

Amazed: School Helps Fire Victims

By: Greg Gross

March 29, 2008 - A lot has happened to Dereese Williams in eight days. Two weeks ago, he and his family had a home on Smyser Street in York. That Thursday, their home was destroyed in a five-alarm fire. Since then, he and his family have been living in a hotel. The 13-year-old said he was embarrassed about what had happened to his family and how vulnerable it made him feel. But he's coming to grips with the fire and how it affected him, and he's ready to move on with his life.

Friday, a few of the major pieces fell into place. Students at New Hope Academy Charter School in York, where Dereese is in eighth grade, presented Dereese and his family with nearly everything they need to furnish a new house -- and a temporary place to call home.

"It's kind of weird for the community to be helping us out, but it's nice," Dereese said. Beds, dressers, side tables, lamps, and a washer and dryer sat covered with blankets in the school's multipurpose room. As a curtain on the stage was pulled back, a couch, a loveseat, an armchair, a kitchen table, a computer and many other items were revealed. Denise Stouffer, director of education at New Hope, said that about \$20,000 was collected during the week for Friday, which the school dubbed D-Day: Dereese Day. "This day is really simple. It's how you use your life to make a difference," Isiah Anderson, chief administrative officer for Three Cord Youth Services, New Hope's parent company, told the students.

Anderson said that, when word spread about the fire, a student group called O'Ambassadors pulled together, organized and rallied students to support one of their own. Jessie Mummert, 13, one of the O'Ambassadors, said the group made calls to see who was willing to help, went to stores to buy items and organized days when students could donate money and supplies in exchange for not having to wear collared shirts to school. Next door, students and school employees went into hyper-drive, cleaning and repairing a New Hope-owned house for Dereese and his family to move into until they can find a new home.

Alpine Signs, the company where Dennis Williams, Dereese's father, works, is helping the family search for a permanent home. Chastity and Jade Frederick, directors of urban student ministries at the York City Church of the Nazarene, presented the Williams family with gifts and gift cards and said the church will collect a special offering for the family during today's service. Williams said he was overwhelmed by the support and generosity his family has received. "This is a life-changing experience for the better," Williams told the crowd.

HOW TO HELP

To help Dereese Williams and his family, donations can be sent to the New Hope Academy Charter School, 459 W. King St., York PA 17401; or to the Stillmeadow Church of the Nazarene, 400 Stillmeadow Lane, York, PA 17404, Attn: Chastity and Jade Frederick.

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Photos by Kate Penn



During a presentation Friday at New Hope Academy Charter School, Theresa Brown realizes that not only did students raise \$20,000 for a downpayment on a new home, but also that the home will be completely furnished thanks to donations.



Dennis Williams and his granddaughter Aviona Brown, 3, check out their temporary apartment provided by New Hope Charter School on Friday after they lost their home in a fire on Smyser Street last Thursday. The apartment was one of many gifts totaling a value of about \$20,000 raised by classmates and community members.