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OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Helping Hand For At-Risk Families

39 Sites Statewide Offer Free Program Aimed At Parents And Children

By **JOSH KOVNER**

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NEW HAVEN — Nonthu Mapuvire came to New Haven from Zimbabwe in 2006 to live with her mother and sister.

The 21-year-old had not finished high school. She didn't have a job. As the years

passed, the dynamics of the household were becoming more and more difficult for her. She felt isolated. She pined for independence. Then, in the late winter of 2010, she got pregnant.

"I felt pressure," she recalled. "I thought I would be a terrible mother."

So she took a leap of faith.

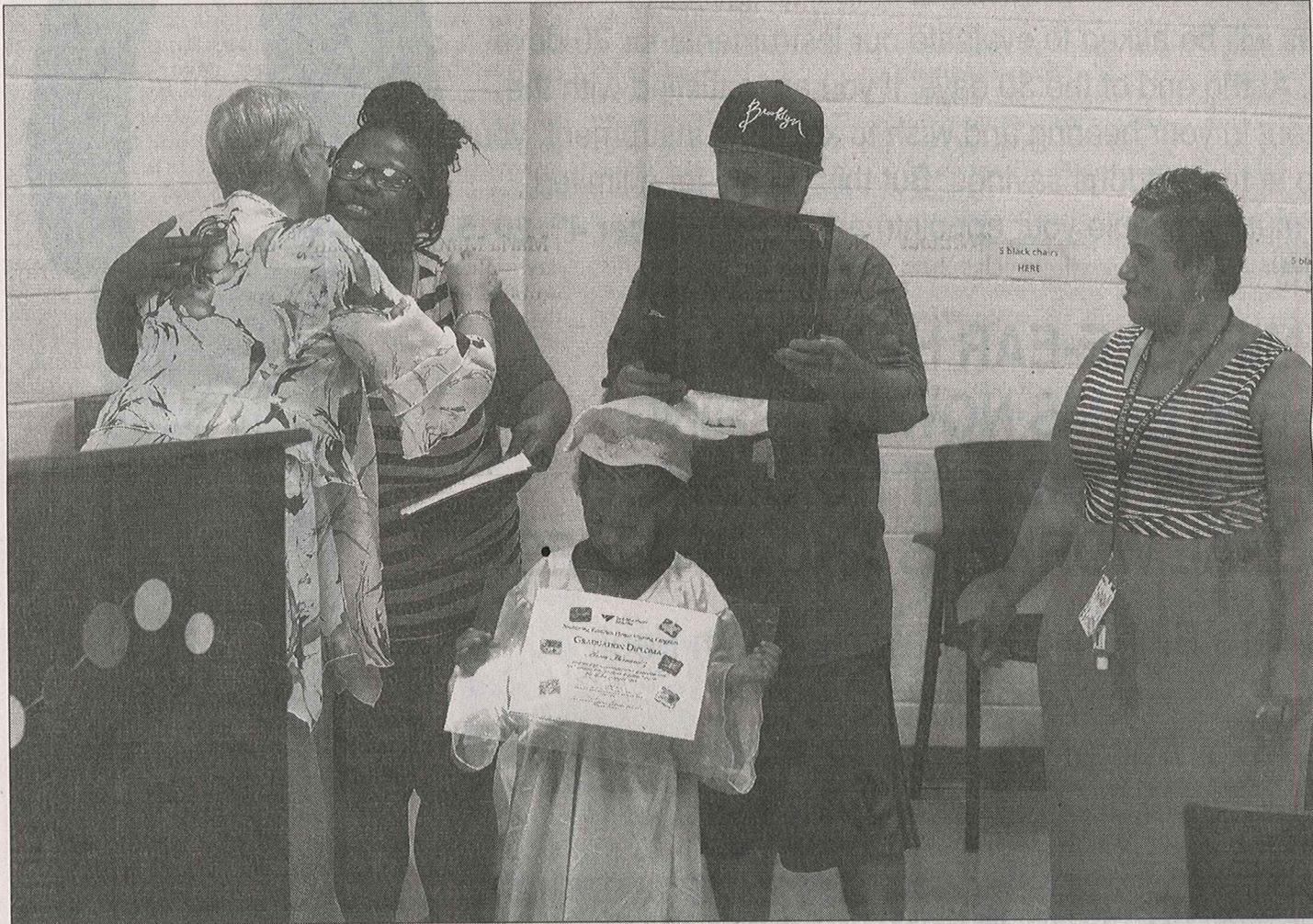
She had met Myreya Alvarez, a home visitor and parent educator with the Nurturing Families program, at a prenatal health clinic.

