

Ensuring education that is truly special

By Rita Spina and Gary Simpson

For two decades happy young faces have graced the pages of the Chatham County Together! (CCT!) newsletter. Since 1989, CCT! earned high marks for its ability to provide exemplary mentoring programs for youth needing extra support due to family problems, low income, mental health issues or poor social skills. From across the county caring adults have stepped in and stepped up to create smiles by providing youngsters with stability, warmth, understanding, counsel, meditation and just plain quality time. Twenty years worth of smiling faces and thankful hearts is priceless!

But running successful, life-changing programs isn't ... "priceless". Most non-profits are constantly counting costs, walking a tightrope as they balance fragile income sources with expanding expenses. CCT! is as good a high wire act as there is. But what happens when you are out in the middle of the wire, and suddenly half of your balancing pole disappears? Do you turn tail and seek a hasty retreat, or do you summon the courage and fortitude to forge ahead? CCT! now finds itself riding the horns of this dilemma with one of its finest programs in jeopardy.

Seven years ago, the beginnings of a new school was created to address some age-old education needs. From a "Governor's Crime Commission" grant and the backing of former



CCT! needs your help. Visit www.chathamcountytogether.org.

Superintendent of Schools, Larry Mabe, CCT! fashioned Chatham New School as an alternative learning environment for "long term suspended" youth. The grant was made in response to the Zero Tolerance legislation that followed the tragic Columbine High School shootings.

Chatham New School filled a niche for some youth that the regular public school classroom couldn't. Some came to New School from the court system; staff accompanied them back and forth to their court appearances. Life choices can put students academically and socially at risk, and leave them ill at ease. Going to school shouldn't add to that dis-ease. For them and others troubled by depression and other medical problems, homelessness, gang affiliations, or school suspensions, the hospitality of New School became infectious (in the best sense of the word). Having proven its value to public

education, Chatham County Schools added financial support to expand the scope of New School. Again in 2006-2007 the program was further extended to include the addition of a certified Exceptional Children's staff position. It was full steam ahead entering the 2008-2009 school year for this exceptional program for exceptional youth.

Then in June of this year, the funding for New School was sucked out of the program, due to other priorities. The more than \$100,000.00 budget would be torn in half in order to assist the growing needs of another worthy institution of specialized learning, Sage Academy. It's a familiar story of needs exceeding resources.

Full funding had enabled a new staff teaching position, and allowed CCT! in 2007 to move its operations into a wonderful home on Salisbury Street, allowing for integration of all their services: mentoring, family advocacy, community service activities and New School. That was then ... this is now! If New School is to remain on the tight rope and move forward without crashing to the ground, it will require a ground swell of support from a caring community committed to restoring balance to a truly special education program that fills needs no one else does. Individuals must fill an immediate need while new major funding sources are sought.

To learn more about Chatham County Together! and Chatham New School, and to help contact CCT!

Director Kim Caraganis at 542.5155 or kim@chathamcountytogether.org. or visit www.chathamcountytogether.org Contributions may be sent to CCT!, PO Box 1101, Pittsboro, NC 27312.

Rita K. Spina and Gary Simpson collaborated to write this article on behalf of Chatham Citizens for Effective Communities Institute.

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