

The ABC of success

Program gives inner-city teens
a quality educational experience
and an edge on the future

By KELLY BURCH
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There are many reasons for families to move to Andover: easy access to Boston, a small-town feel and a great school system. These are some of the same factors that attracted eight underprivileged teenage girls, many of them from New York City, to move away from their loved ones to seek out better opportunities here.

The girls are participants in A Better Chance of Andover, or ABC Andover. The program is part of a national organization that brings talented, inner-city youths, primarily minorities, to boarding and high-performing community schools across the country. The initiative is based on the belief that by attending better schools, the teenagers will be given an edge toward success through college and beyond.

“We try to give them the experiences that many other kids in Andover have,” says Kate Margolese, a volunteer with ABC Andover. “ABC makes students aware of the opportunities that are available to them.”



Fatouma Koné, 17, of Harlem, N.Y., third from left, and Jazzare Mays, 18, of New Haven, Conn., sit down for dinner on a Wednesday night with Koné's ABC host family, Gaby Nossiff, right; her husband, John Nossiff, second from left; and their 17-year-old son, John, at their Andover home.

In Andover, the girls live together in a dorm-style house on Main Street, where the program has been headquartered since 1967.

ABC Andover originally accepted only boys before briefly becoming co-ed, then switching to serving girls. The decision to have one gender or the other is simply about logistics and not needing to navigate the challenges that come with having teenage boys and girls living together.

Through ABC Andover, 131 of its scholars have graduated from Andover High, with three more seniors set to move on this spring. All of ABC's graduates have

THE ANDOVERS

North of Boston Life

gone on to four-year colleges.

"That's why we're here – to help kids graduate and go to a great college," says Susan Connolly, vice president of ABC Andover.

Program participants, called scholars, often come from failing school systems. By putting them in a better school system and in a community with high expectations for its youths, the program sets a

higher standard for what the scholars can achieve. In turn, by becoming successful citizens and leaders, the scholars can influence more youths like them to follow in their footsteps.

In fact, some of the ABC Andover girls say that they are already inspiring friends from home before they have even graduated.

"At first kids would say, 'You're going away? Why? What's wrong, is your mom kicking you out?'" says Fatouma Koné, a junior who is originally from Harlem. "Now they're saying, 'Wow, you're doing really well.'"



The Dowe family: Ian Dowe and Allison Reilly and their children, Samara Dowe, 15; Quinne Dowe, 9; and Maxwell Dowe, 18. Ian Dowe is an alumnus of the ABC program in Andover. Originally from Jamaica before moving to the Bronx in New York, he attended Andover High School through A Better Chance.

What is ‘the better chance?’

“The students are typically from school systems that are under-performing and where the quality of the teaching is quite low. Being in a better school system is part of the better chance,” says Dan Hall, ABC of Andover development coordinator and longtime volunteer. “Another part of the better chance is learning how to succeed in a predominantly white society.”

For more information on ABC of Andover, visit www.abcandover.org.

An ABC of Andover success story

One of the 130 ABC Andover alumni is Ian Dowe, who graduated from Andover High in 1984 when the program accepted boys rather than girls.

After graduating from Andover, he attended College of the Holy Cross in Worcester on a full football scholarship, which he credits in part to legendary Andover High football coach Dick Collins, who died earlier this year.

Today, Dowe works as marketing and outreach director at McLean Hospital in Belmont. In 2005, he and his wife moved to Andover,

where they live with their three children.

Here, Dowe talks to The Andovers about his experience with ABC:

The Andovers: You were born in Jamaica and moved to New York City three years before enrolling in ABC Andover. How was your experience coming to Andover?

Dowe: Coming from Jamaica to the Bronx was a transition. I wasn’t as entrenched in the Bronx so the transition to Andover wasn’t as difficult, but it was still a major adjustment. On many fronts, the economic adjustment was a much bigger deal than the racial adjustment. We were a lower-income family. Everything was a struggle. To come to an area with upper-middle and upper-class families, and to see the economic difference was for me very startling.

The Andovers: Did you ever encounter any negative behavior because of your race?

Dowe: There were a few minor incidents with my race. They didn’t hold me back, but they left an impression. Today that is diminished, but not completely absent. My three kids are bi-racial and among certain cohorts, some of the attitudes are still there.

The Andovers: You’ve been a scholar in the program, a host family and the vice president of the ABC Andover board. How has the program affected your life?

Dowe: The ABC experience exposed me to a different world. Coming from a poor background into an upper-middle class community gave me exposure to career-oriented families with white-collar experience. It showed me what a successful career could look like. It taught me how to study at the standards that were required to perform well and how to advocate for myself.

The Andovers: What should people know about the ABC program?

Dowe: It is a tough (four) years for sure. It’s not a cakewalk and is not for every student. It does challenge you in many regards, with being flexible and open and able to adapt. With the support of a host family, I was able to make adjustments and get through.

The Andovers: Are you still in touch with your host family?

Dowe: They’re part of my family today. We talk once or twice a week. We’re very close and always have been since I was in the program.



