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When a dream becomes reality Community groups partner to support full-service school

Nearly five years ago, a group of people at Tri-County Youth Services Bureau had a vision. The vision was to design a place where middle school students could receive additional educational help, participate in recreational and character-building activities after school and simply come together as a community.

Through partnerships with United Way of Charles County, Charles County Board of Education, Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, Charles County Sheriff's Department, Charles County Department of Community Services and the Maryland State Police, that dream has become a reality.

The name of the dream is the General Smallwood Full Service Community School. The program at General Smallwood began in December 2000, when the youth services bureau, board of education and General Smallwood Middle School formed a partnership with the Eisenhower Foundation.

The foundation provided the initial funding and technical assistance to replicate a similar program that had achieved positive results in New York. General Smallwood and the board of education provided the space and support for the initiative. The youth services bureau was designated as the lead agency to provide the coordination and staffing for the full service school, and United Way of Charles County provides additional funding to help keep the program going.

The idea behind the school is to provide a center for the community, and at the same time, to combine educational practices with services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn. This includes providing a safe place for youth to spend recreational time, learn new skills and reinforce old ones, as well as a place for families to go to socialize, problem-solve and just be together. In the five years of the center's existence, site coordinator Charles "Butch" Gibson has made it his mission to foster skills and values in young people that will serve them well into adulthood.

"I want to show them that there's more to life than self, more to life than just surviving until this afternoon," Gibson said in a press release.

One of the best things about the full service community school, Gibson said, is that the resources are brought to the students in one central location, rather than having to send the students elsewhere to get the help and support they need. This is especially important because many of the students live in the most remote areas of the county.

Among the programs he and the staff have implemented is an after school homework help center where kids can reinforce what they learned during the school day,

get extra reading help and prepare for tests. The Fantastic Future Clubs for Young Men and Young Women are designed to enhance cultural awareness and social skills. Youth development groups teach the value of making wise choices avoiding questionable situations and “doing the right thing.”

The University of Maryland Talent Search program offers students, beginning at the middle school level, the chance to pursue college education in fields for which they have shown aptitude. Songs With Meaning is a program that builds confidence and self-esteem by helping kids to discover their talents and perform in public. A small computer software library is available to families and a summer program for youths is also part of the community school initiative.

When asked what he most wished for, Gibson was quick to answer: “More adult involvement.” He said that raising kids is a hard job, made harder by the fact that there are fewer extended families today. Many children are raised by grandparents or in single-parent homes. He would like to have parent groups that could come together and share parenting problems and solutions. He would also like to have more involvement from the community.

“We’d welcome adults who have a skill or hobby to share, or who would just like to hang out and mentor our kids,” Gibson said. What started as the vision of a few people has become a reality. New opportunities and a commitment to youth and families have created a new center for the community at the General Smallwood Full Service Community School.

Tri-County Youth Services Bureau has been a United Way of Charles County partner agency since 1986. For more information about the General Smallwood center or any of its other programs, call 301-843-2960.

This article was prepared jointly by the staff of United Way of Charles County and the Tri-County Youth Services Bureau.