



From left: Program participants Charity Neely, 15, Dayza Lee, 15, Dream Team Member Leslie Coles, Krishshayla Rolle, 12 and Mikayah Foster, 7 (front). Photos by Layla Farmer

# A Time to Celebrate

Piedmont Park Dream Team recalls successes at holiday soiree

BY LAYLA FARMER  
THE CHRONICLE

Youngsters in the Piedmont Park community were treated to a special holiday party in their neighborhood on Tuesday, the last day of school before Winter Break.

More than 60 school aged children flocked to the neighborhood's community center that evening to enjoy refreshments and take home some new additions to their personal libraries, thanks to Jonathan's Legacy: Connections of Hope, a locally-based nonprofit. Each youngster received three books, and parents were given books to read to their children.

The holiday party and book giveaway was staged in part as a celebration of the accomplishments of the Dream Team, the leaders of a fledgling family engagement initiative designed to empower and educate the residents of Piedmont Park, a 240-unit public housing community. Dr. Cecilia McDaniel, director of Family Engagement and Education for CHANGE, serves as coordinator of the program, which was founded with a \$5,000 grant that the Winston-Salem Foundation's Black Philanthropy Fund awarded to the Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity and representatives of CHANGE earlier this year.

"We wanted to really promote literacy by allowing them to choose the books they want and connect that with the season and make sure that over the vacation, they're not totally divorced from learning, and to engage the children and the parents," explained McDaniel, an alumna of both Harvard and Yale.

The Dream Team model has been resident-driven and resident-led from the very start, beginning with the 110 "Let's Dream Again" surveys a team of residents distributed to their neighbors to assess the community's greatest challenges at the outset of the program, McDaniel said.

"We want to leave the skills in the community so that they can push things forward and have that strong support in working for themselves and their families," commented the city native. "It has to be something that they own for it to be sustainable."

Community members who responded to the survey overwhelmingly reported that fostering kindergarten readiness, increasing primary school success and addressing behavioral issues were among the community's greatest needs, and McDaniel and the four-member Dream Team have sought



From left: Latonya Smith, Dr. Cecilia McDaniel and Leslie Coles.



to answer their pleas with after-school tutoring, computer literacy programs and the other community based programs.

For 32 year-old Latoya Smith, a mother of five, getting involved with the Dream Team was a chance to liberate the community she grew up in from some of the challenges it faces.

"I devoted myself to it, basically," said Smith, whose two youngest children participate in the program. "It made me wake up and realize I have to save this community before it went down."

Smith, who has lived in the community since she was four years-old, said she had access to a wide variety of programs and services as a youngster. Today, those opportunities are far more scarce, she noted.

"I love the kids and they didn't really have too many programs out here for them and we're trying to keep them away from drugs and violence," said the Resident Council president-elect. "What we try to do is bring everything to the community because the major problem is transportation. If we can get it here, then the community responds better."

More than 30 children participate in the program on a daily basis.

"It's catching on slowly but surely," said Dream

Team member Leslie Coles, the Residents Council secretary-elect. "I think by next year, we probably might be doing a whole lot better."

Coles, a mother and a grandmother, said recognizing the dire circumstances of the youth in her community inspired her to get involved.

"I got tired of hearing little kids outside cussing," she confessed. "Like they used to say, it takes a village to raise a kid. I needed to start participating in raising some of these kids."

The 40 year-old Philadelphia native said working with the students has been rewarding for her.

"It's a little fulfillment, that's all," remarked Coles, who is unemployed. "I'm helping somebody else, giving back to my community, I'm not just sitting around doing nothing."

The BPF grant is long gone, but McDaniel said donations from Ministers Conference members and others in the community have helped to keep the program afloat. She is hopeful that the group will be able to secure additional funding to not only sustain its effort, but fulfill the Dream Team's aspirations of helping to launch similar programs in other local communities. McDaniel says the Piedmont Park project is evidence that such efforts can foster positive change.

