



# The Scholar

Spring 2003

A Better Chance in Darien Newsletter

Volume 8

No. 1

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- Cokey & Jim Concannon
- Pam & David Dysenchuk
- Lisa & Kent Eppley
- Kiki & Peter Karpen
- Leanne & Bill Meyer
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- Barb & Larry Simms

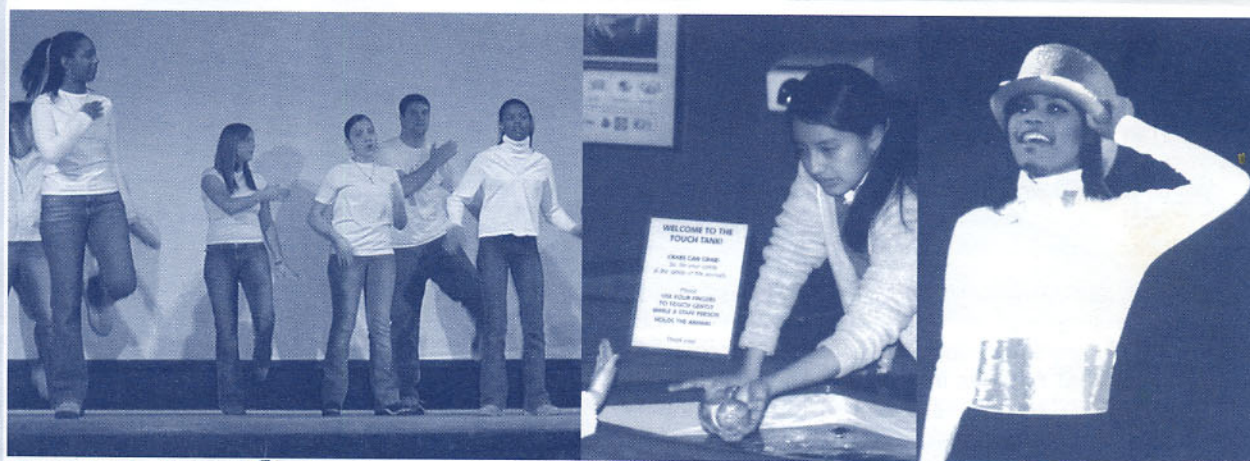
### Students

- Kendra Barber 2003
- Chadaé Chang 2003
- Melida Burgos, 2005
- Christina Gonzalez, 2005
- Silvia Puma, 2006
- Morgana Coombs, 2006

## in full bloom

Approaching the finish line at the speed of light, each of our ABC students has been masterfully juggling studies and extracurricular activities. **Chadaé Chang** spent the fall sports season as the Head Flyer on the DHS Cheerleading Squad. Once football season was over she turned her attention to Theater 308, appearing in this spring's production, **A Chorus Line**, as the dance captain, Larry. Extraordinary talent was experienced in the auditorium March 20-22. She has also been quite busy visiting colleges where she hopes to study biology and remain active in theatre. Never one to sit still, our high honors student **Kendra Barber** has spent her "spare" time editing the Yearbook, and scripting and coordinating an all-school assembly for Black History Month. Our famous girl scout dedicates four hours each week at the Maritime Center, educating visitors on the mysteries of the sea and environment. **Christina Gonzalez**, in addition

to making the honor roll, volunteers at Stepping Stones Children's Museum, where she enjoys watching toddlers discover the world around them and at the "Y" after-school program, working with kindergartners. **Melida Burgos** maintains her spot on the honor roll while offering her time at Norwalk Hospital where she assists with clerical work in the Operating Room department. She also helps out at the "Y" two days a week. **Morgana Coombs** was very busy this fall as a member of the DHS freshman soccer team. She splits her volunteer hours between the "Y" and Norwalk Hospital, where she makes those stunning patient bracelets and provides patient updates to families in the waiting room. **Silvia Puma** has spent her time making honors and volunteering at the Maritime Center and the "Y". We are excitedly anticipating the graduations of Kendra and Chadaé in June but don't even want to think about life without them next year.



Celebrating Black History... a Step dance choreographed by Chadaé. Silvia Puma volunteering at Aquarium. Chadaé as Larry in A Chorus Line finale.

