



WardHome
Skills for living. Hope for life.



Melody Carter

Our Stories

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

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Like many former foster teens, MELODY CARTER-FRYE entered the system as a young child, with no advance warning.

Until that fateful day, when she was just 10 years old, Melody and her younger brother, Ujamaa, lived with their mother. She went to school, played with her friends and watched over her brother while her mother took care of them and the household.

However, her mother was prone to extreme mood swings, a symptom of her mental illness. One day, when the family was running errands, Melody took five-year-old Ujamaa into a McDonald's so that he could use the bathroom. When they were finished, they nearly missed the bus, which angered her mother.

They argued so loudly on the bus that they were asked to exit. By coincidence, the bus driver stopped near the office of a foster care caseworker her mother knew. They went inside and Melody's mother asked if she could leave her daughter there.

"My mother thought she couldn't take care of me anymore," Melody says. "I was crying... I was like, 'You're really going to leave me here? You can't be serious!'"

However hard for the young girl to believe, that day marked the beginning of what would become an eight-year stay in the foster care system. During that time, she would move among six foster homes, three shelters, one group home and one supervised independent apartment building.

She spent the first 18 months with a kind woman named Gloria, who knew Melody's grandmother. After Gloria had a stroke, Melody moved to several temporary placements. She yearned to live with her brother, whom her mother had placed into foster care as well. Eventually, a family agreed to foster both siblings.

"School was a refuge for me," she says. "I attended five middle schools and two high schools, but I still managed to do well. I even made the National Honor Society."

At 15, Melody moved into a group home. In these facilities, foster teens usually share a bedroom with at least one other resident. They eat meals together, prepared by staff members, in a common dining room, and have few responsibilities beyond attending school. They also have minimal freedom.

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*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 school¹. In 2008, **all 22 high school seniors** in Ward Home programs graduated—and **18 went on to college.**

¹ Casey National Alumni Study, 2003

This changed dramatically when, at age 16, Melody interviewed for and was accepted into Ward Home's Supervised Independent Living program. She and another foster teen shared a small apartment in a building in Wilkinsburg, one of three that the agency staffs around the clock by credentialed Direct Care Specialists.

"I consider that the beginning of my adulthood," says Melody.

During the next two years, she learned and practiced the skills she would need to build a successful adult life once she aged out of the foster care system. That included how to clean and organize the apartment and how to budget for groceries and clothing.

Each teen in the Supervised Independent Living program receives a monthly stipend for food, personal care items and supplies, such as shampoo and dish detergent. For 2010, the average stipend is \$242 per month. For a young mother with a child, that increases to approximately \$362.

All teens and young adults in the program are expected to adhere to clearly defined rules, such as curfews, housekeeping standards and "good neighbor" policies for common areas, such as the laundry facilities and community room. They are also encouraged to maintain or rebuild their relationships with their families. Throughout her years in foster care, Melody remained in close—sometimes daily—contact with her mother, who died of heart disease when she was in college.



Melody and her husband, Quentin

"My years with Ward Home were some of the best of my life. I could still do some of the things all teenagers do, but I was given responsibility like an adult, and there was always someone to walk me through the process of learning," Melody says. "It was the perfect balance of freedom and responsibility."

Above all else, the Direct Care Specialists stress the importance of setting and achieving educational goals, from earning a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) to choosing a college or trade school. They helped Melody to find "hidden" sources of financial aid, and rejoiced with her the day she learned that the University of Pittsburgh had awarded her a full academic scholarship.

When moving day arrived, the staff helped Melody settle into her dorm room. The \$1,000 she received from the employee-funded Ward Home scholarship—granted to one outstanding student per year—allowed her to buy a computer and some school supplies.

Melody graduated with a degree in Africana Studies and Communication. Today, she works with a social services agency, LifeSpan, helping senior citizens to access services they need to maintain their independence. She bought her first home and lives there with Malachi, her four-year-old son from her first marriage, and her husband, Quentin. The couple eagerly await the birth of a son in late summer.

Ward 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 Wilkinsburg). 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 Melody Carter-Frye.

"Give a teen a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a teen to fish, he eats for a lifetime."