



## Learning The ABCs Of Helping Students

Hartford attorney supervises residential program for urban teens

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

**A**lyssa Cunningham leads the life of a busy professional. As an associate with Wiggin and Dana's health care practice, she routinely works into the night at her Hartford office. Then she drops by a house on Hopmeadow Street in Simsbury to see seven teenage boys and make sure they're keeping up with their studies and chores.

For Cunningham, it feels like she's the mother of the teenagers. But they're not her own flesh and blood. The Simsbury boarding house is operated by A Better Chance program.

Cunningham is the local president of the all-volunteer program that provides minority urban youth in good academic standing the opportunity to live and study in parts of the country where school systems are better funded.

"I don't have children of my own, so I feel sort of motherly toward them and enjoy guiding them and helping them succeed," Cunningham said.

She has been president of the Simsbury ABC program since last June, and has been on the board of directors for the past three years. She heard about the program by volunteering with the Junior Women's League in Simsbury when she moved to Connecticut from New York about five years ago.

Then she married her husband, a Simsbury native, who went to school with participants in the ABC program, and she soon made it the focus of her volunteer efforts. "I really believe in and enjoy being part of the house," said Cunningham, who lives in Simsbury.

ABC's national office is located in New York, and the program takes academically gifted students from impoverished urban

school districts and places them in suburban settings. Simsbury is one of nine public high schools in Connecticut that enroll students from ABC, and several private schools in the state also participate. Students must show that they're dedicated to their school work and perform well on a qualifying test before the ABC national office refers them to another school.

Usually, the students come from neighborhoods overrun by drugs and school systems with no college counseling office.

"There are not the same opportunities where they live and they're more likely to fall through the cracks and not realize their potential," Cunningham said. "The main goal is to get these kids into college and teach them the skills that they need to graduate college."

That also includes taking in cultural events, such as the theater, and working on public speaking skills and etiquette.

Six of the seven teenagers in the Simsbury program come from New York City and the other from Philadelphia.

### No Sleeping In

Cunningham spends at least 10 hours a week at the boarding house. Part of her job is to coordinate all of the volunteer efforts of nearly 60 people. That includes board members, academic advisors and volunteers who offer transportation or a place to stay when the student comes home sick from school and no one is at the boarding house.

Resident directors and resident tutors stay overnight at the boarding house. The only paid employee is the cook, though Cunningham currently is looking for a replacement now that the current cook is leaving for another job.



Gary Lewis

**Attorney Alyssa Cunningham spends at least 10 hours a week at the Simsbury ABC boarding house, where she coordinates the volunteer efforts of nearly 60 people.**

"That's the biggest challenge right now," Cunningham said. "Teenage boys eat a lot."

And there are strict schedules and rules to follow. The Simsbury ABC program, launched in 1973, includes mandatory study hours in the evening following the traditional sit-down dinner. There are also rules about bedtime and no cell phone use at night. Students also must abide by guidelines for keeping their grade point average at a certain level while keeping up with a regular routine of chores around the house.

There's no sleeping in on the weekends, and getting caught smoking or drinking

can lead to expulsion.

Cunningham enjoys dropping by the house frequently so that the students can put a name and a face to the person who helps make many of the rules. With so many people and activities to oversee, Cunningham said "it's helpful to be a lawyer."

She noted, "From practicing law, I've learned the importance of attention to detail and multi-tasking."

And her legal background comes in

handy because she is responsible for analyzing insurance coverage for the program and making sure corporate bylaws and policy manuals are accurate and updated with the program's mission.

And, of course, there's always a focus on fundraising.

Cunningham said it costs \$85,000 for the Simsbury ABC program to operate for a year, and no money comes from the national organization, state or federal government. It's

all private donations, and that has kept Cunningham seeking more assistance because she has seen the rewards when students graduate on to college.

"You can see it's meaningful to the students that someone cares about them and is interested in their future," she said. "They are great kids." ■

*For more information, visit [www.simsburyabetterchance.org](http://www.simsburyabetterchance.org).*