

NEWS

New Start program lives up to name

Assistance League Chicagoland West helps families get into the kitchen, on their feet

By Pamela Lannom

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MoniKea Thomas — then MoniKea Hatten — was just 21 years old when she decided to take her baby boy and move in with her best friend to escape a domestic violence situation.

“I couldn’t get in school. I lost my financial aid,” she said. “I had my son, and for a whole year I just couldn’t catch a break.”

Her housing solution wasn’t permanent, however, and she and her son were homeless for about six months the following year. Then, in 2012, she discovered Catholic Charities and their transitional housing program. Unfortunately, with no driver’s license and no vehicle, she did not qualify.

“I found another program. I got my license. I got my car,” she said.

She spoke to the woman from Catholic Charities a second time.

“I told her, ‘I have my license. I have my car.’ She gave me a chance,” she said.

Thomas and her son, Ezekiel, moved into an apartment in Naperville. They didn’t have much. But thanks to Assistance League Chicagoland West’s New Start program, they had a fully equipped kitchen. Thomas said it brings her to tears remembering the first time she saw it.

“I just couldn’t believe everything in the kitchen was brand-spanking new,” she

■ MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Difference is a partnership between The Hinsdalean and Assistance League Chicagoland West, whose mission is to deliver education and outreach programs that address needs and help transform lives in local communities.

said. “I had pots and pans. At the time I didn’t think I could cook. They even left me three or four cookbooks because word had got out that I couldn’t cook.”

She appreciated the thought that was put into her kitchen, such as the purchase of a crock pot — a perfect appliance for a full-time student and single mother.

“I was just blown away,” she said. “They even put together a little binder with their favorite recipes, which I thought was really touching.”

People often assume that family members will step in to help someone who is struggling, but Thomas had no one to help. She was estranged from her mother, and her only other relative was an elderly grandfather.

“I had no one to really support or help me,” she said.

Fortunately, Hatten’s situation changed. The friend who had taken her in, Alexander Thomas, is now her husband. Ezekiel has a little sister, 15-month-old Elyzabeth.

Now 26, Thomas is finishing her last semester at Lewis University, where she is studying criminal and social



MoniKea Thomas said Assistance League Chicagoland West’s gift of a new kitchen through its New Start program changed her life. A single mom to son Ezekiel when she transitioned out of homelessness, she’s now married to her best friend, Alexander, and mom to a daughter, Elyzabeth, now 15 months old. (photo provided)

justice. She hopes to continue her education at John Marshall Law School.

And she’s learned her way around a kitchen.

“Now my husband loves my cooking. My kids love it,” she said. “I think it’s a sneaky skill I had all along that I didn’t realize.”

Her co-workers at the firm where she is a paralegal are fans of her dishes as well.

“I’m confident enough to

bring my cooking to work and everyone loves it,” she said.

Faith and determination have helped her persevere through the tough times of her life, Thomas said. She also pointed to the support she has received from community resources like ALCW.

“They made me who I am,” she said of the agencies. “I want to give back to the community that gave so much. I want them to see I can flour-

ish and help people.”

Thomas is looking forward to telling her story at ALCW’s Books and Brunch event Nov. 14. She first met ALCW members unexpectedly last December at a People’s Resource Center lunch.

“I walked up to them immediately and said, ‘You guys really changed my life. You have no idea how something so simple means the world to someone.’”