Abigail Awodele, 17, of Bridgeport, Conn., Deanna Starr, 17, of New York, New York, and Fatouma Koné of Harlem, work in the study area at the ABC House on Main Street in Andover.

Jazzare Mays, a senior from New Haven, Conn., says, “I see friends that I’ve had who are now going away to school because I inspired them.”

In the ABC house, each girl has chores and responsibilities ranging from shoveling snow to doing the dishes. Two resident directors and two assistants live with them and a small army of volunteers helps to arrange everything from dinner time to carpooling.

“More or less, it functions like a typical family,” Margolese says.

The girls have designated study times and nightly chores. They eat dinner together most evenings, around a large square table with a basket in the middle. That’s where all cellphones must be deposited during the meal.

“We want to make sure that they are spending time together,” Connolly says.

It works. The ABC Andover charter allows for up to 10 scholars, but there are currently eight girls living in the house. The older ones look out for the freshmen, and everyone ends up bonded by their time spent in the house.

“I think we all become somewhat like sisters,” Mays says.

“We spend more time with them than with our actual families,” Koné concurs.



Susan Connolly, left, vice president of ABC Andover; Dan Hall, 18-year volunteer; and Kate Margolese, three-year volunteer, on the steps of the downtown Andover home where the program welcomes up to 10 high-schoolers a year.

Breaking away

Despite the opportunities that they knew were coming, the girls say that making the decision to leave their families at just 14 years old was difficult.

“I was nervous, but excited,” Koné says. “I didn’t know what to expect, but

I expected to be let out of my comfort zone. I realized I would be on my own, but with a lot of people around to support me.”

The program certainly does offer the scholars plenty of support. ABC Andover has about 50 volunteers tending to the



Jazzare Mays, 18, of New Haven, Conn., left, talks with Fatouma Koné, 17, of Harlem, N.Y., at the home of Koné's host family in Andover. Rusty the dog looks on.

house and the needs of the girls. If you have a skill, the organization can put you to use, whether by driving students to and from activities, fixing a leaky pipe or mentoring a senior through the college admissions process.

"You just give us the basics on who you are and we will find a match," Connolly says, noting that some jobs mean that the volunteers have more exposure to the scholars. "The drivers have all the scoop."

The only paid employees at ABC Andover are a part-time cook and some tutors. The fact that people in the community are so willing to support the organization is not lost on Koné.

"This is a nonprofit and is run all by volunteers," she says. "That's so amazing. They have lives, kids and jobs, but they go out of their way to help us."

ABC's support network extends well beyond the regular volunteers. For example, this year a scholar wanted to try hockey, but wasn't sure whether she would like it. Rather than spend money on new equipment that she might not need, the ABC house put a call out to the community and soon its back porch was covered in loaned hockey supplies.



Jazzare Mays, 18, of New Haven, Conn., pets a dog named Rusty as she talks with Fatouma Koné, 17, of Harlem, as Fatouma's host mom Gaby Nossiff looks on in Andover.

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“We have such a great network that we can tap into,” Connolly says.

ABC Andover does not receive any money from or send any funds to the national organization. It is entirely locally funded.

To help her through the transition to Andover, each ABC scholar is paired with a host family. That local family supports them over the four years of the program.

“We give them a soft place to land,” says Gaby Nossiff, Koné’s host mother. “They know that there is somebody in town who has their back. It’s more intimate – somewhere where they can be nagged about homework.”

“Which happens all the time,” Koné interjects.

The scholars have dinner with the host families every Wednesday night and spend one weekend a month with them. Many ABC scholars talk to their host families every day and keep in touch long after the program has ended.

“It’s been very comfortable for me,” Koné says during a recent Wednesday afternoon at the Nossiffs’ house. “I love my host family.”

“The host families are another strength of the program,” says Dan Hall, ABC Andover development coordinator, who has been volunteering with the organization for 18 years. “Besides the chance that (scholars) get from being in the high school, they are also getting the support of a family that they wouldn’t necessarily get at home, where a lot of their friends may have a lower bar set. In Andover, the community is raising the bar for what students’ goals should be.”

For Koné, that has certainly been the case. In addition to being her host mother, Nossiff is also Koné’s college mentor. That’s a role that Koné knows her biological mother, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast, would not have been able to fill.

“My mom can’t be hands-on with the process; she just wants me to do really well,” Koné says. “It’s good to know that we have people here (who can help).”

Nossiff is quick to point out the sacrifice



Deanna Starr updates the schedule board at the ABC house in Andover.



Fatouma Koné and Deanna Starr looks at an info board in the hallway as A’mari Bing-Way studies in the the study room before dinner at the ABC house in Andover.

that Koné’s mother has made by sending her daughter away for school. As a mother to three boys of her own, she can relate.

“I know this is a big sacrifice for her mom,” Nossiff says. “She misses her tremendously, but knows that she has to do this in order for Fatouma to have a better chance.”

For her part, Koné is taking full advantage of the opportunity. She participates in a leadership institute at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge

and is working with Nossiff to begin applying to colleges. She also is getting a preview of a career that she’s interested in – law – through the mentorship program at Andover High School.

