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Group reaches out to kids through camp program

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Casey Robinson's daughters could be bored at home, watching television.

Instead, Destiny, 8, and Ashley, 9, are playing games at the park, going on field trips, and making friends -- all through the Frederick Alliance for Youth's Club Explore program.

"It's the best thing that has ever happened to my two kids," Robinson said. "They love it."

Destiny especially enjoys arts and crafts, such as making beaded bracelets, painting rocks, and creating hats for the Fourth of July, Robinson said.

"They come home with exciting things to tell me," she said. "They've been meeting so many different friends."

Club Explore is the first program offered by the Frederick Alliance for Youth, a nonprofit organization formed in February that aims to provide children and their families safe, quality programs for learning and fun.

Club Explore, started in May, is funded by the Ausherman Family Foundation, a nonprofit organization that advocates for the well-being of Frederick residents.

"Our mission really is to have a substantive change on this community," said Scott Alexander, president and CEO of the Frederick Alliance for Youth. "We want to go beyond child care to actually increasing children's resiliency -- their ability to handle the hardships that life throws at them."

Club Explore has both a free after-school program and a summer camp open to Hillcrest Elementary School children that meet needs as determined by the school, Alexander said.

The program offers field trips, indoor and outdoor activities, snacks, a supervised computer lab, group projects, and a homework club during the school year. Often the activities revolve around a weekly theme.

"We try to build in multiple learning experiences into recreational experiences," Alexander said.

For example, one week the focus was flying. The children learned about airplanes and aerodynamics, then made their own paper airplanes and kites.

"The children absolutely love it," Alexander said. "One day, one of the kids just stopped and said, 'This is the best place ever.'"

The Frederick Alliance for Youth and Club Explore goes above and beyond what is expected from a youth center, providing support to the children in school, after school and at home, Alexander said.

"We link those together," he said.

Along with the Ausherman Family Foundation, the program has teamed up with other nonprofits to enhance its programs, such as the Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County, the Police Activities League, the Frederick County Office for Children and Families, the Mental Health Association of Frederick County and the Frederick County Hope VI project, which decentralizes low-income housing.

"We want to maintain high-quality programs that really make a difference," Alexander said. "And we want to do that through collaboration with the community."

The Frederick Alliance for Youth is temporarily based at the Hillcrest Community Center until its own youth center is constructed. Alexander hopes that the new building, yet to have an exact location, will be ready within five years.

Once the youth center is established, the organization will be able to add more programs and reach out to more children in the Hillcrest area, from babies to 18-year-olds, Alexander said.

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