"It really means a lot to me to see residents empowered," she commented. "They can feel like, 'I'm not just operating for today, I'm moving beyond survival - I want to have a different future and I have some way of getting to that and I'm willing to work together with people as a cohesive community to help everyone have a chance.'"

## NEWS CLIPS

Compiled from staff wire and submitted reports

### N.C. among Race to the Top winners

North Carolina is among nine winners chosen from 37 applicants for the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The state will share the \$500 million grant with the other winners. While the exact amount of the grant will be announced later, the state's application was for approximately \$70 million. North Carolina's grant will allow the state to strengthen efforts to ensure that all children are able to start kindergarten with a strong foundation for future learning.

Officials say that quality early childhood programs have proven to produce better education, health, family and economic outcomes. Effective early education from birth to age five correlates with school readiness, academic achievement, college graduation, good citizenship and a productive workforce.

The grant recipients were announced by the White House on last Friday morning. The Race to the Top program is designed to spur innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education.

### Ministries distributes toys

Whole Man Ministries recently distributed toys to youngsters at its Bridging The Gap Community Center.

In partnership with Toys For Tots, more than 200 toys were given to children who live in the community surrounding the church, which is led by Pastors Barry and Camilla

Washington.

Whole Man Ministries also partnered with Carolina Christian Bible College and Wrangler Jeans Inc. to provide additional free items.

### Citizen survey posted online

City residents can provide their thoughts on city priorities and the quality of city services by filling out a citizen survey posted on the city web site (www.CityofWS.org).

The survey is identical to a printed survey that was mailed to a statistically representative sample of city residents by National Research Center, a survey firm hired by the city to conduct its 2011 citizen survey.

The link to the survey will be posted through Jan. 5.

The survey is being posted online to give all citizens an opportunity to voice their opinions. The online results will be presented to the City Council along with the results of the printed survey.

Council members and city staff will use the results as a guide for evaluating priorities and improving the delivery of city services. The city periodically conducts a third-party survey of citizens as part of its commitment to service excellence.

### Salem picked for scholarship program

Salem College was chosen by the Hattie M. Strong Foundation to participate in the Strong Scholars Program. The program offers \$5,000 scholarships to college students enrolled in teacher-training programs. Salem was awarded \$10,000 in scholarship money per year for three years. The first gift will be made in January 2012.

Eligible students are in their final year of study with a demonstrated financial need and a minimum grade point average of 3.0. Undergraduate students who have exhibited outstanding success and enthusiasm in teaching experiences prior to the final year of their program and graduate

students whose life experiences prior to enrollment reflect the same traits will also be considered.

The Hattie M. Strong Foundation began as a successful student loan program in 1928 and has since become a scholarship program aimed at college students enrolled in teacher-training programs. The foundation's mission is to help alleviate financial stress during the student-teaching semester. Salem has enjoyed a positive relationship with the foundation throughout the years and looks forward to a continued partnership in the future.

### State residents asked to help save frogs

Gov. Bev Purdue issued a proclamation last week officially declaring April 28, 2012 "Save The Frogs Day" in the state of North Carolina.

The Governor's move was prompted by the request of 13-year-old Rachel Hopkins, an 8th grade student at Ravenscroft School in Raleigh. Rachel has been working diligently over the past year to spread the word about the rapid disappearance of amphibians in North Carolina and around the world.

Worldwide, nearly one-third of the world's nearly 6,897 amphibian species are threatened with extinction and 200 species have completely disappeared since the late 1970s. North Carolina is considered one of the world's amphibian biodiversity hotspots. In particular, the state boasts at least 60 different salamander species, including the threatened Southern Gray-cheeked Salamander and Red-Legged Salamander.

The Governor's choice of April 28, 2012 coincides with worldwide events planned for the day, which is indeed the 4th Annual Save The Frogs Day.



Hopkins

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