

Hope: Partnership works to build better lives for children of troubled families

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A group of inner-city Jackson elementary school students picked not for academic excellence, but for their need of a math and science boost, took first place statewide the past two years after participating in the Fusion Robotics Team summer program.

Cade Chapel Missionary Baptist Church of Jackson provided the coaching in science, engineering and mathematics, and the Foundation for the Mid-South funded the program for third- through fifth-graders. The youngsters won first place in statewide competition in research in 2010, and in mechanical design in 2011.

“What we wanted to do was take these boys and let them see that if they get the opportunity, that they could be anything they wanted to be in those areas,” Cade Chapel Executive Pastor Rev. Reginald M. Buckley told more than 150 people gathered at the Mississippi Children’s Museum Thursday for a program focused on improving the lives and futures of vulnerable children and families.

At the heart of the discussion was children in foster care, and how to improve their current conditions and plant seeds of hope for their futures.

Philanthropists and clergy came together with child welfare leaders, educators and the judiciary Thursday for a program called Building Communities of Hope. Participants shared ideas and a common desire to make changes that will benefit vulnerable children and families. The gathering was intended to be a catalyst to continuing collaborative efforts.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. said, “We as a court look forward to collaborating with all the stakeholders.”

Jackson Mayor Harvey Johnson said, “We all know that children are our nation’s most valuable resource.”

Supreme Court Justice Randy G. Pierce, co-chair of the Commission on Children’s Justice, recalled what another participant said at a national conference several years ago: “Until people in positions of leadership that have a heart for children get involved, we are spinning our wheels.” Pierce said, “We are going to take responsibility....We are at the crossroads and we are going to make a difference and partner with you.”

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The Community of Hope program seeks to alleviate the need for foster care by working to strengthen families and help them deal with the economic hardships, lack of education and housing and other problems and stress factors that make family ties unravel.

Seattle-based Casey Family Programs, one of the philanthropic creations of the late United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, has pledged its economic resources to the effort in Mississippi. Casey Family Programs is the nation’s largest private foundation focused on foster care and improving the child welfare system. The non-profit works as partners with child welfare systems across the country to improve practices and policies.

Department of Human Services Executive Director Richard A. Berry welcomed cooperative efforts. “This initiative will be a big help, a big boost for us. It’s about the children. We never want to lose sight of that.”

Casey Family Programs works to reduce the need for foster care. The foundation’s strategy is to help child welfare agencies focus on preventing family crises that lead to separation and foster care, rather than dealing with the aftermath of crises.

DHS Division of Family and Children Services Deputy Administrator Lori Woodruff said children struggle with homesickness and long for their parents, friends, school and familiar surroundings, even when troubled home lives tear them apart. “Our children deserve to grow up in permanent families, not permanent placements. Our communities will be stronger if we work to remediate the problems within the family that brought their world and our professional world together.”

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has a similar approach. Tribal customs call for working with families to work out problems, and looking to the support of relatives when parents are not able to care for a child. “Our motto is to work with the family to keep the family together as much as we can,” said Choctaw Tribal Chief Judge Hilda Nickey.

Casey Family Programs Board of Trustees Chair Shelia Evans-Tranumn said, “We are in Mississippi because there are too many children that are snatched out of their homes in the middle of the night. We are in Mississippi because judges have to see too many families that stand disjointed before their bench and have to make decisions about where a child should go.” She also expressed concerns about child safety and stabilizing educational placements for children.

Casey Family Programs President and CEO William C. Bell, who grew up in Pace in the Mississippi Delta, gave a personal testament to the power of education, and of hope, to pull people up out of poverty. He recalled how his mother and her five children were evicted as sharecroppers when he was small. She had a fifth-grade education, but she earned a GED, then a college associate’s degree. She taught in the Head Start program until she retired. Bell and a sister earned doctoral degrees, and a third sibling died while working toward a Ph.D.

Bell said, “Hope changes us. Hope changes the way we see others and hope changes the way we see the world.”

Buckley said instilling hopes and dreams are the church’s mission. “When you talk about hope and you talk about putting it inside them, you see that spark in their eyes and you know that they have gotten it. And they now believe in themselves and they will do everything they believe they can do.”

Cade Chapel works extensively in the areas of education and housing improvement for the needy. “It requires the kind of partnerships, believing in the integrity of each other, believing in the possibilities. Our ministry could not do it by itself,” Buckley said. Church tithes are coupled with grants from the non-profit Foundation for the Mid-South.

The Foundation for the Mid-South was established to bring together the public and private sectors and focus their resources on increasing social and economic opportunity in Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. Foundation President Ivey Allen said, “We look at what makes a community whole: a good education system, healthy kids, healthy families,

fathers and mothers who earn income that gives a family a living wage, quality housing, quality water.”

While lack of resources poses an impediment to community improvements, part of the Foundation’s work is in making people aware of public resources available and challenging them to use what they have effectively. “Sometimes the things that are needed are not necessarily about money,” Allen said. “It’s about how to help people understand how to effectively utilize what’s available.”

DHS Region V West Director Tonya Rogillio said, “Protecting children and strengthening families is not something our agency can do alone. We cannot do it without the engagement and the buy in from our community partners.”

More than two years ago, the Department of Human Services began implementing a new child welfare practice model. Changes are being made region by region, Rogillio explained. Implementation teams in each region include representatives of other state agencies, private non-profits, the courts, foster parents, people who grew up in foster care and other community members.

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