

Fresh start at NKY Scholar House



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*Syann Williams, 16 months, plays on the piano in the living room of her new apartment she shares with her mother, Debbie, at the Northern Kentucky Scholar House on Tuesday morning.
The Enquirer/Amanda Rossmann*

A few months ago, Debbie Williams was stuck: Living in subsidized housing in Roselawn, working two jobs, rushing to day care with her baby.

It was a cycle of futility, she said. And although she was a committed nurse's aide, she could not find time or energy to go to college.

"Life just shows up, and there's nobody to help you," Williams said. "You just sink or swim."

But now Williams, a 34-year-old single mom, is at home in Northern Kentucky Scholar House.

Here, she drops off Syann, 1, at an on-site, certified, child-care center. She works 20 hours a week, and goes to Cincinnati State Technical and Community College full time to become a licensed practical nurse.

She's still busy. But she lives in a campus-like community where parenting, work and school are balanced with help from a supportive staff and neighbors who are also single parents working and pursuing a higher educational goal.

"That's the beautiful part about it," Williams said. "We're all having the same struggles."

Williams is one of 36, soon to be 48 residents, at the new Scholar House, the 10th Scholar House in Kentucky and first in Northern Kentucky. The agency at 450 W. Sixth St. in Newport will celebrate its opening Wednesday, welcoming funders to see the child-care center, naturally set playgrounds and apartments.

Newport Neighborhood Foundations, owner of the Northern Kentucky Scholar House, has partnered with the Brighton Center and the Model Group, a property development and management company building the 48 units and the Early Scholars Child Development Center next door. The Brighton Center is heading up educational programming and staffing. Neighborhood Foundations is managing the properties.

Every resident at the Scholar House is enrolled in a post-high school educational program, said Tammy Weidinger, president and CEO of the Brighton Center. Cincinnati State, Northern Kentucky University, and Gateway Community and Technical College partner with the agency to help ensure their students' success.

Three out of four apartment complexes, with 12 units in each, are finished, and the fourth should be done in November.

For Williams, who moved in about a month ago, every day has taken her further from the uncertainties she lived with before.

"They watch your grades. They have day care right on site. I feel like if my foot slips, they own it," she said, laughing.

The \$9.1 million project is funded in a variety of ways, with private donors; Brighton Center; Newport Millennium Corp., a nonprofit affiliate of Newport Neighborhood Foundations; Kentucky Housing Corp.; and Campbell County Fiscal Court among entities and individuals that provided project money. The city of Newport donated the land.

Others, too, have been involved preparing for the residents of the Scholar House. Churches are among groups that have donated items for a care basket that includes a broom, mop, shower curtain, paper towels, even a welcome mat.

"When I saw it I almost started crying," Williams said of the welcome basket.

Syann is happy, too, her mother said. It's evident as she bangs on a piano in their new apartment, as she plays with other toddlers at the child-care center, and smiles, shrieks and chatters to just about every adult that comes near her.

Williams said the Northern Kentucky Scholar House gives her and her daughter a better chance in life.

"It gives you that boost that you need," she said. "I see that light at the end of the road."