



GIVING BACK

It Takes a Village

Greenbriar Children's Center nurtures kids and families

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IN THE EARLY 1940s, with World War II still in full swing, Savannahians did as they've often done and gathered together for the sake of a greater good.

At the time, orphaned Black boys with nowhere else to go were sent to live at prison farms alongside convicts, while girls were sent to the Chatham County Protective Home. The measures weren't meant to be punitive; rather, such facilities were deemed the only safe place for Black orphans at the time. Adaline Graham, a well-known philanthropist, recognized a dire need for better standards of care and, after her death, willed property and funds

to whoever could establish an orphanage for Black children in Savannah.

In January 1943, five women from the Gamma Sigma Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first historically Black Greek-lettered sorority (the AKAs count Kamala Harris among their ranks), took up the mantle and began the journey of establishing Greenbriar Children's Center. With the help of The Rev. Ralph Mark Gilbert of Savannah's First African Baptist Church, they formed a coalition of local members — regardless of race, sex or socioeconomic status — and opened the center in 1949.

Greenbriar endures some seven decades later, where Gena Taylor currently serves as its executive director. Having lost both her parents by the time she was 10, Taylor empathizes deeply with the center's history.

"I could have been a resident of Greenbriar," she says, "and had it not been for my grandparents, I would have been." After her parents passed, there was an outpouring of love from those around her. "I was truly a village child; my community raised me. Being here at Greenbriar allows me to do the same thing for the children and families in this organization."

In 1964, the center began accepting »



Students learn about musical instruments, circa 1950. Below, a child relaxes at the center.



children of all races and continued to expand in the decades that followed. Today, Greenbriar operates two early childhood education and care facilities, an emergency shelter and family planning programs, providing everything from workshops on how to balance a budget to connecting individuals with resources that specialize in job training, often providing support for up to 50 families at once.

“Our goal is to nurture children and strengthen families,” says Cherie Trice, director of development. “When you’re working as closely with the community as we are,” Trice adds, “you become passionate about the work right away.”

Like everything and everyone else, Greenbriar has felt the repercussions of the pandemic. Its education facilities closed temporarily, and many members of the community who had historically supported

Greenbriar soon sought out help themselves. “So many people reached out about our family preservation program because they didn’t know what to do, where to go or how to get the help that they needed,” Taylor explains, adding that the emergency shelter stayed open throughout 2020. It’s fitting, but not surprising, that the center operates like a family. “Everyone who works here feels responsible for the health and welfare of these children. We all support each other, no matter what program we’re assigned to.”

With all that love, it’s not uncommon for former residents to stop by to say hello. In June 2015, a young man who had stayed at the emergency shelter as a boy before transitioning into the long-term residential program and then to the independent living program, showed up in his crisp United States Postal Service uniform, mail in hand. “That was such an emotional moment,” Taylor recalls. “There wasn’t a dry eye in the room.” That same year, the man worked with his coworkers at the post office to collect presents for children at Greenbriar — and delivered them himself on Christmas morning.

“To know that you had an impact early on in that child’s life and this is the outcome? That’s how we know we’re on target with our mission,” Taylor says. 📍



Two Greenbriar board members (top) and scenes from the center’s grand opening in 1949



Martha Wright Wilson, a founding member of Greenbriar, served as president of the center’s Board of Directors during its formative years.



Adaline Graham, a philanthropist who bequeathed funds and property to establish an orphanage for Black children in Savannah