

Home > News Center > News stories > Second Home

## Second Home gives homeless students stability, chance to graduate

Tuesday, September 11, 2018



*Second Home, which connects homeless students with stable housing, found Charlotte Becker (left) a family to live with a week before she gave birth to Hannah (right). "It was hard for me to believe that people would open up their homes for kids who had complicated situations," she said. (Photo by Jake Arnold, OSBA)*

With his senior year at Beaverton High School winding down, Moses Ochora Okullu suddenly found himself with no place to live and no family nearby.

His mom had struggled to hold the family together in Beaverton, but she had moved to Washington for work and the apartment lease would run out after spring break.

Second Home stepped in, providing a family for Ochora Okullu to live with so he could graduate in June. Now he is working toward a career in criminal justice at South Puget Sound Community College in Olympia.

In 2010, the Beaverton School District partnered with Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and the city of Beaverton to launch Second Home, an innovative program to anchor homeless students without an adult in their life.

The need for such services in Oregon keeps growing: 22,541 K-12 students were classified as homeless in 2016-17, according to the Oregon Department of Education, up from 18,165 in 2012-13. Oregon has the fourth-highest state student homelessness rate, according to the U.S. Department of Education 2014-15 data, but the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness said Oregon was the best at identifying homeless students and enrolling them in school.

Student homelessness creates steep graduation hurdles. The on-time graduation rate for Oregon homeless students is barely 50 percent, and the dropout rate is far higher than for any other group.

Dona Bolt, the ODE's coordinator for homeless student education, called Second Home a model.

"Stabilizing a student in housing is critical to them being stable in school," she said.

The Beaverton School District reports that since the program's inception, 96 percent of its students have earned a degree — nearly double the graduation rate for all homeless Beaverton students.

The program matches families with teens who "rent" home space by agreeing to stay in school and graduate. Signed legal agreements also allow teens to establish a rental history.

Families and students negotiate rental agreements and house rules with the help of city mediators. More importantly, students gain a stable home and someone who is invested in their success.

"Kids need more than a roof over their heads," said Second Home Director Jennifer Pratt Hale. "It's not just housing. It's nurturing."

Second Home, which costs districts little more than staff time already devoted to homeless students, has spread to Gresham-Barlow and Lincoln County school districts. The program has also been awarded grants to partner with districts in Washington and Clackamas counties.

"It's an authentic way of living for kids who have never had any normalcy," said Lisa Mentessana, homeless education and foster care program specialist for the Beaverton School District. The district refers students to

Second Home, whose staff coordinate meetings and set up contracts. They meet with students regularly, and mediators help students and families iron out conflicts.

Charlotte Becker, who asked to be identified by her maiden name, graduated from Beaverton's Southridge High School in 2014 with the program's support. She said it taught her to be a good tenant as well as how to resolve conflicts in a shared space.

Becker left home midway through her junior year. In February of her senior year, she had to find a place to live because she was pregnant and the home she was in didn't have room for her and a baby. Second Home matched her about a week before she gave birth.

Becker liked that Second Home allowed her to interview two prospective couples and pick a good fit. She felt safer knowing the families had been vetted as well.

Becker, who is now working and married to her daughter's father, said it was important that she graduate with her class.

"I like to have that to point to, that I graduated, that I walked with them, that I got it all done," she said.

The program seeks students who are motivated to graduate.

"Any kid who says, 'I am willing to go live with a stranger so I can finish high school,' how can you say no to that?" said Kristen Johanson.

She and her husband, Doug, took in Ochora Okullu and continued to help him as he transitioned to college.

The Gresham-Barlow School District program started with two students in 2015 and expects to have 10 this year. Like other programs, Gresham-Barlow has had difficulty finding enough families.

April Olson, the district's director of federal programs and homeless student liaison, said all the teens in their program have graduated or are on track. Some have continued to community college while still living with the family that took them in, such as Keisha Lynn Hairston.



"She's family," Nancy Ashley (left) says of Keisha Lynn Hairston (center). Ashley and her husband, Ed Gray, let Hairston live with them through Second Home. (Photo by Jake Arnold, OSBA)

Hairston had spiraled into drugs and depression after her dad died when she was in sixth grade. By high school she was couch surfing and occasionally on the street but still intent on graduation.

"I knew I didn't want a minimum-wage job," she said. "I wanted something bigger."

Hairston was living in a Portland group home her senior year. The commute was terrible, and nearby old haunts posed a constant temptation. Enter Second Home and Nancy Ashley and Ed Gray, a retired couple.

With the help of mediators, they weathered rough patches as she built social skills and worked on maintaining sobriety.

Hairston continued to live with Ashley and Gray as she completed her first year at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham. She will become a psychologist, she says defiantly.

"I have dreams and aspirations, and graduation was important," she said.

- Jake Arnold, OSBA  
[jarnold@osba.org](mailto:jarnold@osba.org)

SHARES