

“Help and Hope Start Here”

PENN ALUMNA DIRECTS PREGNANCY RESOURCE CENTER

By Catherine Elvy, Staff Writer

While enrolled in a doctorate program at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1980s, Karen Hess became unexpectedly pregnant.

Though married, the timing posed an obstacle to her goal of completing doctorate studies in a cutting-edge bioengineering program. “Honestly, I burst into tears. It wasn’t my plan,” said Hess. “That really changed the course of my life.”

Today, Hess runs AlphaCare, a pregnancy care center on Lancaster Avenue near Penn’s sprawling urban campus. Though Hess completed a master of biomedical engineering in 1985 with a toddler in tow, she focused most of the next two decades on raising her four children.

Amazingly, Hess felt like her life in the Penn community came virtually full circle when she witnessed AlphaCare’s first pregnancy ultrasound in 2016. During her graduate studies at Penn, Hess was part of a program focused on pioneering developments in medical imaging, including CAT scans.

“My goal in going to Penn was to study medical imaging,” said Hess.

More importantly, AlphaCare has been building momentum since relocating in early 2017 to the outskirts of University City from the Rittenhouse Square District. With the move, the pregnancy center now offers services to students at nearby Penn and Drexel universities.

AlphaCare, a Christian non-profit entity, offers free, confidential, physical, social, and spiritual support

to pregnant women. The organization, established in 1981, especially aims to provide for the practical needs of its clientele, including social services, medical referrals, pre-natal care and education, and life-skills training.



Graduate alumna Karen Hess '85 oversees a pregnancy-care center near the University of Pennsylvania.

AlphaCare’s motto is “Help and Hope Start Here.”

The staff of seven includes a social worker and registered nurses. Given the complex issues of Philadelphia’s impoverished urban neighborhoods, including its opioid crisis, the AlphaCare team focuses on meeting practical needs and helping to ensure new mothers have food, shelter, and safety. Registered nurses teach clients about prenatal education, childbirth, breastfeeding, and infant care. “We’ll walk with her through the whole pregnancy,” said Hess.

AlphaCare, which receives 300-plus inquires per year, welcomed ap-

proximately 45 babies in 2017.

Among other milestones, AlphaCare launched a mobile medical unit two years ago to help care for clients in underserved neighborhoods, especially those who lack medical care and transportation. The former delivery truck features an examination area with ultrasound equipment and restroom.

While not all clients are excited about a pregnancy, Hess described her team’s interaction with moms as remarkable and joyous. “We’re there for them,” said Hess. “You get to speak into the situation. They have a lot to wrestle with.”

Likewise, AlphaCare employees also offer to pray with clients.

Much of the team’s interaction with the women centers upon building relationships and establishing trust, especially given the traumatic life experiences and generational cycles of substance abuse common within Philadelphia’s troubled core.

“A lot of the women want their child to have a really great mom,” said Hess, a grandmother of three. As they receive AlphaCare’s services, the mothers are “so grateful.”

Sadly, the abortion rate in Philadelphia is as high as 15,000 per year, according to Pennsylvania’s health statistics.

Given such a backdrop, AlphaCare

is boosting the training it offers to student volunteers, especially to equip them to participate in community health fairs. Inroads with Penn’s medical community also helped AlphaCare land a Penn Medicine CAREs grant for its mobile services. “We need to grow to be able to address the needs of the people,” said Hess.

In addition, Hess dreams of turning the former Women’s Medical Society Clinic into the Philly Redemption Project, a site for ministering to women and men as they become parents. By taking over a building on Lancaster Avenue, AlphaCare has taken the first step in a multi-stage project to “redeem” the

facilities formerly operated by Kermit Gosnell.

In his high-profile 2013 trial, abortion provider Gosnell was convicted of state and federal charges, including murder of infants, involuntary manslaughter of a refugee mother, and drug trafficking charges.

As for her own surprise pregnancy, Hess readily acknowledged the risky nature of her decision to cut short her Penn doctoral studies. “There were a lot of people who told me I was making a big mistake to walk away from scholarship and to become a mom in the suburbs,” said Hess.

Instead, Hess used the time to

homeschool her children and start a regional science fair. When she returned to the workforce, she initially worked in development for an educational, non-profit organization.

In 2007, Hess stepped up to become development director for Amnion Crisis Pregnancy Center in Philadelphia’s Drexel Hill region. Three years later, she took over the helm of Alpha Pregnancy Services, which now operates as AlphaCare.

“Our main job, as the body of Christ in the city, is to connect people with needs with resources that exist,” said Hess. “The sanctity of human life is probably the most singular social issue of our time.” | **CU**

PENN | *On Campus*

Building Bridges in NYC

JACKSON '89 SERVES IN MAYOR'S OFFICE

By Elizabeth Bloodworth

Some Christians are called by God to be bridge builders and connectors for the sake of the kingdom. Lolita Jackson, Penn '89, is one of those individuals.

When she heard from a friend that Jada Edwards, a young woman of color from her high school, had started at the nursing school at Penn in 2017, Jackson immediately reached out.

“I know how hard it is to go from my high school to Penn,” she said. “I connected her to people I knew who went through the nursing curriculum to help guide her through the steps she should take.”

Jackson and Edwards, who both attended Franklin High

School in Somerset, New Jersey, have also connected over their similar journeys.

“The advice she gave about staying

on track and following my path has stimulated my passion to connect with students from my town just like she has connected with me,” said Edwards, Penn '21.

Raised by her grandmother on public assistance in the working and middle-class community of Somerset, Jackson was determined to be self-supporting and knew that it meant attending a stellar university.

Jackson chose Penn not only for its strong engineering program, but because it offered a diversity of races and economic backgrounds other schools did not. Upon her arrival, she discovered God had prepared a place for her and a purpose.



Lolita Jackson, Penn '89 is a special advisor in the office of New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio.