

Camp Spring Creek: A promising partnership

By JOANNE O'SULLIVAN
Camp Spring Creek

BAKERSVILLE – Tucked away off the main road in tiny Bakersville, Gouge Elementary is a bustling little red-brick school, part of the seven-school Mitchell County public school district that serves just fewer than 2,000 students in its elementary, middle and high schools.

This is an area of outstanding natural beauty, in the shadow of Roan Mountain and not far from Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in the Eastern United States.

But there is little economic opportunity in this area, and nearly 60 percent of the district's students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. For many of this district's students, academic tutoring is financially out of reach and classrooms struggle year to year.

Academy Fellow Susie van der Vorst moved to this commu-

nity 15 years ago to start Camp Spring Creek, one of only three residential camps worldwide for children with dyslexia.

Throughout the years, she has offered Orton-Gillingham, or OG, training to teachers in Mitchell and surrounding counties, including a 35-hour classroom educator training that introduces teachers to the OG approach.

This year, van der Vorst introduced a new program to the district to get students in need of the tutoring that will help them succeed.

The One-to-One Initiative pairs tutors with students that have been identified as struggling by their teachers, who have received Orton-Gillingham Classroom Educator training in three Mitchell County schools: Gouge and Deyton Elementary and Greenlee Primary.

Identified students met with their Orton-Gillingham trained

tutors, who have received associate-level training or higher twice a week throughout the school year or three times a week for 45 minutes each time for younger students.

This year, two tutors, Lissa Jo McMahan and Ishani Bickley, participated in the program.

As one of the pilot teachers for the project, Gouge kindergarten teacher Lynne Huskins was partnered with McMahan, herself a retired teacher. At the beginning of the project, Huskins identified students, for whom she thought language learning would be a struggle to work in a small group with McMahan.

"Some of the students didn't know the alphabet at the start," McMahan said.

But, after only a few months, two of the students had improved to the point at which the group split so those who were rapidly progressing could have more in-

dividualized help.

"Seeing the students discover the different sounds that letters can make in different combinations was incredibly rewarding," McMahan said. "When I walk in the door, they are ready for me. OG tutoring makes them feel better about themselves and this has an effect throughout the classroom."

Because these students are just starting their academic career, they haven't had the years of diminishing self-esteem that results from reading struggles.

"I don't know what I would have done without Lissa Jo," Huskins, who will retire at the end of this school year, said.

Greenlee Elementary teacher Justin Hollifield said the scores of the four students in his classroom who were in the program improved dramatically throughout the school year. Because of the program's success, more

teachers in the school system have expressed interest in OG Classroom Educator training, which will allow the teachers to have tutors for their students.

The One-to-One Initiative is funded by donations to Camp Spring Creek and makes tutoring that is available through camp accessible to children in the community who would not be able to afford to attend.

Van der Vorst hopes to expand the program to other counties in the coming years as more teachers receive OG Classroom Educator training. With the support of the school district (the curriculum director is a former teacher who van der Vorst trained), funding for the program remains the largest barrier.

To learn more about Camp Spring Creek and its training initiatives, visit www.campspringcreek.org or www.campspringcreektraining.org.

SECU Habitat Challenge dedicates new home in Mitchell County



Robin WARDEN

Friends of Mitchell-Yancey Habitat for Humanity gathered Sunday, Aug. 27, to celebrate the dedication of Cherrie Patrick's new Habitat home on Walnut Avenue in Spruce Pine. Patrick and her sons, family friends, volunteers and community members joined for a ceremony to pay tribute to the power of giving that makes every Habitat home possible.

The Rev. Richard Biega, of Trinity Episcopal Church in Spruce Pine, presided over the dedication ceremony with an opening prayer, scripture readings, candle-lighting and blessing of the rooms in the home. A choral group from the Celo Friends performed beautiful inspirational hymns. M-Y Habitat Board President Gary Ray formally presented the family with the keys to their new home.

In keeping with the

Habitat tradition, the family received a personalized Holy Bible, a bag of salt and loaf of bread, symbolizing the "sweat equity" the family gave to helping to build their home that is now a place to sustain them for years to come.

Mary Nash and Nancy Williams, from the Higgins United Methodist Church Quilting Group, presented handmade quilts for Patrick and her sons, Casey and Cory, who will be living in the new home. Also, the family received a beautiful stained-glass piece donated by Deanna Blanchard and Chuck Young from Selena Glass and Metal in Burnsville.

