WE ARE FAMILY
Winter 2016 Newsletter
We Are Family

The Inspirational Power of Youth

When a young person chooses to exceed their greatest expectations, we are reminded of the impact of our work. Marlon Rittenge, Peer Coach at our LifeLink program in Brooklyn, has set a stellar example of the boundless possibilities our participants can reach when they’re empowered to succeed.

Six years ago, Marlon was a self-proclaimed procrastinator who was passively floating through high school. Realizing that he needed guidance to help keep him focused on his school work, Marlon took the initiative to enroll in one of our educational enrichment programs where he strengthened his academic standing and developed social skills. Upon graduating from high school, Marlon joined LifeLink, our college retention program. Within his first year there, he became a Peer Coach and a very active ambassador for Good Shepherd. Marlon, with his radiant smile and quiet confidence, has even taken the stage at a few of our fundraising events.

“LifeLink has been such a valuable experience, that as of today, five of my siblings are also in the program. And coming from such a big family, nine of us by the way, you could say that in my family we know a good thing when we see it.” Marlon said as he addressed guests at our Fall Benefit Dinner in October.

Marlon will be graduating from Baruch College next year with a Bachelor in Finance and plans to pursue a career in Financial Communications. He is the Executive Treasurer of the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) at Baruch’s chapter. Marlon epitomizes everything Good Shepherd works fervently to achieve.

Spread Love, It’s the Good Shepherd Way

There is an indescribable spirit and a profound sense of selflessness that drives great people. When you come from a rich lineage of extraordinary leaders, like Lettice and her mother Digna Layne do, that spirit is inherent. This powerhouse duo, with a combined tenure of 14 years at Good Shepherd, are at the forefront in East New York, Brooklyn working to dismantle the systemic, socio-economic, and personal challenges people face in low-income neighborhoods.

Lettice was the first of the pair to join our family. Fresh out of graduate school where she earned a Masters in Social Work, Lettice moved rapidly up the ranks and is currently the Program Director for our Youth Initiatives programs.

“Good Shepherd is always growing and as they grow you become a part of something that hasn’t been done before. You never lose the zeal for innovation,” Lettice shared as she reflected on her career journey.

Digna, a matron in her community and longtime mentor to neighborhood kids, was urged by her daughter to apply for a position at Good Shepherd that reflected the work she had already been volunteering her time to do. Two years later, she is now the Community Relations Manager and has earned the reputation for being a courageous proponent for children and families.

“If you’re doing something that I don’t like in my community, as an advocate, I’m going to come after you with full strength. But if you’re doing what you’re supposed to do, you have 100% of my support,” Digna said.

These two are a force to be reckoned with and we are inspired by their commitment to uplift and advocate for New York’s most vulnerable populations.

Building Family through a Common Mission

Your connection to a mission can be a powerful force that drives the direction of your life. Program alumni, Mikequawan Jones and fiancée Kiara Combs grow up in Good Shepherd programs, fell in love with our mission, and eventually with each other while working for our organization.

When he was about 4 years old, Mikequawan was a rambunctious child in our afterschool program who liked to test limits. He spent three years in our program where he discovered male influencers who were critical to his development. “I grew up without a father, so I looked at the male role models there as a role model for me and it was basically an escape from everyday life,” Mikequawan shared.

He later returned to Good Shepherd as a teen, landing a summer job as a program aid. After growing within the organization to become Senior Youth Development Specialist, Mike went on to his current position as Athletics Director and Assistant Program Director for Manhattan Youth, a social service agency.

As a 7-year-old from Puerto Rico, Kiara entered our afterschool program without knowing a word of English. Within two years, she was fluent without having to take language classes, an accomplishment she credits to the bonds she formed with other kids in the program. She initially met Mikequawan when they both worked at our Beacon program. However, sparks didn’t fly until he moved on to a different Good Shepherd site. Now they have an adorable 3 year-old daughter named Riley and they’ve engaged to be married.

“Good Shepherd builds positive citizens and it builds families. When you spend every day with co-workers and children they become your family,” said Kiara, who is the Office Manager at our Midtown Centerstone program where Riley is now a participant.

A Special Place to Call Home

Rising above your circumstances is a testament of the human resolve. Denise Zayed has demonstrated courage, resilience, and perseverance through a tumultuous childhood, and her journey to self-worth started over three decades ago at our Marian Hall residence for girls.

Denise, an honor student in high school who endured years of abuse by several family members, reached her breaking point at the age of 14 after an incident at home. On that day, she made the courageous decision to never spend another night in the place that was the source of so much pain for her.

“At Marian Hall, it was the first time that I felt a sense of value and a sense of belonging and felt loved. It just became the family I never had,” said Denise as she fought back tears.

For four years, Marian Hall was her sanctuary and she relishes the wonderful memories of harmless pranks with her surrogate sisters and family rituals like Saturday morning chores. “I didn’t have that growing up. It’s so important to have those rituals and routines because it makes children feel loved,” she said.

At 13 years old, Denise got married and held her wedding reception at Marian Hall. “One of the councilors’ sons, because they were my family, gave me away. The cook made my cake. The reception was in the lobby. Looking back, I have good memories,” she said.

Denise is thriving and currently works in the corporate responsibility division at NY Life Insurance where she connects staff and partner organizations, like Good Shepherd, with opportunities to give back. She will begin mentoring at Good Shepherd next year because she wants participants to know that “you’re not alone, you have value, and you are loved.”