

LIFE IN

# *The Flats*

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**The Scholars of  
Winchester ABC**



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# Winchester's Home For A Better Chance

By **Michaela O'Shaughnessy** with contributions from resident **Terry Marotta** and **Jack and Suzanne Reno**

Once owned by the First Congregational Church, the pleasant house perched on Dix Street has been the place the scholars of Winchester A Better Chance (ABC) have called home for almost 50 years now.

The idea of establishing a local chapter of the nationally run non-profit in Winchester was inspired in response to the town's rejection of METCO back in the 1960s. Unhappy with the town's decision, a small group of Winchester residents decided the ABC program would be the perfect alternative and joined together to form the ABC Committee.

A Better Chance, the brainchild of a collaboration between Dartmouth College and the Independent Schools Talent Search (ISTS), was formed in the early 1960s after the two groups discovered they shared a goal of providing academically talented male and female scholars of color with expanded educational and career opportunities.

Originally set up for private schools, the program's burgeoning enrollment (over 1400 by 1967) and waiting list demanded a closer look at incorporating public schools into the program. In 1966, Hanover, New Hampshire became the first community to establish the public school ABC program with many other communities coming on board over the next few years. The public school program was designed so that scholars from disadvantaged academic situations could live together in a new community with a challenging academic high school program, which would not only help the young scholars with college admittance but also reduce the risk that they might fall behind when they got there.

Jack and Suzanne ("Suzie") Reno are two of the founding committee members and dedicated individuals who threw themselves into the project. As a result of the couple's relentless determination, the group pressed forward, never pausing long enough to consider the enormity of arranging for 10 unrelated kids with a resident director and spouse to



Jack and Suzanne Reno

live under one roof. In the wake of this wholehearted effort, the ABC chapter in Winchester was established in under six months.

"Arranging" is actually quite an understatement, considering that Jack and Suzie took out a personal mortgage and put a down payment on the house on Dix Street, something Suzie admitted at the time that they didn't have the money to do. Even more remarkable was that as the youngsters of the group — Suzie in her late 20s and Jack in his early 30s, with two toddlers of their own — they were setting up a house for teens they did not know, but whom would soon become an extension of their own family.



Tutoring in Roxbury



Former scholars Omar Grant and Ricardo Gayle graduated last June



Terry Marotta

"Things happened very fast — there was a lot of energy," says Suzie. "It never occurred to us; we were just so busy. We laugh about it sometimes — we had our own young children and then we had these kids come here ... what were we thinking? But it all worked out. We did it all with a lick and a promise."

Preparing the house for the boys' arrival was a group effort with each committee member taking responsibility for cleaning, painting and decorating one room in the house. Other tasks were divided based on particular skillsets — Suzie was responsible for setting up the house with the furniture that had been donated by town residents, while Jack was responsible for the fundraising, successfully raising \$175,000, a sum that was needed to get them through the first three years. John Dolan, a Hale & Dorr lawyer, handled the legal aspects while longtime educator Bonnie Holmes was in charge of the correspondence with the School Committee.

"The important part about ABC is that it was just a mass of the right things happening at the right time with the energy just the right way," says Suzie.

In September of 1971, ten boys arrived at their new home from places like Jersey City, New York City, South Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio. Unfortunately, there was some initial pushback in the form of insults shouted at the boys from a passing car and rocks thrown through the house's windows. While so many members of the town supported the program and voted to waive the usual tuition fees, there were some who opposed the School Committee and town's decision to exempt the scholars from paying tuition, referring to them as a burden to the community. The ABC Committee countered that negativity by emphasizing that the boys would not be a burden but a real benefit to the Winchester community, a belief that was shared by the majority and is clearly evident considering the tremendous support ABC has received from the town over the years.

"I think the generosity of the program created a generosity in their own way of living. All of these kids, in their own way, contributed so ferociously and beautifully to making it happen. We all wanted it to happen, but they *allowed* it to happen just by the real seriousness they had," says Suzie.