Alvarez was there looking for expectant mothers who needed help, and who might be at risk of abusing or neglecting their children. Alvarez doesn't necessarily tell the mothers

this, but one of Nurturing Families' goals, along with helping needy families find stability and getting the children ready for kindergarten, is to prevent avoidable injuries to children.

Amid all the help that the moms receive in

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PROGRAM MANAGER Melissa Rowe, left, hugs Latoria Parson as Parson's daughter, Aurea Hernandez, 5, looks on at a graduation ceremony last week for the Nurturing Families program at Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital. Parson's husband and Aurea's father, Anthony Hernandez, center, looks at his wife's diploma, and parent educator Winel Polanco is at right. The ceremony for three women and their children who completed the program was held at the Courtland Wilson Library in New Haven.

Families

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child-rearing and squaring away their own lives, there remains a strong emphasis on soothing a crying baby and proper feeding

Mapuvire agreed to take the screening test for the voluntary Nurturing Families program. Seventeen true-or-false questions: Mother is 18 or younger; mother is single or unemployed, or has an unstable housing situation, or no phone, or substance abuse issues, mental illness, no high school education, poor prenatal care...

Three T's and you're in, but only if you are willing to open your door to Alvarez or one of the other 200 home visitors statewide. Once a week for an hour. The program, in its entirety, lasts five years.

The average family stays for 22 months. Bad mood? A crisis? A disappointment? Tired? It's snowing out? You open the door.

The program, free to the families, is built on commitment and trust.

"At first, it seemed kind of strange to me. It took a few weeks to get to know Myreya, to get to know what she stood for," said Mapuvire, whose full first name is Nonhuthuzelo. She goes by Nonthu.

"I came to trust her so much, and I really like the program. It give us the power to be the best mothers," she said.

And there she was on Tuesday evening, wriggling with glee, holding up her five-year certificate, with her daughter, Michelle, born in August 2010, in a yellow graduation gown, standing in front of her, in a room at the Courtland Wilson Library, on Washington Street in New Haven.

Mapuvire and two other families graduated from the Nurturing Families program at Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital, one of 39 sites statewide. There are about 10 sites in the Hartford area.

Mapuvire stepped to the lectern. She read a poem about how she treasures the smiles that Alvarez has put on her face through the years, "because, she says, 'a smile cannot be bought or borrowed or stolen.'"

She said later that she wasn't sure she was going to stay in the program for five years.

"But it helped me so much in raising my daughter, even to handle breast-feeding," Mapuvire said.

In all, about 3,000 families participate throughout the state. Half the moms are under 18. All are first- or second-time mothers.

Although only about 15 percent of the families stay the whole five years, it doesn't take that long to get the full benefit of the parent education, the school-readiness activities, and help with finding medical care, decent housing, day care, schooling, a job, transportation, and more intense clinical services, if needed, said Karen Foley-Schain.

"We're engaging a family at a critical time, and most recognize they can benefit from the help."

**Karen Foley-Schain,
Office of Early Childhood**

Foley-Schain works for the Office of Early Childhood. She runs the Family Support Services Division, where Nurturing Families resides.

"We're engaging a family at a critical time, and most recognize they can benefit from the help. We're not going in after a crisis. Often, we can start prenatally, helping mom prepare for the baby, and we're there with her when the baby comes home."

The yearly budget to serve the 3,000 families is about \$14 million: \$10 million in state funds and \$4 million in federal funds.

Child-abuse figures are markedly lower for parents who have gone through Nurturing Families, said Foley-Schain.

Research conducted for several years showed that about 2.5 percent of the families in the program had substantiated reports of child abuse, compared with 19 percent to 22 percent of families with similar risk factors who weren't in the program, she said.

Dr. John Leventhal, medical director of the child-abuse program at Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital, said the in-

home parent education is not only helping mothers get their children ready for preschool and kindergarten, but it is creating safer homes and reducing preventable injuries.

A proven curriculum titled "Parents as Teachers" is used to help the moms and dads bring their children along and have fun doing it. One mark of success, says Foley-Schain, is when the parents feel a deep satisfaction in the job they are doing.

Commitment and trust, backed up by science.

"It takes parents who know this is important," Myra Jones Taylor, commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood, told the three families and the Nurturing Family staff members at the graduation ceremony.

"I don't know if I would have wanted to talk to someone when I had my first child. 'Get out of my face' — you know? But three weeks in, I wished I did," Jones Taylor said.

Melissa Rowe, director of the Nurturing Families site at Yale-New Haven, gave each family a goody bag, including a bag of marbles "in case you lose yours," and a piece of string "for when you are at the end of your rope."

Alvarez said she is still working with Mapuvire even though five years have passed, and is helping her find new housing.

Mapuvire said she has begun taken GED classes and wants to go to culinary school.

"Because, you know, I love cooking," she says with joy in her eyes.