## a deeper shade of history

Shortly after 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, February 13th, students filtered into the DHS auditorium to be treated to an amazing program of film, dance, jazz played by the DHS Jazz band, guitar, storytelling and readings. Kendra Barber took the stage to lead the crowd in the pledge of allegiance and to say let the program begin. DHS' Pjeter Dushku gave a brief history of step dancing and heralded on to the stage Mrs. Rubin's World Literature class to perform a foot stomping step dance choreographed by Chadaé Chang. Students clapped and cheered the dancers on—the inaugural DHS Black History Assembly was underway. Conceived and organized by Kendra, the assembly represented the

culmination of a four-year dream to enlighten fellow students and the greater DHS community. Judging by the rapt attention of fellow students and teachers, the messages were enthusiastically received. Several teachers and parents remarked on the unusual silence permeating the auditorium as students listened intently to each segment. In a thank you letter to Kendra, Principal Auclair wrote, "The message that this program conveyed to the students and staff of DHS was an essential one. You taught us all valuable lessons and helped bring us together as a community of people who know about and care about each other."

# just part of the family

**The Host Family Program in Darien ABC** On a sunny August day in 1999, just days before she left Brooklyn to go away to high school, Kendra Barber learned she was soon to have two new brothers. Miles away in Darien, Mrs. Chacos was waiting with great anticipation for a "daughter" to add some female influence to her three-man household. Across town the Karpens were also excitedly awaiting the arrival of an addition to their family. These are not stories of expectant adoptive families but rather reflections from the A Better Chance Host Family files.

Through the Host Family program, each in-coming ABC freshman is paired with two families. One family acts as the Host Family, taking its assigned student one weekend each month throughout her four years of high school. The other family acts as the Back-up Host Family, spending one Sunday each month with the student. This arrangement allows the student to form closer relationships with people in the community. So much is learned by both the students and their host families as these relationships evolve. When Cokey and Jim Concannon learned about the host family program they thought it would be a perfect match for their household of four biological children, a nephew and newly adopted child, Tatiana. Coming from a big family herself, Melida totally fits in and has adopted the Concannon's, especially James, who is in her Spanish class.

Students join the family in whatever is planned for that weekend. The feedback from the students is that it's a bit like spending time with a fun relative. When asked what they look forward to on host weekends, students generally agree that they simply want to unwind, taking advantage of some down time. Sophomore, Melida Burgos, recalls that one of her favorite memories was buying 4-year old host sibling, Tatiana, her first pair of jeans.

Special Host Family traditions run the gamut from attending mass or watching afternoon movies on Sundays to dinners at the Tokeneke Club. Memorable firsts shared with host families include going to a college football game in North Carolina, kayaking, seeing rugby live, attending a New York Knicks basketball game, tasting sushi and driving in the snow.

Although incoming freshmen are a bit apprehensive in the beginning about spending time with strange families, the relationships invariably blossom. Chadae Chang summed up her feelings. "I was a bit uncomfortable with the idea at first. I didn't know if I would get along with my host siblings or if I would be openly welcomed into my new parents' home. My 'parents' have accepted me as one of their own and for me, I have accepted them as my own parents." That sentiment was echoed by Melida, "I thought I might not be that close to my host family, but I am head over heels for them!" Ask the girls what they would change about the Host Family Program and the answer reiterated consistently is "more time with our (Darien) families!"

Matchmakers Debi Lee, Nancy Herling and Pam Lindberg have the task of pairing students with host families. By reviewing criteria such as the families' activities, children's ages, religion and even allergies, they have enjoyed enormous success in making enduring matches that begin in the student's freshman year and continue way past graduation. According to Debi Lee, "The giving and willing attitudes of the families, along with the overall personalities are what make the program click."

Currently, twelve Darien families graciously open their homes to our six ABC students. Joan and Mark Bergen, Debbie and Andy Chacos, Lisa and Kent Eppley, Kiki and Peter Karpen, Leanne and Bob Meyer, and, Susan and Mark Scott are currently acting as Host families. Back-up Hosts include Donna Holt and Jim Archibald, Cokey and Jim Concannon, Pam and David Dysenchuk, Susan and Steve Mulderrig, Patti and Kurt Schoknecht and Barb and Larry Simms.

The connection between A Better Chance Scholars and the wider Darien community is an important component of the A Better Chance experience and host families are perhaps the most critical vehicles for helping to build this connection.

