

Vanessa

Vanessa welcomes me into her neat and nicely furnished home. A boy is relaxing on the couch in front of the TV. “Hi, are you Terrell?,” I say. “TerrELL,” he answers, correcting my pronunciation. Later he joins us at the dining room table to study his 6th grade, Ancient World History lesson. Terrell is Vanessa’s youngest child ... “my baby,” she calls him. Vanessa projects a quiet spirit that belies her strength and determination to better her life and the lives of her children.

At 26 years old, Vanessa was living in public housing in Bethlehem. Having used drugs since she was 12 years old, she spent more of her young life in addiction than clean and sober. She had never held a job, and lived solely on public assistance. She came to Lancaster with nothing, and entered a treatment program for her alcoholism and depression so that she could avoid losing her children. A church family adopted Vanessa’s family and with their help, she found an apartment and employment. Her goals were to become stable, get a job, and be a good mother.

When she received a mailing from Tabor about the first-time homebuyers program, she saw an opportunity to provide more stability for her family. In Tabor’s Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program she met Rya, who counseled her on the steps she needed to take to reach her goals. From there Vanessa began participating in Tabor’s Consumer Credit Counseling Services and cleared her debt, paying \$35 a month for 16 months. Vanessa also enrolled in the Family Savings Account program, putting aside money for the down payment and closing costs on a home and receiving a \$1,000 match.

Vanessa did not graduate from high school, but for her children she says, “schooling comes first.” She wants all her children to go through school and be self-sufficient. So having a home close to her children’s schools was very important. Ginny, a Coldwell Banker realtor, would pick Vanessa up after work to look at houses, eventually finding one within walking distance of all three schools her children attended. She closed on her home purchase on November 17, 2006, making history as the first person in Lancaster City to purchase a home through the Section 8 Homeownership program.

Both of her oldest daughters received full scholarships from McCaskey to attend college. The oldest was obviously influenced by Vanessa’s belief in education. A graduate of Millersville University, she works in school administration, coaches the cheerleading team, and looks forward to a career in teaching. The second was strongly influenced by the mother of the church family that adopted Vanessa’s family. Listening to her stories about being a nurse, she knew that was what she wanted to be, and just graduated as an LPN in April. Vanessa’s two younger daughters and Terrell still live at home.

Vanessa has been working with her counselor, Rya, for 5 years and is in the final phase of her post home-purchase counseling. “Rya is more like a friend, now,” she says. “I can talk to her about personal and work problems.” Vanessa has her driver’s permit

and looks forward to getting her driver's license and not having to depend on others to take her places she needs to go. "If you put your mind to it, you can do anything you want to do."

Vanessa has been sober since February 2003. She faithfully attends AA meetings and keeps in touch with her sponsor. Rya marvels at Vanessa's success—"Without a high school education she maintains stable, full-time employment to support her children, regardless of the many changes and difficulties she has endured."

Vanessa has been content and comfortable working at Wal-Mart for the past 9 years. She enjoys being a resource for her friends, letting them know what services are out there and where they can go for help. She remembers when she went to the Council of Churches for food baskets and how she learned about the scholarship programs for her children. If she were to get another job, she would like to be a counselor. For now, "I try not to think about the future ... just stay in the day."

I ask Terrell if he would like a picture with his mother. "Sure," he says, smiling broadly and proudly. I leave behind a picture of a son with his loving, involved mother, who came to Lancaster homeless, and is now the owner of a three-bedroom row home in a quiet Lancaster City neighborhood.