

ROCKDALE CITIZEN

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Looking out for the Future

Ministry reaches out to at-risk neighborhoods

By Beth Sexton

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There was a time when a group of boys called it fun to break into the Hunting Creek Community Center and vandalize the place. Today, those same boys are involved in Bible study and helping to mentor younger kids at the center where the efforts of churches, school leaders and community volunteers are working to make a difference in the lives of young people.

The "seeds have been sown," Hunting Creek Community Director Toni Branyon said, when Rockdale Alliance Pastor Larry Vaughn, church member Terry Earl, and Tim Cummins of Whirlwind Missions began ministering to the children in the Hunting Creek Community in Conyers.

Meanwhile, Branyon, who has been a school teacher and now teaches 5th grade at Flat Shoals Elementary, was waiting for God to "send her out" as a missionary.

In 1976, Branyon served as a summer missionary in the inner city of Houston, Texas, and was directed by the legendary southern Baptist missionary and mentor Mildred McWhorter. She enjoyed serving as a summer missionary but said she felt God leading her in a different direction and went into the teaching profession.

"About two years ago, I suffered a terrible loss and said God, I'll grieve myself to death unless you get me busy," Branyon said. "Around that time, the '40 Days of Purpose' (study) came along and God showed me He did have a purpose."

Branyon contacted her good friend, Trudy Cathy White, the daughter of Truett Cathy of Chick-fil-A, and whose husband was John White was chairman of the International Mission Board for the Southern Baptist Convention. The Whites had been missionaries in Brazil and gave Branyon options of where and how she could serve. Branyon remembers that everywhere they looked, the words ESL, English as a second language, marked the need for people who could help others learn English. In helping others to learn English, Branyon said missionaries could then have a greater opportunity to witness to them.

"I said, OK, God, I'll get certified to teach English and then I would see where God wanted to send me," she said. "I was ready to do what I needed to whether I needed to sell out and go to Cuba, or wherever."

Soon Branyon attended the world mission conference held at her church, First Baptist Church of Conyers, where she ran into Tim Cummins of Whirlwind Missions. They began talking and realized they shared a common friend in McWhorter.

"I told him I was so excited and just waiting for the Lord to send me to El Salvador or the uttermost parts of the earth," Branyon said. "Tim said, Toni, there are missions to be done in Conyers. I said, 'OK do tell.'" Now, you see how God prepared me for this mission.

Indeed, it was not long before Branyon began serving as ESL Director of the ESL ministry at the community center then later to serve as director of the community center. The property was owned by Klaus Beckwold, who gave a townhouse for the ministry to use in the community, which is composed primarily African-American and Hispanic residents. "It's a win-win situation," Branyon said. "We get to minister to the community and it's a win for Klaus because there is a free after school program ministry there."

The list is long for participating churches, Sunday school classes, community groups, and

volunteers which include Rockdale Baptist Church, Greater Foundation Church, Conyers Police Dept., Heritage Hills Baptist Church, the Interaction Sunday School class at Conyers Presbyterian, and the First Baptist Church of Conyers.

Rockdale school teachers and leaders, including Dr. Carolyn Ormsby, assistant principal of Honey Creek Elementary School, volunteer their time, as do three men who work as mentors and Bible study leaders, Ted Ormsby, Sheldon Landy, and Rev. Richard Carter. The Bible study has grown so large it has outgrown the space at the center, Branyon said.

"The Hunting Creek ministry involves different area churches and denominations working together for the purpose of carrying out God's plan to help people of the Hunting Creek/BICOR subdivision," Branyon said. We are working together in a joint effort with the law enforcement of Rockdale County and community organizations."

In addition to continuing the ESL classes for adults at the center, there is a thriving after school program Monday through Thursday where children arrive at 3:45p.m. Volunteers review the children's agendas from school, help with their homework then give them a snack before they go home at 5:30p.m.

"We go in and we've done such things as talking to different principals to tell them if our children get into trouble to let us know and we'll get a mentor for them," Branyon said. "There was a high school student who was a trouble maker who has turned around and is now serving as a mentor. He's also showing an interest in piano and we're looking at getting him a scholarship to get piano lessons." Branyon said they are helping to get some of the children involved in Boy Scouts. As she drove through the community, she noticed a group of teenage boys who were always playing basketball. One day she stopped to ask them if they would like to play on a basketball team and they all said, "YES!" She then worked with her friend Mike Rhinehart, who helped get each boy on a different church team. Those churches took each boy "under their wing." Paid their registration fees, shirts, and got them to the games.

Branyon wants to see such programs duplicated throughout areas she calls "high risk."

"The police were looking at this area even before we got involved," Branyon said. "They say it as a high need area. We're hoping to go into another area next. My desire is to stir up interest and get a new set of volunteers to duplicate what we've got going on at Hunting Creek. If somebody can catch the vision to go into another area, I'll work with them. There are people out there with a heart for this."

Branyon said the ministry is always in need of financial donations, which may be made payable to First Baptist Church Conyers and earmarked for the Hunting Creek ministry.

"You will receive more of a blessing than anyone you help because God loves us and wants us to love each other and be like Jesus with skin," Branyon tells her volunteers. "It is a sign of obedience when we help those in need and we are blessed when we are obedient. When we are serving His, we are serving Him."

For more information, or to help the ministry, call Branyon at (770) 929-3462 or (404) 285-5908.