

# A parent program that changed a grad's life

Posted November 17, 2016



**Brandy Williams said leadership training changed her life.**

LISA HERNDON

## **By Lisa Herndon**

“I was a frustrated parent, single mother, raising three frustrated children,” said Brandy Williams, a school assistant the New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science (AMS) in Marble Hill, about her life two years ago.

It was before she enrolled in the Parent Leadership Training Institute at AMS, a 20-week program where participants learn about education policy, how to work with state and local elected office, understand budgets and how to advocate on behalf of their children. “Now I am a walking advocate leader for myself and others,” Ms. Williams said. Her eldest daughter, Cassandra, is a 2016 AMS graduate.

She credits being the training program's graduate for changing her life and improving the lives of her three children. To staff members to AMS, Ms. Williams is an integral part of the team and improves the lives of families in the school community.

"It actually opened up a lot of doors for me to be more confident, what I do in life and how to help others who are going through the situation or a similar situation," Ms. Williams said, as she sat in the school's art room.

Lisa Gibson, president of Family School Organization Leadership Cabinet, the school's parent organization, called Ms. Williams someone who keeps a watchful eye for opportunities that benefit students and families.

"I have watched in amazement as she addressed the needs of a parent whose child was being challenged academically in school, sharing with them the facts when it came to their rights, the obligations of the education system and encouraging them to not be discouraged - she would be right there every step of the way. I wish every school had someone like Brandy on staff - her commitment is contagious!" said Ms. Gibson in emailed comments.

Ms. Gibson, who first met Ms. Williams last January, is also a graduate of the Parent Leadership Training Institute.

"It isn't just her going through the motions. It's about her sometimes going above and beyond what her position calls for and being physically present for our parents," said Sanya Hudson, the school's associate director of community engagement and alumni relations.

Ms. Williams interned at her office, and after seeing first-hand how the school worked with students and families, got a job as Ms. Hudson's assistant, a position funded by a grant from Macy's.

Ms. Hudson recounted how on one occasion Ms. Williams helped the family of a student who had a disability to find a school setting that worked best for the student. Instead of just forwarding the information, Ms. Williams accompanied the family to the Education Department's Family Center to advocate for the family and assist with finding a good match.

The training institute not only changed her life but it changed the lives of her children. Ms. Williams found herself in the role of her daughter's advocate at AMS when Cassandra was nearly asked to leave, while Ms. Williams was taking classes during the training program.

"She had to be out of the school for a little bit to take care of mental health. While she was out, me and her father were coming in and doing meetings so she could come back into school," she said. Because of what she learned through the Institute, she was able to work out a plan of action and keep Cassandra's seat at AMS.

"It taught me how to advocate for her and for her to advocate for herself," Ms. Williams said. Cassandra graduated from AMS in June and is now a freshman at Herkimer College.

Her middle daughter, Briana, is more focused at school and was just elected vice president of her senior class and is “doing wonderful,” Ms. Williams said. She added that her daughter, who has an individualized education plan, intends to earn a Regents diploma.

Her youngest daughter, Adriana, is a junior at the Marie Curie School for Medicine, Nursing and Health Professions.

Robert Hiller, the AMS principal, said the program benefitted the school by giving its staff a better understanding of how to assist parents.

“Ms. Williams has been crucial in helping us further develop systems to work with our families - especially around parent communication. Her advocacy and voice [have] been so important in our process as she experienced our school as a parent for four years,” said Mr. Hiller.

Established in 2014, the Parent Leadership Training Institute is a program through the New Visions Charter Network in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, Ms. Hudson said. The program accepts approximately 26 people per session. The chapter at AMS is the only one in the Bronx.

Ms. Williams was a student in its first class. Next, she will be developing the program’s alumni network and a focus group on how the school can best continue to assist parents.

“My whole life changed with who I am now, which I am very happy for,” Ms. Williams said.

Original Post: <http://riverdalepress.com/stories/A-parent-program-that-changed-a-grads-life,61190>