

Radnor ABC House offers students chance for a first rate high school education

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Radnor High School junior Jordan Coleman, 16, would one day like to study computer science. Mariah Maynard, 15, a sophomore at RHS, plans to become a pediatrician, a goal she's had since she was a young child.

Both Coleman and Maynard, residents of the Radnor A Better Chance house in Wayne, believe the program -- which allows promising minority students the opportunity to attend an excellent high school -- will make it possible for them to fulfill their goals.

Coleman, who had attended a charter school in the Northern Liberties section of Philadelphia before coming to the ABC House, said the residents of the house, a large, comfortable, older home next to the Radnor Memorial Library, feel like a family to him.

The work load at RHS is "not hard per se, it's challenging," he said. "As long as you can get the work done, it's not too difficult." Currently in AP English, Coleman plans to take AP Computer Science next year. His favorite subject this year is physics where "we're doing some cool things with velocity." He wrestled last year and plans to either wrestle again or go out for basketball this year and he also joined the ping pong club.

"I wanted to come because of the education," said Maynard, who is from East Stroudsburg in the Poconos. Also, living away from home helps a student prepare for college, she said. At first, "I was very scared," but now, she has a lot of friends at RHS.

"I think it teaches you a lot," she said, about living away from home. "You learn a lot about yourself. It makes you a stronger and better person."

"I feel the teachers here are good and care about each and every student," Maynard added. She likes math and is studying Algebra II. She also plays clarinet in the marching band, is in art club and on the student newspaper.

Isabel Clark, the resident director, lives at the house with three tutors and seven high school students. The girls live in the main house and the boys live in what was once a carriage house in the rear of the property. Clark, who was the head tutor at the Lower Merion ABC House for five years, also works as a soccer coach for 2- to 6-years-olds at Soccer Shots.

“My hours work well,” Clark said. “It’s flexible.”

Along with their homework, the students are responsible for chores at the house. Dinners, at a long table in the newly painted dining room, are served family style. A housekeeper cooks dinner Monday through Thursday, said Clark.

Two Sundays a month the students spend time with their host families, who remain with them the entire four years of their high school career. The ABC House is always looking for potential host families and other volunteers.

“These are the relationships that last the longest,” said Clark.

June Gilson, of Wayne, is co-president of the Radnor ABC House board.

“I wanted to give students who don’t go to such good school districts as Radnor the same opportunities as my children had,” said Gilson, who has a daughter, 25, and a son, 19. “It’s a great school. Everyone should have an equal chance for a good education.”

This is the 42nd year since the program, which the Radnor ABC House is affiliated with, was founded during the Civil Rights Movement. Close to 3,000 students nationwide apply each year for admittance to the nonprofit program, which offers them a berth at some of the nation’s best schools, public and private.

Before the school year began, the Radnor Township School Board waived the tuition for the ABC House students, which was certified at \$14,888.85 annually for the 2013-14 school year. This tuition rate was certified by PDE in May of 2014.

The rate is always a year behind, said Michael Petitti, a spokesman for the district. “The ABC House is a vital part of Radnor High School’s culture,” said Dan Bechtold, RHS assistant principal. “ABC students are involved in a variety of sports, clubs and activities, and continue to find ways to give back to our school community. We are proud to support our ABC students and thank the many people who have given their time and money to the ABC House. The continued support for this worthwhile program is critical.”

While the finances of the Radnor ABC House dropped during the recent recession, the house is

back on track now, said Gilson. Also, repairs to two bathrooms in the old house, which was donated to the program in the 1970s, cut into their reserve, she said.

Charles Oliva, co-president of the Radnor ABC House, said in the past couple of years they've only been able to offer residency to six students and he's pleased they are up to seven students this year. The goal is to admit up to 10 students.

"There are two new freshmen [male and female] ... two seniors, two juniors and one sophomore," said Oliva.

"Typically, how the program is run, they find out about us through a counselor ... or through a friend or a family member," said Oliva. The students apply during 8th grade.

"Typically our students come from the Northeast area, primarily New York, the Bronx. The last year or two we broadened the search," he said, adding two boys are from Philadelphia and another is from the Atlanta area.

The students not only are in a "better academic environment" but they also learn "personal growth skills."

During the school year, the students are often taken on trips to museums, concerts or other activities, said Oliva.

One recent weekend, Clark took the group camping in Lancaster County.

Even though finances for the Radnor ABC House have improved, the group always needs new donations.

"The house is old and so that set us back quite a bit getting some work done around the house," said Oliva. "The community really came together and we were able to redo that third floor to make more room. We're always reaching out to community and organizations for their generous support."

An article in Main Line Media News last year helped get the word out that the program faced financial challenges and area residents and corporations rallied to help. Oliva offered "a big thank you to the community for helping when we need it."

Many of the ABC House students go on to top colleges. They've graduated from, among others, Ohio State, Morehouse, Syracuse, Temple, Georgetown, Columbia, NYU, Duke and Williams. After that, many have gone on to have careers in business, law, education or other professions. Gilson noted there are "many success stories" among the graduates.

Oliva has a “strong personal interest” in helping the students because of his own background. He grew up in San Diego in an area that was similar to neighborhoods where the ABC House students live. There were “not the greatest schools,” he said. While Oliva went to college and graduate school, “a lot of my peers never had those opportunities. I’ve always had this interest in education and youth.” His wife wanted to donate her office furniture and discovered the Radnor ABC house and told them that he wanted to get involved. The Oliva family lives in Wayne and two sons are at Radnor Middle School. “So it was near and dear to my heart,” said Oliva. Meanwhile, Oliva noted that “it’s a sacrifice for a parent to let their kid go a 1,000 mile away.” The students must also have the drive to want to improve their lives.

“For a student that young, to be disciplined enough to get through something like this, they must learn to adapt to their host family and volunteers,” he said. “It takes a village to raise a kid.”

For more information or to donate go to: radnorabc.org^[2]

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