

WHO: Highbanks Society

WHAT: Provides young mothers between the ages of 16 and 24 with affordable family unit accommodation and support services

WHY THEY'RE ON THE A-LIST: 25 mothers and their children have lived in its six apartment units over the past five years, escaping poverty and starting new lives

Raising a child can be difficult under the best circumstances. But raising a child without a dependable partner, an affordable place to live or the necessary life skills and education makes the odds of stumbling all the more likely.

Highbanks Society works to skew those odds in favour of success by providing housing and support for young women and their children. The society was created in 2001 by parent educator Bette Mitchell, who realized many of the mothers she was visiting were segregated from each other with no one to relate to. The women were also often trapped in unstable living situations, forced to couch surf with their children or remain in unhealthy relationships just so they had shelter.

"When you are isolated, you can easily get depressed or caught up in a crowd that you wouldn't normally choose, but you are desperate," Mitchell says.

Highbanks provides a stable and supportive environment by housing the women in the program together. The Society owns and operates the Bowview Apartment building in West Hillhurst, housing four independent family units, which it rents to mothers at a reduced rate for up to two years. The apartment building forms the hub of the Highbanks community that facilitates peer support and makes it easier for wraparound services such as social workers to reach the families. Highbanks also sub-leases two units in a separate building to families participating in its support programs.

All Highbanks residents must be enrolled in a full-time education program, whether high school or post-secondary. They also have to attend monthly group meetings with guest speakers who share practical information and life

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skills to help them gain independence. Financial planners, pharmacists, lawyers and nutritionists have all volunteered their time and advice.

"It's all about empowering them with education and awareness about different things, not just book smarts, but life knowledge," says program manager Cecilia de la Rocha, who, along with Mitchell, forms Highbanks' entire payroll.

Mothers who have moved on from Highbanks are still able to access the support, and many return as board members and mentors. All are considered part of the growing community. Its increasing network has led to a facility expansion that will add space to the Bowview building, allowing for more residents and increased community outreach, plus a rooftop patio that will provide a safe outdoor play space for the kids. —*Jaelyn Molyneux*

What Can You Do?

For volunteer opportunities, or to make cash or in-kind donations such as building materials for Highbanks' current expansion, call Cecilia at 403-521-0082 or visit highbanksociety.ca.



Bette Mitchell,
Nicole Fisher and
Cristian Soto