

# Giving Kids a Better Chance

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**B**ehind the clatter of Route 7, not far from the Cannondale Train Station, sits the ABC House. A long driveway leads up to a two-story beige residence that resembles any other home in the area: a generous lawn flanked by two basketball hoops giving way to a pathway leading to the front door. Inside, hearty, green plants decorate the hallway, and a shelf with cubbyholes is neatly stacked with a well-worn Nikes, Pumas, and Air Jordan sneakers. Leaning into a corner are a couple of snow shovels, at the ready. Hardwood floors gleam.

Around three o'clock on a recent Tuesday, the house comes alive with the arrival of its eight residents: Jeremi, Kenny, Freddy, Edwin, Issaka, Elija, Chris, and Elijah. The boys file in from their long day at Wilton High School, just a short walk away. One wears a green Jets jersey and carries a thick personal finance textbook under his arm. Another bounces in, balancing a football with his heavy backpack. No doubt they are all tired; some are stressed out (after all, it's college application time)—and hungry. They congregate in the kitchen, its reputation as the heart of the home clearly evident as they banter easily about their day.

These boys are part of the ABC (A Better Chance) program. If not for events in Alabama in 1963, ABC might not exist today, and the future of minority students around the country might be limited by the dearth of opportunity in their hometowns.

Instead, ABC, a national non-profit organization, offers thousands of intellectually gifted and highly motivated high school girls and boys an opportunity to excel and experience

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superior educational choices by placing them in over 300 outstanding independent and public high schools around the country.

## **The Beginning**

In 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace physically blocked the doors of the University of Alabama's administration building in an attempt to prevent two African-American students from enrolling.

In response, President Kennedy ordered the Alabama National Guard to personally escort these students into the school to register. His speech—“...*not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or an equal motivation, but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves*”—would ultimately result in the passage of the 1964 Civil Right's Act .

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*Ray Chambers, first graduate of Wilton's ABC program*

The following year, a grant from the Charles E. Merrill Foundation enabled 23 independent schools around the nation to establish the Independent School Talent Search Program—later changed to ABC: A Better Chance. Fifty minority students were placed in college preparatory schools, opening the doors to an educational opportunity with the promise of a future.

A Better Chance is the oldest and the only national program of its kind, boasting over 11,000 students and alumni. Highly motivated and talented minority students are invited to apply to the program, which carefully considers their academic performance and standing, extracurricular activities, and personal qualities. During the school year, ABC participants are housed together in a family-style environment where they learn not only how to get along as a group, but also how to succeed academically and out in the world. And succeed

they do: ABC's graduates include Deval Patrick, the first African-American governor of Massachusetts and other high-ranking businessmen and women, lawyers, professors, and physicians.

The Wilton chapter of ABC is one of five in Fairfield County. It offers eight spots to talented male students, sometimes referred to as “scholars.” (The Westport and New Canaan programs house boys; the Darien and Ridgefield programs house girls.) Started in 1996 by a group of local individuals committed to bringing more diversity to the town, Wilton ABC has sent its graduates to some of the top colleges in the country, including Amherst, Brown, Columbia, and Tufts.

“I look at ABC as a transformational experience; one where you can accelerate your wal,” says Ray Chambers, 26, the first graduate of Wilton's ABC program. “It gave me the confidence to know I could succeed in a highly competitive environment.” Chambers,

originally from Mt. Vernon, New York, graduated from Brown University. After a two-year stint as a financial analyst with Goldman Sachs, he now lives and works in Manhattan as an assistant vice president for corporate development at Vista Research, a division of Standard & Poor's.

In 1996, when Chambers entered the program as a freshman, there were just three students living in the ABC House, at the time a smaller residence near the library. Chambers was attracted to the supportive family atmosphere. "I looked at a few schools, including some boarding schools," (some ABC programs offer this option) "but decided on Wilton because I thought living in a house with a close-knit group of people interested in my success was superb," he says. Chambers is quick to point out that the program's support and mentoring systems provided him with a sense of mission. "I am naturally driven, but having the onus placed on me by people who have dedicated their time and dollars helped."

ABC runs on private funding, as well as donations and grants from corporations and foundations. Its new house was paid for "through a massive capital fund drive and the generosity and foresight of board members and donors," Barbara Myers, current president of ABC's board of directors, explains gratefully. Each year, ABC volunteers work tirelessly to raise the roughly \$200,000 necessary to operate the program. These funds cover the costs to

house and feed the students and enable them to "receive educational extras, such as tutoring and summer enrichment programs."

## Getting Started

The highly competitive selection process begins at the national office of ABC, with hundreds of hopeful applicants from middle schools across the country vying for openings. Students are judged by a number of factors: they must consistently perform at or above grade level both in Math and English, maintain an overall academic average of B+ or above, and rank in the top 10% of their class. Also considered are extracurricular activities and personal attributes of the individual. Standardized admission tests are required, as are supporting documentation, such as transcripts and teacher recommendations.

Applications are then referred out to the local ABC chapters. Following careful review by the selection committee, prospective candidates and their parents are invited to visit. Myers says a primary concern of the committee is to avoid setting anyone up for failure. "Wilton High School is academically and socially demanding," she notes, "and we strive to be certain our scholars have a reasonable chance for success."