More than 100 volunteers from 12 churches and nine groups and organizations helped fund and build this house. And once again, Habitat thanks the "Wednesday Crew," who has continued to volunteer once a week to build Habitat homes in our community. Numerous businesses representing construction trades, building and landscaping supplies, financial and legal services, restaurants, art galleries and public services also lent their support



Cherrie Patrick in front of her new Habitat for Humanity home on Walnut Avenue in Spruce Pine.

through in-kind gifts, discounted services, grants and donations. Thank you, as well, to the 150 donors whose financial contributions over the past year, helped to make this house the Patrick's home.

Major funding to build this home came from the State Employees Credit Union and North Carolina Habitat for Humanity Challenge Program Grant. This grant was part of 100 grants available to North Carolina Habitat affiliates to support the building of new or renovated homes in each of our

state's 100 counties. The Mitchell-Yancey Habitat affiliate is proud to have completed two homes under this grant. Special thanks, as well, to the Mt. Air Community Residents' Fund, Helping Hands of Yancey County and High Country United Way for your funding of special projects supporting our mission.

Mitchell-Yancey Habitat for Humanity now moves on to build two new homes in Mitchell County.

Site preparation is underway in Ledger for the Hoyle-Stout family and we are seeking another lot to build a home for the Hudgins family. We invite you to be a part of building homes and changing lives with us. Share your time, talents and gifts and become a Habitat volunteer.

Email Steve Bruton at stevehabitatvc1@yahoo.com or call 407-864-0699 for more information.

Robin Warden is vice chair of the Mitchell-Yancey Habitat for Humanity Board.

LOCAL COLUMN

Local group wants people to have greater voice in healthcare decisions

"Stand with Mission." That's what Mission Health Care System is asking the people of Western North Carolina to do as it battles the region's biggest insurer, Blue Cross Blue Shield.

That plea leaves a sour taste here in Yancey and Mitchell counties, given Mission's abrupt decision to close the labor and delivery unit at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital. The hurt is still raw and the memory fresh: Mission acted with no outreach and no apparent concern for the impact on us, the people this \$1.7 billion corporation claims to serve.

But Mission's insensitive approach did have one positive outcome: Concerned citizens, including several pastors as well as doctors and residents from both counties have banded together to fight for our hospital and our health care. We've chosen the name Sustaining Essential and Rural Community Healthcare, or SEARCH.

We need people from every corner of our counties, from every walk of life, to join the fight for the survival of our local hospital. After all, every one of us is likely to be affected if Mission continues to chip away at the services and facilities at Blue Ridge.

Already, two local physicians have decided to move their practices to other areas where they can continue to deliver babies. Two others plan to move or retire. Our communities can't afford losses like that.

The people who formed SEARCH aren't naive. We know that Mission is a highly acclaimed institution – in many ways a regional gem.

We know that, like all hospital systems, it is struggling to bring its costs in line with what insurers and programs like Medicare and Medicaid will pay. (After all, that's why Mission is taking on Blue Cross.)

And we certainly know that every health provider in North Carolina has been stretched to the



Risa LARSEN

breaking point by the state's decision not to accept federal dollars to expand Medicaid as provided by the Affordable Care Act.

We want to see a change in the way Mission does business. Our community has a right to a greater say about the services provided at our local hospital. Our hope is that Mission will welcome our efforts, and that in the future we will proudly stand with Mission as true partners.

Here's how you can get involved:

Attend a Public Vigil for Health Care at 7:30 p.m. on Sept. 30 at Riverside Park in Spruce Pine. This candlelight vigil, cosponsored by SEARCH and the NAACP, will mark the day the labor and delivery unit closes.

Come to SEARCH's next general meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 3, at First Baptist Church in Burnsville.

Watch "Women's Health and Rural Hospitals," from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. on Sept. 25. This public forum in Asheville, hosted by Carolina Public Press and HuffPost, will be streamed live online. (Check SEARCH's website, searchwnc.org, for details on how to watch.) You can also attend the event in person at LeNoir-Rhynne University's Center for Graduate Studies in Asheville.

The forum is just one part of a joint investigation by Carolina Public Press and HuffPost that will highlight stories of women in our counties as an example of how rural women struggle to get access to basic health services.

Their reporting will bring national attention to our area.

Risa Larsen is a member of SEARCH.

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