Both Jack and Suzie made the definitive decision to step down (after five years for Jack and ten years for Suzie) so that new people could come in, bringing renewed energy and a fresh perspective. "You can't have a thing continue to be successful if it is just you all the time. Jack would still be fighting for ten people, and I would be sitting there, boring people, all the time."

"We have been pretty involved in a lot of organizations in Boston and in the town, including hospitals, churches and the library, and for me, it is the most rewarding and satisfying of the things we have done," says Jack.

Over the many years that Terry Marotta has volunteered with Winchester ABC, she has held several different roles, including president, Student Selection Committee member, and English tutor. Yet, for Terry, it has always been less about the specific role than the time spent with the teens, filling the void left when she gave up her job as a high school English teacher to raise her family. It is an age group that the book author and former *Winchester Star* journalist loves for their honesty and all the ways in which they awaken to discover their gifts and how they can use them in the community.

The ABC scholars are a perfect example of this self-discovery. With the help of A Better Chance, they have created opportunities for themselves through hard work. They are selected because of their strong academic motivation and tenacious willingness to adjust to life in a new community. Recommended to the program by guidance counselors, principals and teachers, the manner in which they value education signifies a maturity beyond their years. According to Terry, the two essays that the scholars are required to write gives "a sense right away of how broad their vision is." These essays, along with the candidates' test scores, teacher recommendations and interviews, are all reviewed by





Current scholars Aaron Apostadero and John Emanuel



ABC scholars from the 1980s



the national ABC office before candidates are referred to local chapters for further interviews and selection.

“The boys are so gracious and graceful — someone in their thirties might not have those skills. They just happen to be very remarkable,” says Terry.

Eric Woods is the president of Winchester ABC and a mentor to the boys, continually motivating them to invest the time and energy needed to move forward academically and live up to their potential. He makes sure that they are happy and taken care of, while at the same time helping them become more marketable to universities.

“There are so many people invested in the success of these guys that they become de facto family members and board members. The success of the program is a derivative of the energy and excitement of the community,” says Eric.

When candidates and their families come to visit, they are greeted with a welcome dinner after which the candidates spend the night at the ABC house so that they can experience what life is like there. While the scholars must be selected for the program, the final selection process is made by the scholars and their families who are also auditioning Winchester ABC — both the program and surrounding community — for its fit and feel. This is just how it should be considering the tremendous sacrifice these parents make when they give up their children for four years so that they can have access to what the title of the program promises — “a better chance.”

“The families are very supportive. I can only imagine how hard it is to give up your darling 14-year-old for four years. When you meet some of these parents, you get to know them. It is just priceless; it is a connection that lasts forever,” says Terry.

Another long-lasting connection occurs when the scholar is assigned a host family. They spend Sunday afternoons and one weekend a month with the host family, who plays a key role in supporting the boys as they transition to their new community. By providing a home away from home, they offer a place of comfort for the boys who have had to leave behind friends, family and everything else familiar to them — a feat that would be challenging at any age. The bond between host family and ABC scholar often becomes so strong that it outlasts the four years, with many of the boys returning to stay with their host families after they have left for college.

“I love how I have been integrated into the family. They honestly love me so I love them too,” says Ricardo Gayle, an ABC scholar who is now a freshman at MIT.

“They find their voices. When the boys first come, they have not gone to school for eight years with the other kids they are now in high school with. They come in as strangers,” says Terry, whose own host son is 47 and still sees her once a week.

Describing her current role as a “grandmother figure,” Terry hosts sleepovers at her home where the boys connect with former ABC scholars over board games and laughter. Terry believes that by bringing the boys and alums together, you can build a bridge between the two groups.

One of only 22 community school programs, Winchester ABC is often referred to by the students as being “warm with a family feel” and unlike other ABC programs they have seen. “The program is only as good as the town that wants to take it over,” says Suzie.

The success of the program is obvious from the long list of colleges that the scholars have attended or are currently attending. In the last several years, they have placed two students at Bow-

doin, one at Ohio State, one at Williams (now at Princeton for graduate school), one at MIT, two at UNH and one at RIT.

