

## A Host Family Counts Their Blessings: Rajon Mitchell and The Grigsby Family

Over the years, ABC has hosted scholars whose interests blend athletics, academics and community engagement. Rajon Mitchell is clearly focused on his academics and has an amazing aptitude to learn. Even while taking multiple AP classes, he has found time to participate in track and wrestling (and will even be one of the captains next year). As the bar is raised for kids competing to get an opportunity to attend college, Rajon is becoming a leader in the ABC house establishing a work ethic and level of excellence that helps others rise to the high expectations our scholars must meet. As younger students become more senior in the house, they have an opportunity to lead the other boys. When Rajon needs to just be a kid, there is no place better to check-out than spending time with his host family, the Grigsbys.

For Courtney and Michael Grigsby and their three sons, Rajon Mitchell, ABC scholar and Class of '18 has become a permanent Grigsby and an incarnate reminder of how easily the heart can expand to increase the radius of any family. Carol, mused as she shared what she loves most about serving as a host family: simply put, it's Rajon!

For thirteen year old Bates Grigsby, Rajon makes everything funnier and lighter. "I love it when Rajon is with us. He laughs really loud at funny videos. I always wanted an older brother." (It should be noted that Bates actually has two older brothers – some things never change!)

"Rajon became part of our family when his Mom was about to have her 3rd child. It was really easy to get to know him quickly and to know what a good kid he was by watching how much he loved his little brother Lee and his new baby brother Mason. It's so cute to see how much they look up to him and how happy they are when they're around him. He's lucky to have such a supportive family at home rooting for him (as he continues to serve as an ABC scholar). We've loved getting to know all of them and look forward to staying in touch with them for years to come.

While only a junior, the Grigsbys like to share how enriching it's been to watch him grow and mature into a very independent, capable young man.



Rajon Mitchell ABC scholar and host brother Jake Grigsby before prom

"He has been taking architecture classes at NYU on Saturday afternoons and will be spending this summer in Morocco in a cultural immersion program that he's really excited about. He really takes advantage of all that ABC has to offer and I can't wait to see where he ends up."

The Grigsbys understand that as a host family you get as much as you give. The personal and social bonds, as we found out from countless host ABC families, last a lifetime and have only reinforced their views on the efficacy of programs like ABC New Canaan.

"The impact that ABC has on the boys in the program is immediate. It is such an honor to watch their growth over the four years they are in New Canaan and to see where the program takes them. ABC opens up so many doors for its scholars and it is so rewarding to see them go on to great colleges and bright futures.



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## 40 Years of A Better Chance In New Canaan

### ABC President's Message June 2016

By Mike Curran

The ABC program is blessed to have so many wonderful supporters. The purpose of this newsletter is to highlight one important group of those supporters – the Host Families. Many of you know about the role of Host Families in the program, but for those who do not, this newsletter will hopefully provide some perspective. The overview of Host Families that we provide on our website talks about them being a “home-away-from-home” in New Canaan for our boys, but that does the role an injustice. These young men take on a big challenge when they come to New Canaan at 13 or 14 years old. They leave their family behind for much of the year, they take on



a new environment, and they try to fit into a school where most of the students have been in class and activities together for years – if not their whole lives. It is a hard transition. Then explain mandatory study hall (including Saturday mornings for freshmen) and after school activities and minimum grade requirements and you have a really hard task to make these young men comfortable in this strange new world. And did I mention that they are teenagers?

Making the transition a success requires hard work on the part of the boys and a strong support structure from the program. Importantly, it benefits from providing them with loving, caring Host Families who adopt these young men into their families. In the stories that follow, we highlight two former Host Families and one current Host Family and their students (or as they will tell you – their sons!).

### Make A Difference By Supporting ABC As A Family or A Financial Donor

This newsletter serves a critical purpose. It's our outreach to the community to ask for help to continue a program that has produced 150 scholars who have moved well beyond imposed limitations to realize their potential. ABC scholars nationally have become governors, attorneys, financiers, activists, teachers and catalysts for change. They are effective leaders because they understand their success is achieved by standing on the shoulders of so many in the community who understand that by

giving they are making their community and world a better place. To quote the late Martin Luther King Jr, "Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

In one click, you can donate to our mission and be part of the bridge that has served so many deserving scholars. Find us on the internet at [www.abchouseofnc.org](http://www.abchouseofnc.org) and simply click on "Support Us".

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WWW.ABCHOUSEOFNC.ORG Visit our website for pictures, history, alumni information and a calendar of events.

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The connection to David Cox has become an iron clad relationship that has transcended time and allowed them to participate in David's success and milestone moments in life.



## Sixteen Seasons of Firsts: David Cox and The Fager Family

When David Cox arrived in New Canaan, it was an overwhelming cascade of first experiences. Brought up in a difficult neighborhood where he was expected to come straight home from school and not venture outside for whatever reason, David was denied some of the most basic rites of adolescence – green grass lawns, a walk down to the store, riding a bike, finding a place to swim on a hot day, or just loitering around town with a pack of kids – preoccupied with all the things that teenagers enjoy and chase as they fall through adolescence.

