

## School should come first

By Jamie D

*Editor's Note: New York State has the highest demand for domestic violence services in the country, with one in every four women becoming a victim of abuse in her lifetime. Grace Smith House is a non-profit domestic violence agency dedicated to empowering individuals and their families to live free from the shadow of abuse. For more information, please visit [www.gracesmithhouse.org](http://www.gracesmithhouse.org) or call their 24-hour crisis hotline: (845) 471-3033. The articles are printed as a public service in the Northern and Southern Dutchess News.*

Whether, as a child, you dreaded the first day back at school or were thrilled by the pending exploration of new subjects, we all remember the preceding weeks of preparation and shopping. Three-ring binders, spiral notebooks and the perpetually requisite No. 2 pencil seem an inherent part of our educational experience. For some, back-to-school shopping is a delight, for others a much-begrudged chore. For children living in domestic violence shelters in Dutchess County, preparing for the new school year seems like one of many insurmountable challenges.

For children witnessing domestic violence in their homes, school is rarely a priority. Clark is one of those gifted teenagers that teachers and peers alike imagine will one day accomplish great things. He excels at math and science, loves engineering and architecture and dreams of one day attending MIT. But as tensions increased at home, Clark fell into the role many children of survivors find themselves in: the parental child, responsible for the care of his three younger sisters, attempting to manage household chores and finances, and mediating between his mother and abusive father. Shouldering so much responsibility at only 14, Clark was forced to set aside school work and a brighter future.

Long-term exposure to abuse and violence causes severe anxiety in victims, especially children and teenagers, and they carry feelings of apprehension, worthlessness, depression and isolation with them to school every day.

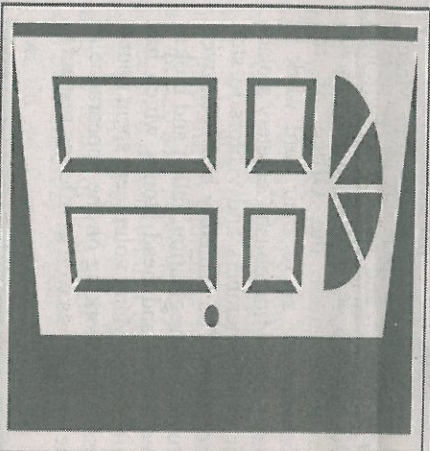
Clark found himself unable to focus on his school work, watched his grades plummet, and his record affected by continuously low attendance. He was forced to drop sports and extracurricular activities. Ashamed of his home life, Clark avoided his friends. He didn't feel he could reach out to teachers, for fear they would call the police. Isolated and afraid, Clark became the target of bullies, increasing his anxiety and sense of worthlessness.

When Clark's family sought shelter at Grace Smith House, Clark experienced a sense of safety for the first time in his young life. A stable and nurturing home life builds trust in children, increasing access to educational resources such as teachers and tutors, and allows students to focus on their future, rather than the overshadowing fear of abuse.

At Grace Smith House, Clark received private assistance from our Child Advocate, began attending homework club and repairing his grades. Today, he is on the fast track in his high school, taking honors classes and participating in a STEM program. He has a renewed interest in sports, and spends his free time with friends.

There are still challenges: survivors of domestic violence have limited access to financial resources, and it can often be a choice between putting food on the table or buy school books for the new year. Teenagers in particular are often forgotten during charitable back-to-school drives. Grace Smith House strives to provide for all children and teenagers living in shelter, but they need the help of supporters and community partners to ensure survivors like Clark begin the new school year with hope and the supplies they need to achieve a brighter future.

*Grace Smith House is an open door for mothers and their children seeking shelter from domestic violence. They provide individuals and their families with crisis shelter, counseling and advocacy. If you would like to learn more about Grace Smith House, or contribute to their mission, please visit [www.gracesmithhouse.org](http://www.gracesmithhouse.org).*



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For Victims Of  
Domestic Violence