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HOW TO LIVE UNITED: JOIN HANDS. OPEN YOUR HEART. LEND YOUR MUSCLE. FIND YOUR VOICE.

A Young Mother Receives an Important Education in Nutrition

Last year, Dishea was a 19-year old mother in the Westchester County foster care system, living in a foster care supervised apartment with her ten-month old son in Yonkers. Dishea attended GED, nutrition and parenting classes at A Different Start program. A Different Start receives EFSP funding and guidance through the United Way of Westchester and Putnam, and is run by United Way partner, Westchester Jewish Community Services. An outstanding student, Dishea studied hard and passed the very challenging, comprehensive 12-hour GED exam. Few people realize that the academic competency required to pass the 6-part GED exam is more difficult than meeting the minimum high school graduation requirements.

In nutrition classes, Dishea experimented with, and experienced, a variety of new healthy food choices. She learned to enjoy whole wheat bread, fruit and yogurt smoothies, low sugar cereals, turkey chili, and vegetable stir fry served with brown rice. Dishea realized that she could choose to give her baby plain Cheerios instead of the sweetened variety and that he would be quite happy learning to pick up and feed himself the tiny Cheerios. Most importantly, she learned how to cook and serve healthy choices at home for herself and her family. This year Dishea left foster care and now lives with her baby's father, a security guard in Yonkers. She is currently enrolled in a Certified Nurses Aid course and hopes to continue on to an RN nursing program while working as a nursing aid. Like many former students of A Different Start, Dishea continues to rely on the food pantry while she gets her education. Each week Dishea, along with other program graduates, comes to A Different Start to select a bag of groceries stocked with healthy choices for herself and her family. A Different Start allows participants to select their own food from an open shelf food pantry, supervised by staff. An open pantry eliminates waste as each bag can be custom to meet that family's needs. As the staff watches Dishea carefully select low sodium soups, fruit packed without added sugar, and read the labels before putting groceries in her bag, they are proud to see the results of their nutrition education program. Dishea always asks for fresh produce. It is so rewarding for staff to fill her bag with apples, spinach and carrots, knowing first of all that Dishea and her family are not going hungry. And so importantly, Dishea has learned not only how to make healthy choices for herself, but for her son. He will learn a lifetime of good habits from his mom – and the whole family can look forward to a healthier future.

This is one of the many ways that United Way works with its partners to improve the education, income and health of our residents – and to tackle problems at their source.