News

Children with the child care program at St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families participate in a Fourth of July Parade. (Courtesy of St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families)

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When A'ja Ross discovered she was pregnant at 16, she felt excited but nervous.

"I didn't know how to be a mom," the Baltimore native said, adding that her mother and stepfather didn't have room in their house for her. "I was moving from friend's [house] to friend's [house]. It wasn't really stable."

Then at 18, Ross heard about St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families, a nonprofit in Hyattsville, Maryland, founded by the Daughters of Charity.

For years, Ross and her young son stayed at the center's transitional housing. The nonprofit's team guided her in obtaining a job and pursuing her education. When she tried living with her brother and it didn't work out, the center welcomed her back to try again.

Now 29 and employed full time while pursuing her bachelor's degree in business administration, Ross owns a condo in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, where she lives with her 13-year-old son.

A'ja Ross, a former resident at St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families, hugs her son, Ti'Andre Williams. (Courtesy of A'ja Ross)

"[My son and I] have an excellent relationship," Ross said. "Without Jesus and St. Ann's lifting me up as a community, I wouldn't have seen the success I am in today."

Ross represents just one of hundreds of women who shape a promising future for themselves and their children at St. Ann's Center. First established in 1860 to house orphaned, abused and neglected children, the center now provides numerous supportive services for single mothers, children and families, with 77 women and children served in 2023 alone.

"There is a huge need for young moms to have support with their new and young families," said Sr. Nancy Downing, a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame, who became the center's new CEO in January.

The first-ever sister taking this position who isn't with the Daughters of Charity, Downing draws from her previous role of executive director at Covenant House New York, where she extensively expanded its programs for youths experiencing homelessness.

"We're really blessed to be able to do this work," said Downing, 65, who just celebrated her 25th year as a sister. "You see how lives can be transformed, and you're a part of that."

Sr. Nancy Downing, a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame, stands in front of St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families, where she became new CEO in January. (Courtesy of the Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

Downing's new leadership fits well with St. Ann Center's evolving legacy, said Sr. Suzanne Baumgartner, a member of the Daughters of Charity who is an honorary member of the center's board.*

Primarily serving the Hyattsville and Washington, D.C., area, the nonprofit worked throughout the 20th century as St. Ann's Infant & Maternity Home, housing orphaned children and foster youths.

"You're always meeting people every once and awhile who say, 'I was adopted from St. Ann's,' " Baumgartner said.

But the board changed the center's name and mission in 2013, she added, to address the community's now greatest need: "women with children living in homeless shelters, and women with no place to go."

The District of Columbia alone totals 1,656 adults and children experiencing homelessness daily, according to the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.

"The wonderful thing about St. Ann's is it has continued to adapt to the needs of the times," Baumgartner said.

Children stand with a teacher of the child care program at St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families. (Courtesy of St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families)

Supporting teen, single mothers

Downing hopes that working with mothers of young children will "prevent the future cycle of poverty from continuing," she said.

St. Ann's Center tackles this directly with its Teen Mother and Baby Program, which guides and aids young women like Ross through their pregnancies and early motherhood.

"It's a frightening time [for teenagers] for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is they're pregnant and young, and don't know what to do," Downing said, adding that many teen mothers don't have their families' support. "To have a place where they can come and are cared for in a judgment-free area and be supported and lifted up, gives them hope."

The program provides young mothers with comprehensive prenatal care during pregnancy, as well as one-on-one assistance with newborn care.

The center's team, including life coaches and social workers, assist teen mothers in completing their high school education and potentially entering college, Downing said. They also help the teens with finding jobs during the school year and the summer to boost their income.

"This way, they can have extra money in their pocket and have their own source of income, so they feel they can support and care for their children," Downing said.

St. Ann's Center provides on-site housing programs for single mothers of all ages, Downing added.

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Many local mothers find themselves without stable housing, she said, for reasons that might include domestic violence, family dysfunction or simply lack of space in a household.

"We get calls every day from women needing residential services for various reasons," she said.

The nonprofit's Grace House provides residential care for pregnant adolescents and young mothers ages 13 to 21, with on-site medical support for their infants.