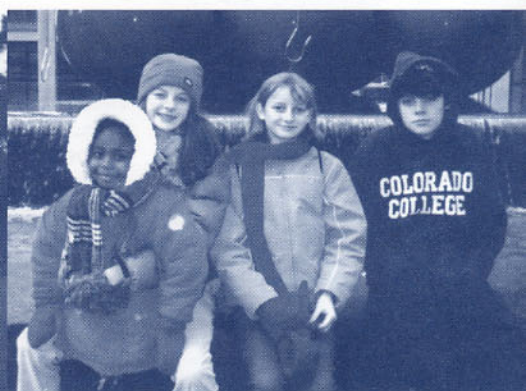
Anyone interested in finding out more about the Host Family program should contact Debi Lee at 655-6552.



**Host Mom Leanne Meyer** urging everyone to bring their dirty cars to the October car wash at the depot



**Kendra between her two "adopted brothers"** Brian graduating in 2002 with Charlie Chacos



**4 of 5 Concannon Children:** Tatiana(4), Claire(11), Allie(13), James(16) Concannon

# acting on our inner voices can make a world of difference

extraordinary people in our backyard



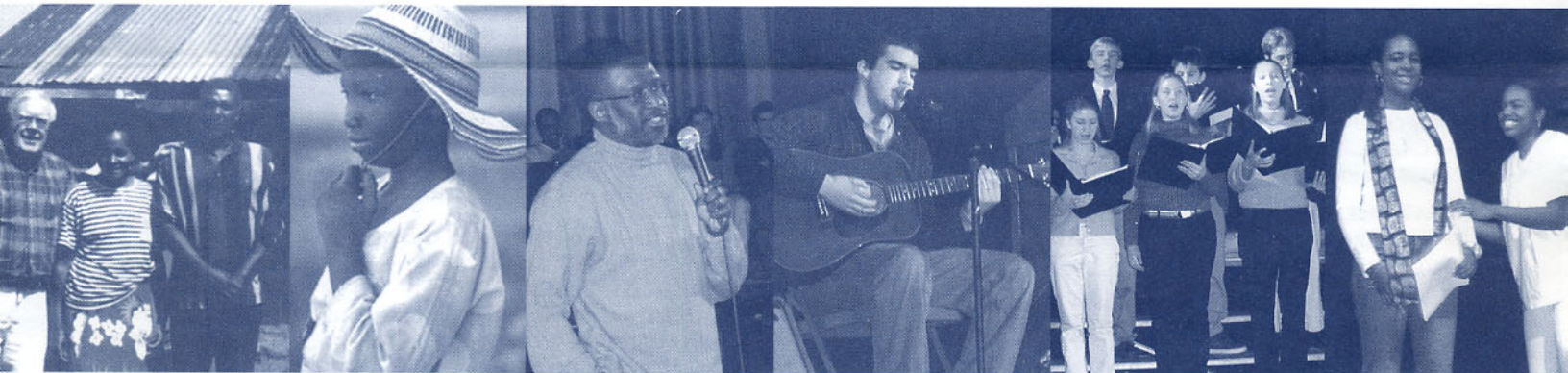
I was looking forward to choosing the next person to profile in this insert of the newsletter when things began happening. It began with taking Angel Harrison, who had won awards for her art while at Greenwich Academy, to see some art when she was home on break from college. That's when I discovered a jewel box in Stamford called **Picture That**, a gallery featuring minority artists. Several days later I heard Pastor Danks, formerly pastor at Noroton Presbyterian, speak of his five years in Kenya. He listened to his inner voice telling him he was needed in Nyeri, a poverty stricken town just north of Nairobi. Among other things, he was instrumental in building a library, college and dormitory for handicapped children with the help of lots of local contributions. When I learned that Kendra Barber was putting together a 90-minute forum at DHS on Black History I realized I had to write about these local heroes who paid attention to their inner voices commanding them to do something to make this a better world.

Armed with an MBA from Columbia B-School and working at Goldman Sachs as Vice President managing large software development teams of engineers Valerie Cooper was as far from the art world as one could imagine. But one day about 12 years ago a friend came to her and asked her to host an art show (similar to a trunk show) in her home. Motivated ONLY by feeling the need to help

non-profit organizations and schools such as CTE, Inc., Greenwich YWCA, Stamford Schools, Stamford Center for the Arts and private individuals, art investors and collectors. Her mission is to promote cultural diversity and awareness through the arts. Like Oprah she is giving heretofore relatively unknown artists exposure and a market that has infinite possibilities. **Picture That** comes from a childhood expression that basically meant "In your dreams!" You can get an immediate feel for what she is about by checking her website at [www.Picture-That.com](http://www.Picture-That.com). And then you must visit her gallery at 84 Courland Avenue in Stamford. Thankfully you will be hearing more from Ms. Cooper, as she has accepted our invitation to join the ABC Board.