His host family Melinda and Jeff Fager recognized that they had an opportunity to serve as a bridge to give David and to a degree their own family, a chance to appreciate the most basic pleasures and privileges of a safe community – a dividend so many take for granted. Melinda Fager remembers that first moment,

“One of the great moments with Dave was when I told him there was a bike for him to use in the garage, and he told me he didn't know how to ride (a bicycle). He'd been brought up in Mt Vernon with 2 working parents and told that after school he was to be home and not go out in the neighborhood. I'll never forget when I looked out the window and there he was, taking off down the road, on the bike, with the biggest smile you ever saw. We still remember Dave wanting to join the crew team, but as it turned out, he didn't know how to swim. We require all the ABC students to take swim lessons at the YMCA. One NCHS student became Dave's personal instructor. He worked at it until he succeeded, and as a senior he achieved his goal, and he was able to join and participate in crew.



The Fager family and ABC Scholar David Cox

The Fagers have been active in ABC and have served as board members and as financial and personal sponsors. The connection to David Cox has become an iron clad relationship that has transcended time and allowed them to participate in David's success and milestone moments in life. Melinda Fager smiles as she relates the accomplishments of her surrogate son:

“We are very much in touch with Dave and his wife Raebekah. They live in Queens. Just last week I had breakfast with him at his workplace, Viacom, right in the center of Times Square. He is thriving as an editor.”

If you ask the Fager's for their opinion about how one leads a richer life, it will invariably include serving others and opening yourself up to new people and those committed to helping themselves.

“Any involvement with ABC makes you aware of the tremendous support and generosity in this town. And I believe the ABC students come to appreciate the value of community, and take with them a feeling that we're all in this together. What separates ABC from the other worthy nonprofits is that you're given the chance, as a host family, board member, teacher, to have a direct effect on one person's life, and you get to see those results (blossom and affect so many others) over the course of four years of high school, and then as they mature into independent and successful adults.

As for Dave and Raebekah, they have carved out a wonderful life in New York City. If you want to catch them, you'll need to head down to Queens and hang out at a local café, where you might see them riding by on their bikes.

## Street Smart and Shy Meets Culture Shock: Eric Ho and The McDermott Family

When Carol and Paul McDermott decided to host an ABC scholar, they had three sons in the New Canaan schools: Greg, a junior at the high school, Brian, a freshman, and Luke, a 4th grader. They had become motivated to support ABC New Canaan after an enthusiastic endorsement from Beth & Chris Ambler, another ABC host family. The McDermotts had been looking for a meaningful way to contribute to New Canaan and thought that this experience, which would involve their boys, would be enriching for the entire family. It is a decision that they would never come to regret.

Eric Ho brought a different cultural profile from the typical ABC Scholar. He was a first generation Chinese-American having moved to NY from China. His father was a cook in a Chinese restaurant while his mother stayed at home. He lived with three brothers in a 2-bedroom apartment in Chinatown where Cantonese was spoken. Eric had attended public schools in NYC and had learned English.



McDermott Family with Eric Ho

He was streetwise, but within the narrow confines of his narrow neighborhood. To hear Eric, his first exposure to New Canaan was a total loss of equilibrium: “My first year (living in New Canaan) was complete culture shock. New town, new high school, the suburbs; it was quite overwhelming. I found my host family an essential bridge and my host brothers to be so kind to me in my first year. I remember being treated as an equal as my host brothers introduced me to their friends. The ABC resident directors and tutors were very helpful and supportive, Michelle Luhtula at the NCHS library was great with helping us as freshmen getting around the HS.”

The McDermott's feel great pride having watched Eric blossom over the next four years. While quick to dismiss the “small part they played as a host family,” Eric is not as quick to let them escape with their description as merely supporting actors in his life-altering experience.

“(When) you begin living at a higher standard and surrounded by affluence and intellect, you begin to dream bigger - you to give yourself permission to want a higher education and become successful. You say to yourself why not me? I learned how

to combine street smarts with book smarts, along with the social skills to maneuver through the world without losing a sense of where I came from and who I am. Both my families have taught me that greatness comes to those who take it. Be humble and appreciative of the opportunity you're given but also be hungry and strive to compete and succeed. Don't suffer from imposter syndrome, double down on your strengths and punt your weaknesses.”

Carol concludes: “You asked what most changed about Eric over the four years. With a reserved nature and a different cultural background, it was understandable that he was very shy initially. The

biggest change was how he gradually grew comfortable opening up to us, telling us what was on his mind... What changed our family was more subtle but we think having a person from such a different cultural and socioeconomic background living imbedded in our family did make us all more sensitive to people whose lives are so very different from our own. It made us appreciate even more our beautiful town and its enviable school system that we might have been taking just a little bit for granted.”

Eric went on to Union College where he majored in psychology, joined a fraternity, and finished in four years. His first job after college was selling life insurance—hard to believe it was the same guy who barely said a word the first time we met him. Insurance wasn't his thing, though, and he seems to have found his niche working in start-up companies in social media roles. He lives in New York City and the McDermotts are still in touch with him regularly. The fact that our relationship didn't end after high school has been a wonderful surprise. He is usually the first one to call us on Mother's Day and Father's Day.



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