The center's Faith and Hope houses provide apartments and single-family units for older mothers. These facilities offer more independent settings, preparing women to support themselves.

Teens can stay at Grace House for up to two years, Downing added, after which they usually progress to the other houses, eventually working their way to living on their own.

"They don't have to worry if they come here at 16 that at age 18, they have to have it all figured out," she said.

Women residing at St. Ann's Center's supportive and transitional housing programs make bouquets on Mother's Day. (Courtesy of St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families)

The residential programs also include weekly classes for mothers, Downing said, covering topics such as parenting, life skills, financial management and even self-care.

"We want them to have a full and rich life that doesn't just focus on education and work," Downing said.

Mothers can also participate in scheduled group activities, said Sr. Judy Dusellier, a member of the Daughters of Charity who just retired after serving at St. Ann's Center for four years.

"They can go shopping, and go to a movie," Dusellier said. "It really helps build their self-esteem and trust, because of some of the backgrounds they come from. Some come from domestic violence, some come from broken families."

She still remembers the "amazing experience" of organizing community donations for holiday parties that provided the children and mothers with gifts.

"Our goal was that hopefully they understood that there were people who cared about them," Dusellier said.

Miss District of Columbia visits with a child residing at St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families during an Easter celebration at the nonprofit. (Courtesy of St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families)

Building success stories

Many mothers benefit from these collective experiences, Downing said.

She felt elated when Ross left the center's housing program in January because she had saved for years to purchase her condo.

"She paid attention to the financial literacy classes, and saved her money," Downing said.

Ross agreed on the classes' significant impact on her, admitting that "I didn't know what a budget was [before living at St. Ann's Center]. Now, I use it faithfully."

Another former resident now volunteers at the center, Downing said, and still another recently visited to report her success at work and in procuring her own apartment.

"She had a beautiful smile on her face," Downing said. "We could see that pride she could take in herself."

Living in one of the center's housing facilities, Baumgartner sees a transformation among the women there over time, she added.

"I see the women grow in their attitudes, their faces, the way they stand and carry themselves, and the way they interact with their children," she said. "It's because this place becomes their home. It's a place of safety, it's a place of nurturing."

The center further helps women achieve independence with its education and employment program, Downing said, which helps mothers both secure and keep jobs.

Beyond helping women build their resumes and prepare for job interviews, the program even coaches them on handling "stressors" at work, she said.

Above all, the center's team encourages mothers to focus on building a career.

"We have someone to talk to them about, 'Now you have a job, what do you want for a career, and how do you get to that place? Do you need additional education?' " said Downing, who herself attended law school at night in her 20s while working in an insurance company. "It's not just, 'I can work at CVS or McDonald's.' "

A'ja Ross, who resided for years in the transitional housing facilities at St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families, signs paperwork for the purchase of her condo. (Courtesy of A'ja Ross)

This approach worked for Ross. During her stay at St. Ann's Center, she started a federal work studies program at Prince George's Community College, and climbed the ladder to now working for the dean. She also obtained her associate's degree in the process.

"The more income I received, I felt confident of being able to support myself and my son," she said.

Baumgartner remembers another mother who trained online as a bank teller, eventually securing a job as a teller.

"Several years later, she ended up as the bank manager," Baumgartner said. "That's the goal, is for them to become independent and capable of taking care of their family and themselves. It's always exciting to see."

Mothers at St. Ann's Center can explore their education and employment options with the help of the center's on-site child care program, Downing said, offered at a sliding-scale fee.

Also available to general community members, the program is "not babysitting," Downing emphasized, but utilizes Head Start education programs.

"[We're] providing those children with the education they need early on, to meet those developmental milestones," she said, adding that the program will expand from 60 children to 86 by the end of the year.

St. Ann's Center also supports participants' mental health with comprehensive clinical services, Downing said, noting that "anyone who experienced homelessness has experienced trauma."

All of these efforts provide mothers with tools to thrive on their own, she added.

"When you see [mothers] moving on, there's a moment of sadness, but there's a moment of great grace and blessing knowing that they've done well," she said.

**This story has been updated to clarify that Sr. Suzanne Baumgartner is an honorary board member.*