workers who help some 140 families with multiple stress factors in their lives, such as inadequate housing or unemployment.

"Mrs. Cheryl", as Foushee would call her, first asked what her goals were. Foushee wanted to become a certified nurse assistant, find permanent housing, and become gainfully employed.

Now, at 25, Foushee has accomplished all three. She credits Davis-Dukes and the Healthy Families Program with making it all possible.

Funded primarily by Durham's Partnership for Children - a Smart Start initiative - and the United Way of the Triangle, Healthy Families has been a Durham community fixture for 15 years and is administered through the Center for Child and Family Health.

Sharing stories

On Thursday, Healthy Families celebrates this anniversary at the Durham Country Library. Starting at 4 p.m., those who have benefited from the program will share their stories amid food and entertainment. All are welcome.

Foushee will be sharing her story.

The Hillside High School graduate spent her first few years of adulthood floating between her mother's home and friends' houses, starting then stopping the surgical technician program at Durham Tech, temping, cleaning homes, and essentially drifting.

"I didn't have no focus," she said recently. "I didn't have nothing to live for."

When Davis-Dukes asked her what her first goal was, becoming a certified nurse assistant was her quick reply.

"It was something that I'd always wanted to do but never went through getting certified," she said. She was enrolled in the CNA program at Durham Tech within weeks.

"Mrs. Cheryl inspired me," she said. "I felt different about the situation."

She stopped feeling scared and uncertain about her pregnancy, her life, and started having focus and hope. She was also directed to the Welcome Baby program, also through Durham's Partnership for Children, where she learned about such foreign concepts as car seats, bottles, crying and night-feedings. She was also able to stock up on baby clothes.

She was in a much better place when Ny'Kiaria was born - but the support did not stop there.

Thanks to Davis-Dukes and their weekly visits, Foushee was able to secure solid housing, maintain gainful employment, and navigate childcare. Her boyfriend, Ny'Kiaria's father, was also inspired by Davis-Dukes and has also taken steps towards furthering his education.

Davis-Dukes stresses that the program has the most impact when the families want to make the most of it.

"We introduce you to the resources and hope you take advantage of them," she said. "We're only there for three years."

First-time parents

Right now, the program is really meant for first-time parents, said Jan Williams, program director.

"We'd love to be able to expand that, but we keep the program full with just first-time parents," she said.

The program calls upon the "it takes a village" mentality and applies practical resources where personal support is lacking. "In some ways, the home visitors become the mother, the grandmother, the aunt who can give support and education to first-time parents," Williams said

As state legislators debate cutting Smart Start funding, Williams hopes a solid turnout Thursday will show leaders how valuable Healthy Families can be. Smart Start provides two-thirds of Healthy Families' budget.

Foushee's last day in the program was December 29 of last year.

"It broke our hearts," said Davis-Dukes, but in that bittersweet kind of way. She knew Foushee was ready to go out on her own. They still catch up regularly - their relationship has in no way ended.

Since graduating from Healthy Families, and with no outside input, Foushee has applied to Habitat for Humanity. She is already packing her apartment - ready for the next step.

## IF YOU GO

Healthy Families will celebrate its 15th anniversary at 4 p.m. Thursday at the Durham County Library, 300 N. Roxboro St, and all are invited. There will be food, entertainment, and testimonials from program participants. Call director Jan Williams at 419-3474, ext. 310 for more information.

## PROGRAM STATS

1,000 families have received care from Healthy Families since 1996.

Three out of four are 22 years old or younger.

95 percent of the children in the program are on Medicaid

Over one-third of the families are Spanish-speaking.

Each of the nine Family Support Workers has a maximum of 15 families in their care, though the average caseload is around 13.

In addition to word-of-mouth, referrals come from Durham Connects (newborn nurse visits), Duke Hospital, the Durham County Health Department, Duke Primary Children's Care, Lincoln Community Health Center, Babylove, and high school counselors.

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