As a Freshman Kendra Barber noticed that no special attention was given to Black History month. Her inner voice began to suggest she conceive and organize a Black History assembly. Thankfully she paid attention to that voice and produced an amazing program which enlightened fellow students and the greater DHS community. Judging by the rapt attention of fellow students and teachers, it was a resounding success.

Highlights of the morning included: a step dance choreographed by Chadaé Chang; the poetry of Maya Angelou and Langston



**Pastor Danks in Kenya** with local artist, John Kihara

**Photograph by Joe Grant,** from **Picture That**

**Lot Therrio** telling stories

**Andrew Rottner** jamming

**Tudor Singers** harmonizing

**Kendra Barber** receiving congratulations

a friend in need she agreed and was taken by surprise when she discovered a whole new world. For the first time she saw images in art that reminded her of her parents, aunts, uncles of her life growing up. These paintings spoke to her and she felt a great thirst to learn more and find out how these artists knew so much about her life and family's culture. She immediately signed up with the art distribution company and began holding her own art shows. She plunged into the art world with the same fervor as she had entered the world of finance but a new passion was awakened in her. From 1992 until 1996 Valerie conducted home art shows upon request and began curating Diversity Heritage Month exhibitions at Goldman where she still worked. She plunged into every resource she could get her hands on and to write and teach a course she entitled, Introduction to African-American History. She takes students from the first documenting of African art in America—soon after a slave ship arrived at Jamestown, Virginia—through the colonial period and the Abolitionist period and then through the Harlem Renaissance and FDR's WPA program. By 2000 she found that so many people wanted art by African American artists that she decided she had to listen to that voice speaking to her telling her to open her own gallery. Today, her educational, consulting and distribution services, are requested on a nationwide basis by such corporations as Credit Suisse, Abbott Labs, Deloitte & Touche, Fleet Bank, Goldman Sachs,

Hughes read by Kendra, Morgana Coombs, Pjeter Dushku, Tess Agresta and Carly Sousa; a rousing rendition of **Lift Every Voice and Sing** (considered the Black National Anthem) sung by the Tudor Singers; a very cool performance by Andrew Rottner, of Ben Harper's **Like A King**; the DHS Jazz Band's electrifying version of the jazz stylings of Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk; and a film entitled, **We Shall Overcome**, about the events leading up to and during the Civil Rights Movement.

Another high point of the festivities was the moving and inspirational storytelling by renowned storyteller, Lot Therrio. In one story he recounted what it was like growing up as an African American boy in the South. One day while waiting for a bus, 15-year old Lot, sat on his book bag. He was eating a candy bar bought minutes before at the local Seven-Eleven. Suddenly police surrounded him and threw him in a police car. They sped off to a section of town known as "Whitetown." A robbery had taken place and Lot was accused of the crime. During the interrogation the police threatened to shoot Lot, saying that no one would ever know. At that moment the words often spoken by his Grandma Ruth "Be safe, boy" rang in his ears. He credited her advice for saving his life.

So listen to that voice inside you—it might take you on an unbelievable journey and leave a better world in your wake.

# Frederick Douglass why February? Langston Hughes

Black history month began as Black history week in 1926. It was instituted by Carter G. Woodson, the son of former slaves who traveled from working the mines and quarries of Virginia to the University of Chicago where he received his master's degree in history and then on to Harvard, where he received a doctorate in history in 1912. Unable to land a teaching position at Harvard because of his color, as was the case with all "white institutions" in those days, Woodson was asked by Howard University, one of the nation's leading black colleges to teach. He recognized the urgent need to provide black children with a defense shield against assaults on their intelligence and moral worth and to provide others with a bank of knowledge of the extraordinary contributions made by African-Americans to our society heretofore excluded from the history books. After the civil rights movement the week was expanded to Black History Month. February was chosen because of the birthdays of Frederick Douglass, the esteemed black abolitionist, and the celebrated black poet, Langston Hughes. It also happens to be the month the NAACP was founded.