While college acceptance is the crowning moment when all their hard work pays off and the scholars reach their end goal — which at one point in their lives may have seemed unobtainable — there is no discounting the many life experiences along the way. It may not be possible to measure them the way a college diploma measures dedication and hard work, but they are no less memorable.

Jack and Suzie are still in contact with that first group of ABC boys, now grown men almost in their sixties. “They have never forgotten the warmth of that couple,” Terry says of that first group of scholars.

“It has been 46 years since that first group and I like to think of the geometric expansion that occurs because many, if not all, of those kids went on to have kids themselves — some of them have grand-

children who are themselves going to college. So, it is not just that first group — it is the expansion from that group,” says Jack.

There is a rejuvenating energy as scholars graduate and leave for college only to be replaced with new scholars, energetic if not a little anxious, who move in to take their place. “Everyone in this community wants to see you succeed, everyone wants to know you, everyone wants to be a part of your success so to speak. So be open and allow that to happen,” Ricardo advises future scholars.

Winchester ABC relies totally on the community for its financial support. Your support can help Winchester ABC continue to provide outstanding educational opportunities to scholars whose academic potential exceeds their opportunity. To find out more information about Winchester ABC and the many ways you can become involved, visit their website at [www.winchesterabc.org](http://www.winchesterabc.org) or email them at [admin@winchesterabc.org](mailto:admin@winchesterabc.org).

The late John Dolan, who Jack describes as “the town character,” once commented that the ABC program would make it in Winchester, and one of the major reasons was Dorian Wilson, one of the original ten ABC scholars. Now a transplant surgery doctor, professor of surgery and director of the Healthcare Foundation for Humanism and Medicine at Rutgers Medical School, Dr. Dorian Wilson credits Winchester ABC for getting him to where he is today. Here are some memories shared by Dr. Wilson from his years in Winchester:



Dorian Wilson

*I must say that there was lurking trepidation initially at the thought of going to a “strange place.” Immersion in an environment that would be in many ways substantially – and especially culturally – different, created many moments of pause. Oddly enough, while my Mom was in some ways fearful before my departure, she never let on to that fact and showed a face that reflected nothing but strong support and encouragement.*

*Happily, after a very short period of transition, I felt quite comfortable in my new setting. Clearly, there was a good reason for this rapid assimilation. First, there was the atmosphere of the “House” at 2 Dix Street. Jon and Cindy Stableford (the live-in Center Director and his lovely wife) were generous and loving, despite all of the often unpleasant distractions and burdens imposed upon them by “their” newly acquired family. Then there*

*was Momma Cerulli, the House Cook. She made the best chicken soup, pizza and grilled cheese on the planet, and I am certain that it was made with pure love!*

*Sundays were times that were spent with host families. David and Barbara Allen (now both deceased) were magnificent. Their magnanimous nature was constantly on display and helped to smooth out the sometimes sharp edges of an experience that was new to all of us.*

*Jack and Suzie Reno were also always somehow in the middle of every significant event, unselfishly offering their time and energy. I continue to communicate with them to this very day. And then, there were the Haddads, Parsons and so many more of whom my aging memory serves me poorly at this juncture, but they were no less important in creating a joyful, enlightening, peaceful, loving and memorable experience. I regret that I am unable to name them all here and now.*

*ABC was probably thought of by many to be a strange experiment at the time and possibly to this day given current events. I am here to say that for me (and clearly for countless others) the experiment was a raving success. It is difficult for me to imagine being able to be who and what I am today in the absence of Winchester ABC. And I am not being patronizing ... while Winchester ABC was only one of many factors affecting my life and leading me to this point, it was nonetheless a critical factor in my growth, development and ability to achieve as well as become a more productive member of society. For this, I am forever and eternally grateful. It is my hope that the way in which I have lived my life and have continued to give back (of course, never enough) substantiates and validates all that ABC represents and all for which it stands. Additionally, I hope that my presence in Winchester, during those years, created a new and more tolerant perspective for those who might benefit from a more diverse exposure.*