

Durham program assists father figures

East Durham Children's Initiative group mentor fathers with unstable homes

By Katie Reeder

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Wilson Garner didn't expect to be raising his 11-year-old grandson on his own. When he became the sole caretaker of José eight years ago, he was already retired due to health issues.

"It took everything," Garner said. "I wouldn't have been able to work anyway having José."

Such a situation is rare, however. Clifton Daye, community ambassador at East Durham Children's Initiative, said many of the men he has worked with have viewed their involvement with their children as directly affected by their employment situation.

Though Northeast Central Durham is less than one percent of the entire area of Durham, according to City-Data, 32.5 percent of homes in Northeast Central Durham are single-mother households, more than double the 15.6 percent of homes in all of Durham.

"I just think it has to do with overwhelming problems, limited foresight," Daye said.

He said some mothers may feel overwhelmed trying to take care of everyone, and some fathers respond to this pressure by walking away.

"The cycle is repeated over and over," he said.

Daye said fathers in Northeast Central Durham have their challenges. The area – and the people – have been labeled based on the negative activities that have gone on there, Daye said. Further, he believes people might feel oppressed due to limited educational and employment opportunities.

But this isn't always the case.

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Jonathon Armstrong

Although his work has been more with fathers rather than grandfathers, Daye facilitated a men's group that provided support for fathers and discussed the importance of a male figure in children's lives. Garner was a part of this group, but Daye said Garner was very involved in José's life before the program.

"Wilson was already hands-on," he said, "I can't take any credit."

Garner said he regrets not being more involved in his own son's life, and he is doing things differently with his grandson.

After his relationship with God, Garner said José is the most important thing in his life. He has been to one cook-out in the past eight years. He doesn't go out of town without his grandson, and he usually checks on José twice every night. He has even allowed a toy fox terrier into the house for José. Garner said the terrier, Princess, is a little devil, but he loves her because she's José's baby.

"My life is based around him, so it's just mandatory that he succeeds at all costs, and I'll settle for nothing less than that. I refuse to do it," Garner said. "So with that, I try to be involved in anything that I can be involved in that's going to make me a better parent."

Jonathon Armstrong, another father who was involved in the men's group, has also chosen to break the cycle of absent fathers.

Armstrong has been married for almost one year and



Wilson Garner, 52, plays with his grandson José's 3-year-old toy fox terrier, Princess. "It's just us – and Princess," Garner. (Staff photo by Katie Reeder)

has two boys – a 4-year-old, who is his wife's biological child, and a 15-month-old he and his wife had together.

Armstrong spent nine months in prison and was released in 2012. He said he became involved with EDCI a little over a year ago so he could be more involved in his children's lives.

Although Armstrong said his own dad was in and out of prison, he said his dad was still a positive role model who tried to be involved with his kids. He said that set an example for him but also motivated him to do more for his own children.

"My dad was in and out of my life, and I didn't want to be like that with my kids. I don't think it's fair," he said.

Through the men's group, Daye connected Armstrong to a certification program at Durham Technical

Community College. Daye said the certification program is good for people who want to work but may have trouble finding employment because of their backgrounds.

Two weeks after graduating, Armstrong got a job in asbestos removal. His job requires a lot of time away from home, however, and he says this is the hardest part about being a father. Fortunately, he has his wife.

"When we're stretched thin and she has to do something, I can be there for them," he said. "When I have to do something, then she can be there with them."

And what makes it worth it all to him?

"Being involved in their lives, and watching them grow up, and knowing where they started and where they're at now and what they've been through," he said.