In addition to the assembly, Kendra orchestrated month-long activities—daily announcements, a soul food lunch prepared by Donna Powell and the DHS cafeteria staff, a Library authors contest, and a bake sale to raise money for Americare's Action for Africa, which donates money for famine and AIDS assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa to celebrate Black history month.

It is Kendra's hope that the assembly will become an annual event at DHS. Ms. Mark Anthony served as an advisor for the assembly. Assembly committee members included: Gisell Acoba, Tess Agresta, Chadaé Chang, Samantha Colastro, Pjeter Dushku, Zack Redding, Carly Sousa and Lindsay Tiscia.

Kendra was asked by the DHS Parent Association to suggest ideas for further education. She suggests visiting:

The Schomburg Center for Research in African-American Culture, New York Public Library, 515 Malcolm X Blvd., New York City. It provides resources on people of African descent throughout the world.

The Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 126th St., New York City. It contains more than 1,500 objects from 19th and 20th century African-American and Caribbean artists.

## Books on Black History can be found at:

<http://www.springfieldlibrary.org/blackhistory.html>

Additional websites to check out include:

<http://www.surfnetkids.com> (Particularly good for families with younger children)

<http://www.hartfordpl.lib.ct.us/bhistory.html>

<http://www.selah.wednet.edu/LINKS/BlackHistory.html>

Thanks again Kendra!

# Romare Bearden Books Jacob Lawrence Elizabeth Catlett

**A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present** by the great American artist, Romare Bearden & well known journalist, Harry Henderson. Beautifully illustrated, it profiles over 50 signal African-American artists, examining the "relation of their work to prevailing artistic, social and political trends in America and throughout the world."

**The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones** by Tritobia Hayes Benjamin. In spite of all the typical obstacles that would have hampered the success of a Black woman trying to break into the white male dominated art world of the 1930's, 40's and 50's, Ms. Jones triumphed, and this country greatly benefited from her contributions to American art. The body of her work created over a 75-year period has had a "profound effect on the many artists and scholars fortunate enough to have been her students."

**The Art of Elizabeth Catlett** by Samella Lewis. Ms. Catlett's sculpture, molded in massive and simple shapes echoes the forms of Henry Moore but communicates a "powerful physical energy" and the emotional trauma of the human condition experienced particularly by African-Americans, reminiscent of the sculpture of Leonardo DaVinci.

## PLEDGE

### Contributions should be sent to:

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I am pleased to support ABC in Darien

Please make check payable to "A Better Chance." Thank you so much!

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\$50 \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_\_\_

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# the fairy GodMother

behind those college acceptances

Arriving in Darien 35 years ago with an MA in counseling from NYU, it did not take Susan Spain a long time to organize her household of three children and a husband before she hit the volunteer circuit. She felt compelled to help others, donating time and talent to the Junior League, Blue Notes, United Way, Opera New England, Darien Arts Council, Center for Hope and even the Darien Youth Hockey Board, picking up awards from the Darien United Way and Community Council Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service along the way. But education is her true passion and it is in this area, especially, that she has made, and continues to make, an extraordinary difference. Susan served on the Parent Association Boards at Royle School and chaired the Middlesex Board the year Mather and Middlesex schools were merged. At DHS she chaired the Council of School Parents. For many years she has honed her teaching skills, acting as a substitute teacher in the Darien school system and as a CCD teacher at St. Thomas More church. For "fun" she became a Great Books coordinator. In 1980, when she learned that a group of extraordinary visionaries were working to make A Better Chance a reality in Darien, she hopped on board to help with the initial fundraising efforts. While serving on the Board of DHS, Susan got to know and appreciate on a one-on-one basis the extraordinary young women participating in that first ABC class, helping them to find part-time jobs through the JOBS office.

In 1985 after completing some refresher classes in educational and psychological testing, school counseling and psychotherapy and earning her credentials as an Educational Consultant and Certified Educational Planner Susan went to work for Educational Futures in New Canaan. While she has worked with many local students, assisting with their educational planning, her primary focus has been working with international students, helping them to get into higher learning institutions in the US. In 1993 she started her own service designed to supplement existing school guidance programs and to provide assistance to families wishing to identify appropriate schools, colleges and graduate schools for their children.

