



**WardHome**  
*Skills for living. Hope for life.*



**Hank Gasbarro**

# Our Stories

*The successes of our teens and young adults...past and present.*

2275 Swallow Hill Road • Building #800 • Pittsburgh, PA 15220 • Phone: 412-722-1404

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**A**bandoned by his mother with no warning, HANK GASBARRO entered the foster care system as a teenager. Today, he enjoys a stable life—a management position at a long-term employer and an upcoming wedding that will make him not just a husband, but a stepfather.

How did he make the successful transition from a disrupted childhood home to successful, self-sufficient adulthood? The staff of Ward Home played a key role in Hank's progress through those difficult teen years. Specifically, the Ward Independence Skills Enhancement program (WISE) program provided the services that helped Hank to overcome his challenges.

"When I was in ninth grade at Baldwin High School, my mother was having some problems," he says. "I came home one day and the door was locked and she was gone."

His close friend, who lived nearby, offered him a place to stay for a few days. "I stayed until I was 24 years old!" says Hank.

Hank's parents had divorced when he was three years old. Moving in with his father was not a good option; he suffered from bad health and was busy caring for his own mother. More importantly, Hank wanted to remain in his own school district.

His foster parents worked through the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) to become Hank's legal guardians. A CYF caseworker suggested that Hank apply for the WISE program, a federally funded program that is part of the Allegheny County Independent Living Project.

At Ward Home, specially trained staff members called "direct care specialists (DCSs)" provide this in-home service to youth living in their own apartments, at home with immediate or extended family, or in a group or foster home placement. Unlike the Supervised Independent Living program, which Ward operates in three locations, WISE staff members do not provide 24-hour supervision.

Soon, he and his foster mother, Rita, were meeting with a Ward Home direct care specialist on a regular basis in their home. "John would come about once a month. Basically, he helped me to build the skills I needed to become independent. We would discuss my needs and goals and he would help us to find resources," he says.

For example, John recognized that Hank would benefit from a tutor and helped to find the right one. "When I lived with my mom, I was a terrible student—I even had to go to summer school," says Hank. *(continued)*

*Education  
 is the key to  
 self-sufficient  
 adulthood.*

That's why Ward Home requires teens to set—and helps them to achieve—educational goals.

*The results are  
 extraordinary.*

Nationally, **only 50% of foster teens** finish high school<sup>1</sup>. In 2008, **all 22 high school seniors** in Ward Home programs graduated—and **18 went on to college.**

<sup>1</sup> Casey National Alumni Study, 2003

“Ward Home also helped me learn how to manage money. I opened my first bank account at age 16, and I still have it today.”

Like many Ward Home teens, Hank was the first in his family to go to college. Direct care specialists help their clients to prepare for the SATs, choose majors, evaluate colleges, apply for financial aid, find discounts on books and other supplies, and sometimes even chaperone them on campus tours.

Hank attended Robert Morris University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Community College of Allegheny County before earning a degree in Human Resource Management from Geneva College, which he attended one night each week for 18 months while working full-time.

Although his original plan was to become an elementary school teacher, for the last nine years Hank has found a satisfying career in the business world. In 2001, he joined the staff of Cricket Communications, a cellular phone company that had just moved into the Pittsburgh market. Cricket operates five corporate stores, where Hank does most of his work, and about 80 other stores in region.

Since 2001, he has been promoted from retail sales representative to assistant manager, then to store manager, and then to his current position of customer operations manager.



Hank, his fiancé Karen Hanasik, her daughter, Dakota, and Dutchess

“I complete monthly store audits and run reports for basically everything in our retail stores—such as making sure employees are ringing things up correctly and checking that inventory is accurate,” he says.

What does he like about his job? “I love the people I work with. Many have been here as long as I have, since the launch,” he says. “Also, the company takes good care of you.”

The far-ranging benefits of supportive relationships is a lesson that Hank learned early in life, during his years with his caring foster family and work with his direct care specialist. He remained in the WISE program for more than three years. During that time, his discussions with John, and the benefits of their meetings, extended beyond school and work.

“There were times that I was down about my situation,” says Hank. “John was very supportive, reminding me that I was not falling into the same traps as my parents.”

Today, as Hank Gasbarro prepares to care for his own family from the foundation of a stable career, his life exemplifies the mission of Ward Home and heartfelt goal for each teen and young adult served by its programs: Skills for Living, Hope for Life.

**W**ard Home is a pioneer for supervised independent and independent living programs for displaced teenagers looking to make the transition from the social services system to adult life. We strive to enable youth age 16 to 21 to maximize their potential as human beings and grow into responsible, self-reliant adults.

Ward Home operates three supervised independent living facilities: for teen girls (in Friendship), teen boys (in East McKeesport) and teen mothers (in Wilkesburg). We also operate an in-home service—Ward Independence Skills Enhancement (WISE)—that teaches disadvantaged teens the life skills they need to succeed in the adult world.

There are many agencies that give shelter and meals to displaced teenagers. Ward Home provides supervision, shelter and food—and also teaches life management skills. With this approach, teens may eventually get shelter and food on their own. This mission is summed up by the adage, “Give a teen a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a teen to fish, he eats for a lifetime.”

Of course, nothing tells our story more powerfully than our teens, young adults and graduates—like Hank Gasbarro.

*“Give a teen a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a teen to fish, he eats for a lifetime.”*