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Michael's C H A N C E

Many women in Lake Forest are working to make a difference in the children of tomorrow. Ann McAveney and her family are one of the many families in our community who have created organizations designed to make that difference. Michael's Chance is a blossoming company created out of the desire to help all the "Michaels" in America who are suffering because few are willing to give their reformed mothers a second chance due to their criminal past.

This initiative was sparked by a very real situation for Ann and her family. In September, Ann and her husband, Jay, took in 18-month-old Michael, a toddler who had spent the beginning of his life living in poverty in Chicago's inner city. Michael comes from a family of four—his mother, Araina, and his two brothers, three-year-old Marion and four-year-old Marquis. Araina's husband refused to support his family when Michael was an infant, leaving the family to live off food stamps after welfare ran out. Araina began using a portion of her food stamps to pay her rent, leaving only a few dollars each month to feed and clothe her children.

It was impossible for Araina to find a job because of one criminal offense on her record that happened when she was a teenager. "She had gone on so many job interviews and felt so discouraged," explains Ann. "Especially during these trying economic times, it is impossible to find work when you have a record." Because of that record, it was incredibly difficult to find someone who would rent her an apartment, even in a dangerous neighborhood.

Desperate and broken, Araina decided to entrust her children to Lydia Home in Chicago. Lydia Home is a successful alternative to state-run foster care and family assistance agencies, offering a variety of programs to help families get back on track. Its "Safe Families" program brought the McAveneys and Michael together. This program allows families to open their homes for a few months to children whose parents are unable to care for them. "We donate our home, our love, and our time to these children who are about to become homeless. We absorb all the costs and we work alongside with the mothers of these children," explains Ann. "We had extra rooms in our home and we wanted to fill them with children who needed help."

Michael has been staying with the McAveneys on and off for six months and has become a true member of the family. Each member has invested time in bettering Michael's life. Their daughters, Ellory and Lilly, wake up early every morning to dress Michael and make him breakfast. They spend as much time as possible with him before and after school. Jay takes him on "father-son outings" to the Rec Center to play basketball or Starbucks for his favorite vanilla bean latte. Time with Jay is especially important to Michael since he doesn't have a father figure in his life. "He has been the perfect addition to our family," says Ann.

Even the community pitched in to help. The Red Cross Club at Lake Forest High School raised money this past holiday season to give gifts to all three brothers and Araina. It was their first true Christmas and was especially memorable for the McAveneys because Michael's family spent it with them.

In this same philanthropic spirit, the McAveneys' daughters and their friends started selling "Peace" necklaces to help Michael's mother. Based on the success of this initial venture, Ann and Jay decided to organize Michael's Chance LLC, a business that employs reformed women like Araina with a criminal past. The

ANN MCAVEENEY AND MICHAEL



mission is to give these women with families an opportunity to independently support their children.

Michael's Chance pays these women 50 cents for every necklace they package, giving them the opportunity to make up to \$35 an hour. "We pay them more than minimum wage because they are worth much more than minimum," says Ann. "Our goal is to get them off welfare, help them open up savings and direct deposit accounts for their monthly rent, offer them a new kind of life, and teach them that they too can be the difference they desire to be." The organization also donates 50 percent of its net profits to charitable organizations that support women and children in crisis, such as Lydia Home, Safe Families, The Primo Center, and A Safe Place.

Word has spread around the North Shore about the necklaces. In less than a month, the organization sold more than 1,000 necklaces. Now the goal is to sell one million "Peace" necklaces in Illinois this year. Michael's Chance will be giving away one thousand of the "Peace" necklaces in a surprise location to promote awareness of their mission. Their Web site, www.michaelschance.com, will also be launched soon. It will be a source for more information on the mission and an outlet for buying Michael's Chance products.

The community continues to support their mission to help the "Michaels" in our community and our country. Helanders Stationers and Sweet's in Lake Forest have promoted the "Peace" necklaces. Kathleen Weinstein Photography of Lake Forest donated her time and talent photographing the new designs for their upcoming catalogue, which will be offered to schools and charitable organizations across the country for fund-raisers. Ann hopes to eventually expand Michael's Chance to other states and donate to three or four organizations in each state.

With the help of this organization, the community, and the McAveneys, Araina has now gathered enough money to move to an apartment in a safe neighborhood. She is working for Michael's Chance full-time and will assist and train many women who are working to transform their lives at Lydia Home and other partner organizations. She and her three sons have been reunited and are living together again. And they will always be a part of the McAveney family.

For more information about Michael's Chance, visit www.michaelschance.com, or e-mail michaelschance@aol.com. FEB