

In a world too often clouded by negativity, simple acts of kindness and caring can be transformative, improving the day – or even life – of both the giver and the recipient.

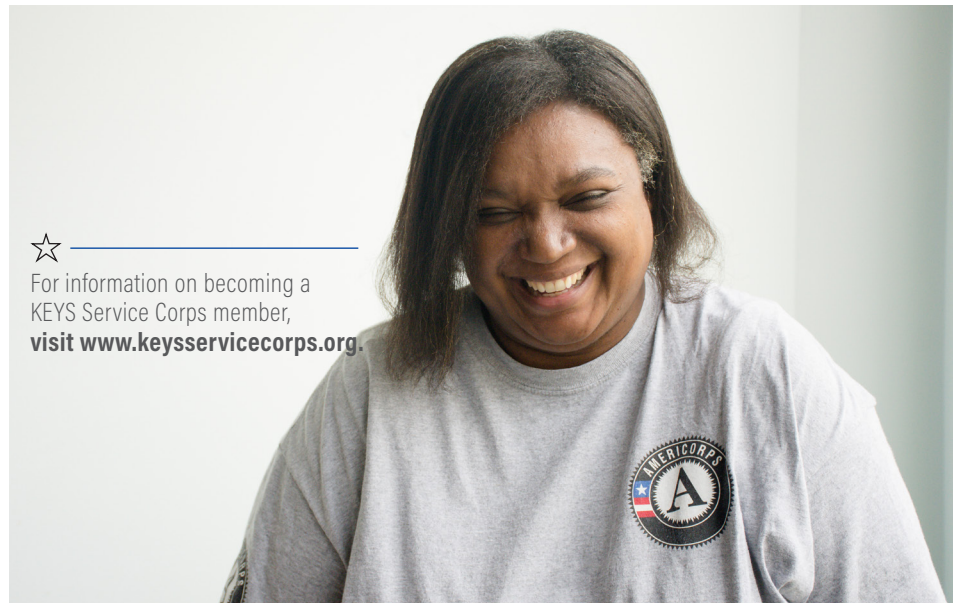
Members of KEYS (Knowledge to Empower Youth to Success) Service Corps, an AmeriCorps program run out of DHS, are such change-makers. Since 1995, more than 2,000 community-minded individuals from 43 states have participated in our local program, providing safe spaces and structured activities for local at-risk students, while also completing countless community service projects to benefit Allegheny County’s residents.

KEYS has been a wonderful extension of our work at DHS, creating change for thousands of our neighbors. Whether helping a kindergarten student learn his ABCs or creating an urban garden, KEYS members are, as the AmeriCorps Pledge states, “getting things done.”

Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
Department of Human Services

DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

KEYS Service Corps



☆ —————
For information on becoming a
KEYS Service Corps member,
visit www.keysservicecorps.org.

Keisha ☆ —————

Keisha may not be what you expect when you think of a KEYS member. She is a mother of five; a grandmother of two; and, at the time, worked in a warehouse. Even her daughter said, “But you’re a MOM! Nobody else in there is a MOM!” when Keisha mentioned her interest in KEYS Service Corps.

“At first, I felt a little awkward about it, since KEYS members are more likely to be younger, but it doesn’t say anywhere that older people can’t join and be a part,” Keisha explained with a smile.

Determined, she pushed hesitations aside and applied for the full-year program.

“I filled out the application, interviewed, and then I had to wait. It was like waiting for a college acceptance letter!

When I finally learned I was going to be a member of the 2015-2016 class, I was like ‘YES!’”

Keisha continued on back



Rich Fitzgerald
Allegheny County Executive

Keisha continued:

Supervised by Emily – “Boss Lady,” as Keisha affectionately

calls her – Keisha began her service in three kindergarten classrooms at Urban Pathways K-5. Although it had been years since she had helped her own children with coursework, she quickly immersed herself in sight words, phonetic sounds, and numbers, working with students one-on-one and in small groups throughout the day.

“Teachers have to teach the whole class, and they can’t put all of their time into one person. As a KEYS member, I can give you as much time as you need. We can do this at lunchtime! I’m not going to take over your lunch, but I’m going to get a couple of

minutes in so we can do your numbers or learn your letters.”

For many, this personalized attention was crucial to improving their skills and increasing their confidence.

“One day, a student told me that she ‘didn’t have a smart brain.’ I said, ‘Don’t you ever say that. You do have a smart brain. We’re going to do this together.’ We worked at it every day until she was able to do her reading. I was so proud of her! Knowing that I was able to play a small role in helping her to see her potential – that made me feel good.”

While the impact Keisha has had on her students is immeasurable, they were

not the only beneficiaries of the KEYS program: Keisha has seen a transformation in herself over the past year.

“This whole thing has been a surprise. I went in thinking that I would just do what I needed to do and then it would be over. I wasn’t expecting to fit in, but I really bonded with the younger KEYS members; they made me feel welcome. Through KEYS, my computer skills have improved, I feel more comfortable talking to different people, and I have learned so much that I can take to my next job – even if it doesn’t involve working with children. This was a truly unforgettable experience for me. I am glad that I was able to be a part of it.”

Emily ☆



Nearly two decades ago, Emily was taking a break from college and looking for a productive way to spend her time. Serendipitously, she saw a sign promoting KEYS Service Corps while volunteering at a local nonprofit.

“Even though I didn’t know exactly what it was, I just knew I wanted to do it – I felt like it was my future. So, I called the number. It was 1998! That’s what we did back then!”

Since she began her service late in the year, there was only one site available: Northside Urban Pathways (now Urban Pathways). After a successful interview, she settled in for a year-and-a-half of service, providing one-on-one instruction and skill development to middle school students. She used her passion for art to teach in creative, visual ways. As Emily was finishing her term, she realized the students and school had her heart. She couldn’t imagine leaving.

“I spoke with our new boss and told her I really wanted to stay on as a full-time employee. It was non-negotiable to me. I didn’t think they’d find a better candidate.”

Over the next several years, Emily worked at Urban Pathways and used her AmeriCorps education award to complete her degree in art education. After a short break to stay at home with her young son, she returned to the school full time in 2005 as an art teacher.

“The first thing I did when I came back was ask ‘Who is taking care of KEYS?’ They said nobody. It had kind of fallen apart while I was gone. I said ‘Well, then I am.’ I have been the site supervisor ever since.”

Through her time as Urban Pathways’ site supervisor, Emily has managed dozens of KEYS Service members, including Keisha. Her experience as both a supervisor and a member gives her a unique appreciation of the program.

“I know how much KEYS gave to me, personally and professionally, and I know that any member we place will benefit from being in the school. It helps my students, too. It exposes them to different people – a different way of looking at things.”

Although her KEYS journey has already spanned 18 years, Emily has no plans of stopping anytime soon. She is passionate about the benefits that the program provides for those in the Pittsburgh region.

“KEYS is getting a ton of stuff done in our community centers, schools, and agencies. Without this program, the community at large would be at a loss because so many lives – kids’ and adults’ – are being enriched. This is without a doubt one of the best kept secrets in Pittsburgh. As long as I can continue to do this work, I’m going to do it.”