



Scott and Robin Gwaltney: Making A Place to Thrive

Away from neighborhoods plagued by guns and drugs, teens thrive under the caring tutelage of the Gwaltney couple in Rochester, Minn.

By Tracey C. Velt | November 2008

Think your life is hectic? Try adding a half-dozen high school students to your demanding family life and real estate career. That's exactly what Scott and Robin Gwaltney, sales associates with Coldwell Banker at Your Service Realty in Rochester, Minn., have been doing for 15 years.

During the school year, the Gwaltneys are unpaid, live-in resident managers for Rochester Better Chance and surrogate parents to six teenage boys from across the United States. The teens typically travel to Minnesota as freshmen or sophomores and stay until graduation.

Part of the national foundation A Better Chance, RBC offers academically talented inner-city, students a safe place to live while they receive a quality high school education. "The boys walk away from everything they know to have an opportunity to be successful," says Robin Gwaltney.

The Gwaltneys, both 46, also have two children of their own, Jenna, 17, and Brett, 19. "A typical day involves lots of cooking, laundry, teacher conferences, dropoffs and pickups, tutoring, dishwashing, and a lot of love," says Robin.

In 1993, after five years as foster parents, the Gwaltneys were asked to fill in at RBC when the previous house parents quit without much notice. "We thought it was temporary," Robin laughs.

Fifteen years later, they're still at it, living in RBC's 100-year-old Victorian home. "Over the years, we've had 46 kids," says Robin. Only four have left the program due to homesickness and one because he didn't follow the rules.

The boys go home during winter and summer breaks, typically to supportive families who want to help them succeed but don't have the means. The program is geared toward students from areas where the odds are against them. "They're from environments that aren't conducive to succeeding—drugs, bad public schools, crime, gangs—very poor neighborhoods," says Scott.

Most RBC graduates go on to attend top-tier universities including Harvard, Dartmouth, UCLA, and Northwestern. "We've got a lot of engineers, several with business or finance degrees, one college professor, and one accountant, just to name a few," says Robin.

Prospective RBC students go through a rigorous selection process. "These 13-year-olds have to write letters, participate in interviews, and take tests. They're very motivated to move out of their current situations," she says.

One of the many success stories is Danny Pierre, an RBC graduate from New York. Now 27, Pierre attended Tufts University on an academic scholarship where he earned a master's degree in chemical engineering. He's now a chemical engineer with Cabot Corp. in Boston. "I'm the youngest of seven children and have a very nurturing mom," says Pierre.

However, after seeing his brothers and sisters struggle to get to school through a very dangerous route filled with drugs, gangs, and crime, he decided to find another way out. "It was critical for me to have that home feeling, and Robin and Scott provided that," he says. "In fact, had they not taken such good personal care of me, it would have been difficult to adjust."

To help care for the boys, the Gwaltneys spend at least \$30,000 of their own money each year. "When I go to the mall, I don't just buy for my kids. If one of the boys is playing basketball, I buy basketball shoes," says Robin. In most cases, the boys' parents don't have extra money to send.

At the end of this school year, the Gwaltneys are retiring from their role as resident managers, but they'll stay involved in RBC, says Robin. That's good news for the RBC board, since the Gwaltneys will be a tough act to follow.

"Outside of raising our own kids," the Gwaltneys say tearfully, "this is the most important thing we'll ever do in our lives."

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