

Thanks to Healthy Families, mom and brood are well launched

Mariners Harbor woman credits the program for her success and will soon get her college degree

Wednesday, October 01, 2008

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Homeless, jobless and hopeless.

That was Cynthia Soto-Santiago's situation in 2003, when she was living in a Bronx shelter with her children. In May, this mother of six, now settled in an apartment in Mariners Harbor, will be a college graduate with a new lease on life.

Ms. Soto-Santiago and her family were part of the 2008 Healthy Families Staten Island second annual graduation yesterday at St. Peter's R.C. Church, New Brighton. The program is administered by the New York Foundling's Manhattan-based Fontana Center for Child Protection.

"Healthy Families helped us a lot," Ms. Soto-Santiago said. "They were able to find us accommodations on Staten Island and put us in touch with resources."

Healthy Families Staten Island has been providing support and information to expectant and new parents in Staten Island's North Shore communities, since 2001.

Program director Christine Cognetta praised the graduates during the ceremony, as did Bill Baccaglioni, executive director of New York Foundling. Parents were given plaques, while their children received backpacks. Elected officials present included Assemblyman Matthew Titone (D-North Shore) and state Sen. Diane Savino (D-North Shore/Brooklyn).

In the program, parents bond with their children and learn the difference between discipline and abuse. Program volunteers pay weekly visits to guide the parents.

"It promotes positive parenting skills and healthy parent-child interaction," Mrs. Cognetta said.

The children "graduate" once they are accepted into a 4-year-old Head Start program or kindergarten.

The path that led Ms. Soto-Santiago to homelessness, poverty and despair was paved with severe health and financial calamities in her family. She related to a reporter the devastation she faced when her father died unexpectedly and the challenges she endures as a single mother, including days that stretch to 20 hours.

Alyssa and Adrian, her 5-year-old twins, graduated from Healthy Families and were accepted into a dual-language kindergarten program. In addition to English, Italian and Spanish are spoken in the family's home.

Ms. Soto-Santiago works as a language tutor.

Dorothy Gordon of Travis is a family support worker who assisted Ms. Soto-Santiago weekly. "I've been doing this for seven years and I've never met anyone like Cynthia. It's been a privilege and learning experience for both of us," Ms. Gordon said.

Parents also honored at the event included Yolanda Barbosa, Elizabeth Escobar, Nelly Osorio and Ruben Ferran. Ruby Vasquez and Veronica Herrera were unable to attend.

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