Even though she is constantly on the move, working with clients out of her offices in Geneva, London, Minneapolis and Darien, in 2000 John Murphy was able to charm her into stretching herself to the limits by joining the ABC Board. Ironically, one of the most daunting parts of this job is actually finding time to meet with the girls, as their days are so tightly scheduled. E-mail has been a lifesaver and in her truly motivated quest, Susan sometimes actually meets the girls in school during their free periods and tries to catch them between dinner and study hall at the ABC house. Another challenge which has presented itself has been trying to impress upon the girls the importance of applying for Early Decision because of financial aid concerns —many decisions have been made at the colleges before their applications are even read. One of her biggest challenges has been getting those SAT scores to match the ABC scholars' abilities and academic achievements. Often gaps in their primary and middle school educations are evident when it's time for the SAT's. Never daunted, Susan sweet talked Chris Black of College

Hill Coaching in Greenwich and his partners into tutoring the girls—significant improvement in scores have resulted!

As happily often happens, it seems the rewards for Susan have been even greater than the challenges—the opportunity to work with some of the most motivated, cooperative students she has worked with in the eighteen years of her practice has brought huge satisfaction to Ms. Spain. One of the most thrilling aspects of this whole process understandably are the end results—getting those college acceptance letters. Under the tutelage of Susan and the inimitable Barbara Thorne at DHS our scholars have received acceptances from, among other institutions, the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Cornell, Brown and NYU Stern School of Business. "The ABC girls have been the deserving recipients of many of these letters and Barbara and I are as pleased as they are!!"

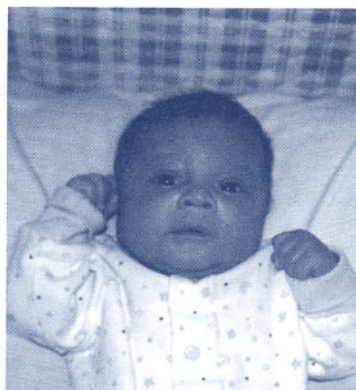
Another most pleasurable aspect of the job is getting to meet parents and families at ABC social events, corresponding with them over the internet, speaking with them on the phone and seeing how much her efforts mean to them. "Perhaps the proudest moment for me during the past three years - and all of us - was when Malika was elected as President of DHS

student Government! What a college essay that girl had! She titled it "I Made History!"

Susan modestly says she doesn't know if she has really changed anyone's lives. I can say with great confidence she most certainly has. Hm, maybe if I bring her some roses she can get me into Duke, my first choice 100 years ago! Thank you so much Susan.



## a boy in the ABC house?



Tristan Dakota LeXander

Tristan Dakota LeXander arrived just in time to bring in the New Year—2:18 in the afternoon of December 31. His birth weight of 4.8 lbs. belies his very large presence at 11 Brookside Road. It's very easy to coax a smile from Tristan Dakota—must be his stress-free routine of drinking, sleeping and playing! Congratulations Karen, Steve and Duncan!

# letter *from* the Presidents



John & Susan show exactly what "a working board" means.

Dear Neighbors,

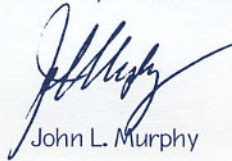
As you can see from our scholar's involvement in the High School and in the community, the plentiful snowfall this winter has not slowed them down. They continue to contribute their time and talent to various organizations while achieving academic excellence. They are able to flourish because of the wonderful support of the greater Darien community.

Not only are the girls developing into self assured young women, but the program as a whole has been successful in reaching many of our goals. We have been able to upgrade the house on Brookside Road and provide a home away from home that is conducive to the academic successes of these six young women. Some of our scholars have taken advantage of academic programs at top colleges and universities during their summer break. We are able to provide them with the educational support and guidance needed in order the them to reach their academic potential.

We are currently in the process of interviewing candidates to attend Darien High School as freshman next fall. We received numerous applications from excellent students who want the opportunity to receive the outstanding education that Darien provides. With the support of our neighbors in Darien we are confident that our two new freshmen will be as successful, and contribute as much to the community, as our current and graduating scholars. We thank you for your continued support of A Better Chance and for helping these young women fulfill their dreams. For those of you who have already contributed this school year, our heartiest thanks. For those of you who have not yet become an ABC supporter, we invite you to do so today.

Sincerely,

  
Susan M. Mulderrig

  
John L. Murphy

Newsletter written, edited and designed by Avery Flowers and Sandy McDonnell

## A Better Chance

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