

New 'Y' Center Empowers Families

By SHERIDAN HILL
Chronicle Assistant Editor

"This is the inner city branch of the YWCA, open to everyone," offers Courtney Saunders, who is as friendly as she is tall. She stands two heads above this reporter, but her smile warms every inch of the 8400 square-foot Empowering Family Center, located at 610 N. Liberty Street. When she talks about parenting and the importance of the family, even her formidable height is diminished by the conviction of her words.

"Everyone wants the best for their children, from low-income to the wealthiest," she declares.

The center, which officially opened last month, is directed by Saunders and is funded for three years by a \$243,000 grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Poor and Needy Trust Fund. It is designed to be a self-help facility, staffed primarily by parents and volunteers.

Skill-building programs serving young and parenting teens will begin the first week of November, but currently, the center's most active group is the very enthusiastic marching bands.

Early in the day, 20 drums stand quietly against a wall, waiting dutifully for school to let out, when the building fills with enthusiastic children, whose eager hands snatch them up and pound out a marching rhythm.

Over 120 children are enrolled in the two marching bands, the Marching Angels (ages 4-11), and the Marching 100s (ages 12-20). Nearly 20 years ago when she worked at the Patterson Avenue YMCA/YWCA, Saunders organized the marching bands as a way to reach kids: it worked, because she had 320 marching children by the end of the second year. This summer, she was overjoyed to resurrect the bands. Some of the original Marching 100s have returned to volunteer their time with the kids, who practice three days a week. Parents also coach the children.

"This is not just kids dancing and marching," stresses Saunders. "It's an excellent feeder program, to get kids and their families involved, to set up communications and establish trust."

In two weeks, when parenting classes begin, the number of families served by the center should double. Eleven local agencies will help teach the classes, and a group of parents will be trained as facilitators for each group.

"The concept of the family is declining," says Saunders. "We want to empower the parents to regain responsibility for their children."



(L-R) Jennifer Goolsby (9), Jessica Palmer (10), Shanita Robinson (9), and Carla Daniels (10) are Marching Angels who practice twice a week at the center.



Courtney Saunders oversees the new YWCA family center

Upcoming Programs at Empowering Center

PROJECT HOME START

To help parents get their 4 year-olds ready for kindergarten

Registration: Nov. 4
First Class: November 9
Classes meet Mon.-Thurs 1:00-2:30 p.m.

PROJECT LIFE-SKILLS BUILDING

To help parenting teens explore their skills and potential and become more independent

Registration: Nov. 2
First Class: November 5
Classes meet Tues., Thurs., 4-5:00 p.m.

PARENT/CHILD BUILD PARTNERSHIP

To foster parent/child communications, good value-sharing and decision-making

Registration: Nov. 5
First Class: Nov. 9
Classes meet Mon., Wed., Fri., 5-6:00 p.m.



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