Koné has been shadowing an Andover defense attorney who shows her the good and bad parts of the profession. Recently, she attended a court session in Boston.

“It’s been interesting,” she says.

Nossiff and her husband, John, are also lawyers and the family has bonded with Koné over good food and crime shows.



A'mari Bing-Way loads the dishwasher as Deanna Starr and Xonatia Lee clean up after dinner as part of their chores at the ABC house in Andover.

Their youngest son is graduating from Andover High this spring and will be attending college in the fall. “Next year, we’ll be empty-nesters,” Nossiff says. “Thank God we’ll have Fatouma.”

Adjusting to the Andovers

If you were to drop into the ABC house between 7 and 9:45 on a weekday evening, you’d find the TV off, social media unplugged and all phones out of sight. It’s study time.

All of the ABC scholars were selected because of their outstanding academic records. However, most of the visiting students are surprised by the educational demands in Andover.

“In the school systems that our students have been in, they haven’t been tested or pushed,” Hall says.

Scholars often come in expecting that they will be able to remain at the top of the class without much effort, like they could in their hometowns.

“It was a shock,” Koné says. “I was used to not having to try as hard and now I had to put in the extra effort.”

Koné says that being behind forced her to develop new positive habits, like asking teachers for extra help and learning from

other students in the class.

An academic committee acts as a liaison between the high school and the students, making sure that everyone is on track. The scholars also have access to tutors if they need them. During study hours each night at ABC house, freshmen and sophomores are required to be downstairs in the common area doing something productive – usually homework.

“Just being able to sit down for two hours has given me the stamina to push myself,” Mays says.

Mays and Koné both say that the study skills they have developed during their years in Andover will aid them in their future.

Increased academic pressure is only one of the challenges that the scholars face when they move to town. Coming into Andover – an upper-class, predominantly white community – can provide its own share of adjustments.

“One student said to me, ‘On the first night, all I could hear was crickets,’” Margolese recalls. “I thought that sounded peaceful, but she missed the hubbub. It’s very different being in the suburbs.”

Mays puts it a bit more bluntly.

“It was a culture shock,” she says.

And Koné agrees.

“You grow up with people who you are around a lot and you are accustomed to them. Then, we had to get used to being around new people and personalities – different people from different backgrounds,” she says.

At first, the girls had to navigate some questions that surprised them.

“Everyone asked where I get my hair done or if it is real,” Koné says, fingering the braids that reach to her waist. (For the record, she gets her hair done when she returns home to New York.)

“At first you want to be angry, but then you realize that they just don’t know,” she says. “It comes from curiosity.”

“We know why they ask,” Mays adds.

There can also be a disconnect between some of the problems their classmates face and what’s going on in their own lives.

“I know sometimes I hear from the girls that (the local) students don’t have enough drama, so they can get dramatic over the small things,” Nossiff says.

When classmates complain about not having the newest iPhone, the ABC scholars say it can be hard for them to relate.

“At first, you sit there and think, ‘Is she



Resident director Catherine Okoh, second left talks with members of the ABC house in Andover.

serious?” Koné says. “But then you realize it’s just how they feel.”

Navigating between two worlds isn’t easy and the girls can also feel cut off from the friends they left behind.

“You lose connections with friends because you’re in two different situations,” Mays says.

“Even though you tell yourself that won’t happen,” says Koné, adding she has drifted away from many of her friends in New York.

Often times, peers at home have a hard time understanding the ABC scholars’ decision to go to high school away from home.

“People think it’s a big slumber party, that it’s fun 24/7,” Mays says. “It’s hard.”

Becoming Andover

Even with the challenges, the ABC scholars end up jumping wholeheartedly into the Andover community.

Many of the girls play sports – last year, Koné was on the varsity basketball team, which Mays managed – as well as volunteer at local organizations and work as babysitters at GracePoint Community Church in town.

“After school, you would be surprised



In an effort to encourage conversation and interaction, a basket collects all cellphones during dinners at the ABC house in Andover.

how quiet it is around here,” Margolese says.

In the dining room of the ABC house, a large white board lists each scholar and her nightly activities. When you’re managing eight schedules, organization is a must, the ABC team says.

The scholars’ involvement in the community also benefits Andover, contributing significantly to the diversity in town.

“That diversity coming into the community enriches Andover itself,” Hall says.

For Mays, jumping into her new

community was a way to feel more at home.

“You need to step out of your comfort zone and ease your way in,” she says.

Sometimes, however, obligations in Andover can cut into precious time back home. This year, instead of returning to Harlem over February vacation, Koné stayed in Andover to attend basketball practices.

During the difficult times, Koné reminds herself that she is indeed getting a better chance.

“It can be lonely if you make it lonely, so you need to make the decision to engage with other people,” she says. “You make the best of it. Here, there are people around to help and the school is so much better. I wouldn’t have done half the programs, like AP classes or SAT prep, if I were at home.”

She also reminds herself that if she didn’t experience these growing pains now, she would have to deal with them when she went away to college.

“Now, I’m a step ahead of everyone else,” she says. “It may be rough now, but next year I’ll be OK.”

“I think we’ll appreciate it even more when we’re in college.” 