

# Responsible Fathers

## Responsible Fathers Program helps men connect with their children.

**“The program has been a savior for me ...I have spent a lot of time with my children, valuable time that I did not spend with them before because my mind was in the wrong place.”**

ALAN, A STARHILL RESIDENT

At Starhill and at the Parole Transition Program (PTP), recovering drug addicts and parolees strive to reintegrate into society. For many men, this involves connecting with their children, sometimes after years of absence. Afraid of being rejected, some give up on being fathers. But in 2001, with funding from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Palladia launched the Responsible Fathers Program to help men become part of their children's lives. “The program has been a savior for me,” said Alan, a Starhill resident who started attending sessions last June. “Although it has only been six months, I have spent a lot of time with my children...” For Alan, 34, developing a relationship with his two teenage sons in the Bronx did not come easy. “At one point, they did not even want to speak to me. I just kept trying and trying. I asked them for another chance,” he said.

Program Coordinator Richard McGuire and his staff help these men make the most of their second chance at fatherhood. They are present at every step of the reunification process, from dealing with arrears in child support and family court hearings to mediating conflicts with ex-partners. Some men have tens of thousand dollars in arrears and McGuire's team is able to assist them.

“I didn't think I had a chance in life because of my past,” said Michael, a 35-year-old Starhill resident. “I had a lot of child support to pay. We were able to freeze the debt, make a payment plan.”

Twice a week for three months, men who choose to participate attend group sessions and talk about topics such as parenting skills, out-of-wedlock pregnancy prevention, child support and arrears, employment goals and family conflict resolution. At least one monthly individual session is mandatory. When clients complete certain program requirements, they become eligible for bi-monthly

8-hour visits with their children.

“At one time, most of the TANF funding went to mother and children programs,” McGuire said, “but with data about the positive impact of a father's involvement in family life, fatherhood initiatives have flourished nationwide. Recent research shows that if a father participates in his child's life, there is a higher probability that the child will remain in school and stay substance abuse and crime free. Ninety percent of clients grew up without full-time fathers. They are repeating a cycle. It is the same pattern. We try to get them to look at the impact that it's had on them and how it could affect their children.”

Michael saw the difference in his daughter's behavior when he became involved in her life again. “When I was on drugs and incarcerated, it was affecting my daughter's life. In school, she was not focused in class,” he said. “Now her grades are picking up, her attitude has changed.”

The program's group therapy sessions focus on the basics of parenting, but the sessions are often emotional too. “This is basically a brotherhood; we have a bond,” said Lavar, 25, who has already graduated from the program but enjoys coming back to learn from his peers.

After completing the program—which lasts three months and is followed by three months of aftercare—men talk about the good time they spend with their children, whether it is repainting a room together, watching “Dora the Explorer” or eating seafood on City Island. Alan, who says he never thought he could teach his kids anything, is now able to discuss the dangers of the streets with his two sons, while Michael has had serious conversations with his teenage daughter about relationships. “We are on the right track,” said Alan. “We are communicating with our children again.”