A typical visit begins on a Sunday when the prospective student and his parents arrive at the house to meet board members and the resident directors. The candidate then joins the current ABC stu-

dents for dinner and stays overnight. He spends Monday shadowing Wilton High School students in their classes. At the end of the day, he returns to the house to take a required short math quiz and write an essay, and be interviewed by the selection committee. A decision is reached, based on this interview and the scholar's and resident directors' feedback.

## An Inside Look

Nancy Denman is the ABC House stand-in mom, cook, confidante, and greeter. She's been coming to the house for the past three years, arriving in time for the boys' return from school and staying until after dinner. Nancy can usually be found holding court in the kitchen.

This room, with enough cabinets to hold provisions for a large family, navy blue high-tech appliances and an ample granite island, was given anonymously by a donor who was redecorating her home. Notes and reminders decorate the refrigerator door. A wicker basket piled high with fresh oranges and apples sits on the counter. Around six o'clock, the boys will take their seats at the kitchen's long rectangular table and enjoy one of the two choices Nancy cooks up each night. It might be chicken fajitas or steak with chimichurri sauce. They receive menus ahead of time and circle their choices so that Denman can shop accordingly. "I'll take their family recipes and requests!" Denman says as she deftly rinses a colander filled to the brim with fresh string beans.

To keep the house running smoothly, everyone pitches in. Household chores rotate weekly. "Our scholars take full responsibility for the house and work very hard," explains Myers. As an added incentive, their weekly allowance is contingent upon successful completion of these chores. The spotless surroundings are proof that their proficiency is not limited to academics.

John and Monisha Gibson, former ABC students themselves, serve as the Resident Directors. They live in the house with their two young children, and provide the stability of a nurturing, family environment, supervising the boys, and serving as role models. Like many "working parents," the Gibsons spend their days at jobs outside the home, but are there for the boys in the evenings, and on weekends (although each Sunday and one weekend a month, they stay with a local "host" family, and most of them return home for long weekends, summers, and major vacations). Each year, the students' parents may visit on parents' weekend.

The Gibsons assign household chores, stay in contact with the students' parents, as well as the Board and host families, and maintain a relationship with the live-in Academic Counselor, Tyrone Shafer, who works closely with each student to help with organization, exam preparation, and school projects. With the recent move to its new and larger house, the ABC program now provides a live-in space for Shafer, as well as a recreational lounge, study hall, five bedrooms, a large bathroom, and a workout area.

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Edwin Carbajal, currently a sophomore from the Bronx, “right near Yankee stadium,” is proud to show off the house. The beds are neatly made, the floors clear of stray clothing or shoes; in the bathroom, the four sinks and showers shine.

Carbajal is the oldest of three children, and takes pride in the fact that his family “always stressed education.” His eyes shine behind his glasses and when he speaks, the corners of his mouth turn up and he automatically sits up straighter. His demeanor suggests “I love it here” without actually saying it.

“I was connected with ABC through the enrichment program I attended at my middle school in Riverdale,” he explains. Carbajal’s interests, among them music, sports, literature, and writing, are unquestionably met at Wilton High School. He is involved in the creative writing club, travel soccer, and the band. “The worst part of ABC was living away—at first. I was so used to the Bronx...but the best is this group of boys, all the opportunities to take different interesting courses.”

Like his housemate Edwin, Chris Payne, a senior from Chicago, comes from a family who thinks education and hard work “are essential.” He is the recipient of the Ralph Desantis Chapter of the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame award for the scholar/athlete with the highest grade point average. As of this writing, Payne is awaiting responses from eleven colleges. His older siblings—seven in all—attend college, and one sister attended an ABC program in Indiana.

“I knew I wanted a change from Chicago,” Chris says. His tone grows serious. “It was tough in the beginning. Wilton is so different

from Chicago, with trees, and grass everywhere. I’m used to the noisy, busy streets...” Although quiet at first, he says he quickly adapted. “After a few weeks, I got used to how everything worked,” he explains. “And I was lucky to find a host family who is very loving and attends all my games and concerts.” Evidence of Payne’s acclimation can be found in just about every aspect of school life. He is president of the band, a member the National Honor Society, as well as a coach for seventh and eighth grade football, and thrilled to be tackling his latest—and favorite—book, *Frankenstein*.

“Did you read it? It’s great!” he says, smiling broadly.

## And Outside...

The boys have more than just talent, drive, and hard work in common. Chris Payne’s wish is to “return to my neighborhood and give back,” and Edwin Carbajal tells me he already goes back to his middle school from time to time to volunteer at the enrichment program that gave him so much. Ray Chambers serves on the ABC board as the alumni coordinator. He helps current students with the college selection process and aids alumni in their job searches. He has also worked hard at redesigning the website ([abcwilton.org](http://abcwilton.org)).

While it might be true that returning home is a reminder of what they left behind, it is also true that these ABC students clearly see how much they’ve gained. “We’re not looking to break the family ties these boys have,” Myers explains, “and they will always be in two worlds.”

And making those two worlds a much better place. ☒