



On the Front Lines: UMB Champions of Excellence: Promise Heights Team

November 24, 2020 | Mary Therese Phelan

School of Social Work initiative's staff members keep their promise to support Upton/Druid Heights community, shifting many services to virtual settings amid considerable COVID-19 challenges.

The **Champions of Excellence** campaign is a multiyear branding campaign at the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) in which we highlight individuals and teams that exemplify extraordinary accomplishment and represent excellence at the University. This year, UMB is highlighting the employees who've done exemplary work since the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in March. During the next few months, The Elm will be featuring these UMB Champions, who are making Baltimore, our region, and in some cases the world a better place.



Today: Promise Heights Team, School of Social Work

How does a program focused primarily on aiding children and families in West Baltimore conduct its human services work during a pandemic, when in-person interactions are no longer the norm? With creativity, resourcefulness, perseverance, and planning, say the leaders of Promise Heights, which operates out of the University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMSSW).

Those attributes are emblematic of Promise Heights' service to the community, and they proved effective as most of its services were moved to online platforms during the COVID-19 crisis, with the response and results earning the program a UMB Champions of Excellence Award.

"We had to switch to virtual content just like everybody else, and we had to pivot very quickly," said Bronwyn Mayden, MSW, assistant dean and Promise Heights executive director. "What I'm so excited about in terms of my staff is that they began to use some of their inner talents and inner strengths. They pulled it out of themselves."

(Watch video below.)

Established in 2009 to improve educational outcomes for youth and ensure that families are healthy and successful in West Baltimore's Upton/Druid Heights community, Promise Heights partners with faith-based, government, and nonprofit organizations. Representatives of the University of Maryland, Baltimore's (UMB) six professional schools base their work in the neighborhood's five public schools to reach students, families, and residents as they move through a pipeline of services and programs.

The Champions Award is even more special because staff members have had to overcome so many challenges from COVID-19, said Promise Heights assistant director Rachel Donegan, JD. "We work in a human service capacity, and it is challenging to be of human service when you can't be in contact with humans," she said.

Promise Heights staff had to quickly think of ways to creatively support Upton/Druid Heights. For example, over the summer, funds that normally pay for field trips to Pearlstone Retreat Center and Outdoor Education Campus in Reisterstown were used to partner with the farm to provide eight weeks of food delivery to Promise Heights families. Staffers delivered the meals, which allowed for brief in-person interactions with community members.

Promise Heights applied for COVID-19 assistance from the Baltimore-based nonprofit Fund for Educational Excellence and received \$15,000. Those funds were used to pay for Black-owned West Baltimore food vendors to supply meals to Promise Heights partner organizations. Promise Heights also purchased memberships from a Black-owned West Baltimore CSA (community-supported agriculture) so families could have a consistent food source over the winter.

Another Promise Heights initiative, B'more for Healthy Babies, transitioned from its traditional door-to-door visits offering prenatal and postnatal services to hosting virtual forums on breastfeeding, parenting, and stress reduction that at times attract up to 80 community members. Other programming migrated to Facebook and YouTube.

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All of this ingenuity and resiliency compelled Richard P. Barth, PhD, MSW, professor and former dean of UMSSW, to nominate Promise Heights for the UMB award, comparing its staff to a world-class orchestra.

"Each player lends years of devotion, diligent practice, and talent so that their collective skill speaks for itself," Barth said. "The pandemic raised the ante, and the adept and quickly tailored responses to this public health crisis clarify why Promise Heights earns high marks and deserves to be celebrated."

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