

Drawing from special relationships

Frederick Alliance for Youth looks to branch out to other communities with new center

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Nine-year-old Hazel Mejia is taking piano lessons and making new friends. Ashley Shaw, 11, is taking karate and almost enjoys doing her homework.

Hazel and Ashley are two of the 26 Hillcrest Elementary School students enrolled in Club Explore, an after-school and summer program sponsored by the Frederick Alliance for Youth Inc.



Photo by Sam Yu

The program, which opened about two years ago at the Hillcrest Community Center in space provided by the Hope VI Project, is part of the alliance's mission to provide a safe place for youth in first through fifth grades and their families to grow in positive ways through fun, quality programs.

Ashley Shaw, 11, left, and volunteer Diana Dau draw each other at Club Explore recently.

The alliance plans to build a youth and community center to serve children and families who live in the Hillcrest and Waverley areas of Frederick. It's an idea sparked by Marvin Ausherman and a project of the Ausherman Family Foundation, which provided seed money for the program, said Scott Alexander, president and CEO of the alliance.

The alliance and Boys and Girls Club of Frederick County share program staffing. Collaborating with existing programs that share the alliance's mission is part of their strategy, Alexander said.

"(The Boys and Girls Club) are our biggest partner and are an integral part of what we're doing," he said.

"We work with each (student) and help them with their homework, do different activities and (use a computer-based reading program). But we also focus on their families," said student mentor Sandra Dau, of the Boys and Girls Club. "That's what FAY brings that's different than (BGCF's) other sites."

The alliance continues to mentor former Club Explore families who are enrolled in the Boys and Girls Club after-school programs at West Frederick and Monocacy middle schools. BGCF also has afterschool programs at Crestwood, Gov. Thomas Johnson and Brunswick middle schools.

Dau, who started with Club Explore shortly after it opened, said she's seen success.

"I've seen the kids improving and their parents come to us and ask for advice," she said. "We've seen a lot of the kids become leaders."

Shaw, a fifth-grader, is club president this year, for which mentors give her responsible tasks to do, such as helping with activities.

"We have to be (role) models and act decent in front of the younger kids," she said.

The alliance also partners with the Police Activities League, informally and for formal sessions. On a recent day, an officer spoke to the youngsters about personal safety and "stranger danger." They asked the officer many "what if" questions.

The alliance worked with staff at Hillcrest Elementary to enroll students in the free program, which runs after school and through the summer.

"They find the kids who best need these resources. We made two promises," Alexander said. "We would not screen them and we would not kick anybody out."

"The beautiful thing is that the kids don't know anything about FAY or Boys and Girls Club. They see it as a cool club experience," Alexander said.

Some of the Club Explore kids take piano lessons through a partnership with Downtown Piano Works in Frederick. Others take karate lessons after school through an invitation from The Banner School, and the Frederick Community College Kids on Campus program uses the center for some off-site programs. A grant from the Community Foundation of Frederick County Inc. funds the Young Rembrandts weekly art skills class.

During fiscal 2009, the Frederick Community Action Agency provided snacks and Frederick County Public Schools provided tutoring in math and language arts.

"Eighty-one percent of our kids maintain a B average," Alexander said. "One hundred percent are C students. Ninety percent are returning homework and completing class work and are more cooperative in school."

Club Explore mentors also do activities with the kids outside the program. That gives them opportunities to build relationships with the students' families and can help them connect with needed resources.

That's in line with the alliance's overarching goals of maximizing academic achievement, strengthening the community, reducing juvenile crime and empowering families to support themselves.

"We develop a relationship with the children and try to develop relationships with all the families; to not have the parents just drop off and pick up their kids. We're helping their kids grow up," Alexander said. "We want parents going to teacher/parent conferences, volunteering in the school and engaged in the community."

The alliance hosts quarterly family activities to promote community. In a pre-Fourth of July activity last year, a barbecue for families was attended by 83 people. Some, were neighbors who had not met before, Alexander said.

Dau said when the families meet other families with kids in the program they "feel like they are part of a community. They speak different languages but they come together as one."

Looking to the future

The alliance conducted focus groups in the eclectic Hillcrest community to develop a program model or approach that can adapt with the community's needs. About 80 people -- parents, youth, teachers and other providers -- were interviewed to identify what those needs are. The focus groups identified some barriers to existing services, such as cost and multiple languages; lack of supervision and guidance for youth; gang activity; distrust of law enforcement; and a need for assistance in adapting to American culture.

The focus groups were also asked to identify what they see as needs that could be addressed through community center programs. Instructional and organized sports, open gym time and after-school programs were among them.

The alliance is seeking a site to build a permanent youth/family center that could accommodate up

to 300 people.

"We need to be in the Hillcrest area, which is either highly developed high-density residential or commercial," Alexander said.

Hillcrest Elementary School and the Hargett Farm on Butterfly Lane are two sites being explored, he said.

"Our plan is to raise all the money before a shovel is put in the ground," Alexander said.

The Ausherman Family Foundation has committed to prepping the site and funding 25 percent of the building's cost. Estimates place the yet-to-be designed building cost at around \$4 million to \$4.5 million.

"We're also looking for a partner that could occupy the space during the day, such as a school," he said.

Alexander said the program is universally appropriate for the age group, regardless of the child's background. Each activity encourages growth in one or more of seven core categories: Character building and leadership; education; health and life skills; creative arts; sports, fitness and recreation; technology and media; and cultural integration.

The target date for a permanent youth/family center is to break ground in 2012 and open in 2013.

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